

FIRST POST-WAR SERVICE AND BEGINNINGS OF GERMAN BRANCH

As an old fraud in good company, let me say how pleasant it is to bask in the reminiscences of twenty years ago and more.

At that time I was given a sobriquet - one of the few I have collected, but this one was out of the ordinary run - no less than Herr Jesus. This was not because I went about doing good in a saintly dwam, but because at that time I - wore? - sported? - wore a beard, which between trims and with my customary soulful and melancholic expression no doubt reminded the irreverent beholder of medieval mid-European illustrations of Holy Writ.

The perpetrator, or at least the reporter (with ill-concealed and unholy glee) of this diabolical liberty was one Joachim Frege, the leader of a gang of German youths who for several years had been keeping at bay the combined might of Western Christendom and Joseph Stalin. Having been finally overwhelmed by the moral superiority of the principles of the Atlantic Charter, these youths were imbibing culture in the Faculties of Law, Divinity and Humanities at Göttingen University along with an insufficient calorie-content in their diet. Notwithstanding this deficiency, however, they were giving one or two days a week to helping refugees in the refugee camp at Friedland, near the Russian-zone border.

It would take too long to go into the details of who why and whence the refugees were. They were people in distress, and our function as a Relief Section was to help in their transit. In this we worked alongside German Red Cross, Caritas, Evangelisches Hilfswerk, and the black-britched, jack-booted students.

Suddenly, from somewhere, came the idea of working closely with Germans in a traditional IVSP-workcamp. Approaches were made, negotiations completed, and in December 1945 or thereabouts a team started to build huts.

Out of our Relief Section of twelve, three were to serve in the Friedland team. There was never any doubt about the leadership of this service. Ramsay Bramham, who died 1954, shared with the late Winston Churchill an instinctive rejection of the niceties of foreign pronunciation, and his energetic conservation in idiosyncratic German sounded uncommonly like his native Yorkshire. One word of German he had mastered - "auch" - and it made frequent incursions into his sentences, issuing, however, as "owk". But by sheer enthusiasm and goodwill Ramsay got across. And he knew S.C.I. from A to Z and had long experience. With him were Marian Girling as a sister and Fred Pitkeathly because there had to be a Scotsman; and the second sister was Anneliese Ehrhardt.

Choosing the German members was Joachim Frege's department, and one of the difficulties was just that adequate rations would be available to the team and there was the danger that volunteers would give more weight to that than to other considerations; but either the selection was skilfully made or the Germans were much like any other young man for the service was highly successful in work accomplished (the huts built are preserved in a rebuilt Friedland, and the German Press took notice last year of a return visit by some of the volunteers) and in the establishment of the authentic S.C.I. atmosphere. Moreover, one of the volunteers, Hans Temme, became Chairman of the German Branch in 1947 or 48 and many others from Friedland formed the backbone of the new Branch.

The most striking thing, I think, about the service was the dramatic way in which one could observe the shutters coming down and the windows opening on a world which Hitler had only too successfully shut out of the lives of German Youth. This indeed was commented on by some of them than, and Gerhard Meyer, now University Librarian in Hamburg, said to me a few weeks ago at my home which he and his family visited with Fred Pitkeathly: "David, I think it was a good work I.V.S.P. did in 1945."

David Sainty, 1967