

FRIEDLAND — 47 YEARS ON

As the surviving British member of the Friedland Workcamp these recollections may be of interest, remembering the passage of time makes memory defective and selective. So these thoughts and incidents tend to be personal.

The genesis of the idea of a workcamp IVSP style arose from contacts with Göttingen students who worked alongside Unit 4 members helping the flood of refugees from the Russian Zone. The German agencies were replacing us, but new opportunities were arising with the establishment of a new reception centre at the railhead, to take the place of the muddy conditions surrounding the original farm buildings. Hut accommodation was needed at the new site, and Ramsay put the ideas for a workcamp to a meeting with students. Permission was obtained from the responsible authorities and agencies to push forward the scheme.

Ramsay steeped as he was in IVSP ideals, was the obvious choice for leader, Marian to organise the domestic side, and I welcomed the opportunity for practical involvement at a time of uncertainty. A decision I would never regret, particularly when I later learned that so many of the student volunteers took part in establishing a German branch of SCI and subsequent workcamps.

At this point I'd better confess that the recall of names gives me difficulty. For one thing we were on first name terms and over the 4 weeks there would be over 40 students. Not surprisingly it is the group who served all or most of the time who come to mind, but even here identifying photos is hit and miss. Each week there was a change of personnel from different faculties. Those who come to mind (often with mental pictures) are Hans, Adolf, Gerhard, Joachim, Harald, Horst, Dieter, Paul. There were those who were attracted by the idea of service, who were susceptible to Ramsay's ideas, and others, more cynical or by whose background more resistant, but possibly who welcomed a prospect of enhanced rations when German levels were low. They qualified for heavy workers' extras and these plus our generous Army rations made an adequate if basic diet which Marian and her helpers made the most of. I even developed a liking for the black rye bread, heavy but filling - in the Scots phrase "Hunger's good kitchen". Marian's helpers were Anneliese and Liselotte, and her organising abilities must have impressed the Germans, although the rota for domestic duties was a culture shock. Here the adaptability, if not the expertise, of their British companions no doubt helped.

On the job, it was hard work in cold, unpleasant conditions. Ramsay's administrative duties prevented his full involvement but I was with the gang all the time, and have never worked with a harder working or more cheerful group. The initial erection of Nissen huts may be straight forward, but when these have been dismantled and transported, re-erection can pose problems. I was constantly appreciative of the ingenuity shown by my companions.

An amusing sidelight occurred when I enquired the reason for an outburst of hilarity. It appeared that a discussion among passing campworkers was centred on a khaki uniform in a German work force - consensus: "A British soldier serving out his punishment". I'm not sure if this was the reason that the Camp commandant passed me without recognition, looking very business-like with his briefcase. Ramsay enlightened me: it held his mahlzeit (Scots "midser").

All the students had been in the forces, and their experience and discipline probably contrasted with my more relaxed approach. I found I was regularly appearing last at breakfast: rising, dressing, ablutions in very restricted conditions seemed to take me longer. One morning my arrival at table was so belated Ramsay was holding back "Bon appétit". In my embarrassment I muttered as I thought the German for "pardon" - a burst of laughter broke the tension. Apparently I'd used the word for "parsley".

My knowledge of German was rudimentary, and I lacked Ramsay's confidence, who started from as low a base. The handicap proved less and less as many of the students' English was very good, and they were sympathetic to my faltering attempts. In the case of Gerhard Meyer, his English was so good that through his help as an interpreter a friendship developed which still lasts. I found too I was following discussions at table and in the evening, when Ramsay ensured our principles were aired. Not all the students participated - a group of Lutherans preferred conducting revival meetings in the camp - with a three-piece band to entertain.

On one occasion I was involved in a discussion with them when racism came up. I was asked: "Do you really think a coloured man is your equal?" My reply: "I think the nearest to a Christ-like figure today is an Indian, Gandhi". The look of incomprehension stifled any response.

That group did co-operate in the concert we put on in the village hall for the benefit of Camp staff and workers. I can't remember if their musical contributions were religious or secular. For the rest we were able to contribute a variety of sketches and turns - the students set up a gruesome hospital operation behind a screen, and combined with Ramsay and me in ideas from our former experience in camps, hostels and community. Ramsay a realistic tramp, Horst and I leading community singing (including "Pollywollydoodle"). A sequel to a bit of mime I did involving a needle and thread happened next day when a camp worker invited me (in mime) to sew on a button.

We had other lighter moments - a dance in the village hall, when Unit members and other connections joined in - I remember Ian demonstrating a Highland Schottische - there were visits to Göttingen theatre where we enjoyed opera (Verdi), theatre (Shakespeare) and symphony (Mendelsson). I've no idea who paid. On Sundays we enjoyed walks in the forest.

For me it was a rewarding experience and I think just possibly a real contribution to the P that IVSP had in the shoulder badge I wore, as well as justifying the "pick and shovel" emblem.

Fred Pitkeathly, 1993