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A GERMAN STUDENTS' WORK SCHEME

Relief work as experienced in Holland and German during the past year has not so far offered an opportunity for the type of service that is the tradition of the International Voluntary Service for Peace i.e. "Pick and Shovel" work in accordance with its motto, "Deeds, not Words".

When therefore our ordinary relief work in the Friedland Refugee Camp offered us an opportunity for promoting a service for German students, we jumped at the chance. Friedland is a transit centre for refugees coming from the Russian to the British Zone, and when we first came here the students of Göttingen University were already investigating the possibilities of spare time work. We were able to assist them in organising a regular porter service for the old, sick, and mothers with small children, but the approach of their vacation and the unfinished nature of the camp convinced us that more could be done. Preliminary talks with their leaders and a meeting with the students when we outlined the purpose and ideals of I.V.S.P. met with an encouraging response - and so the Friedland scheme was born.

An official report is the proper place for statistics. It is sufficient to say here that during the month the scheme lasted we had forty students for varying periods from a week upwards; three members (two men and one woman) from our Relief Section and one German girl spent the whole month and provided a permanent nucleus. The work accomplished was real I.V.S.P. work - erection of Nissen huts, and the provision of wooden floors, for an isolation hospital; open and closed draining; dismantling of large wooden huts for transport and re-erection; fencing; and assistance to the camp authorities at emergency periods in loading lorries and trains, transporting refugees' luggage, clearing roads of snow and cleaning out ditches during the thaw. Further work was done in improving the amenities of the living quarters, which formed part of the permanent staff accommodation; and volunteers took turns in helping the two sisters in domestic duties.

Statistics would also say nothing of the hard work and willing spirit, the cheerfulness and enthusiasm shown by these young men; even in the unpleasant wintry conditions ruling during the first three weeks no time was lost from this cause. Occasional setbacks occurred due to shortage of tools and materials, and to differences of opinion among the authorities as to degrees of priority in the jobs requiring attention; the willingness of the students to undertake anything that was to the ultimate benefit of the refugees using the camp impressed these authorities sufficiently to determine such differences as soon as possible.

But those relief workers who took part feel that the chief value did not lie in the work accomplished, important though that was. We lived, slept, fed and worked alongside these German lads for a month and feel that the conditions were such as to enable each and all to contribute something to our mutual understanding. We found at first a barrier, raised by their expectation of a bombardment of propaganda from us of a political, social or religious nature; this soon broke down on their realising that our first purpose was to work and live amicably together, and that the main stress was on mutual help, comradeship and voluntary discipline. A leader was necessary to take responsibility for the work, accommodation and relations with the authorities, but our organisation was quite democratic; a weekly meeting was held to hear and discuss criticisms and suggestions on all aspects of the service, and the decisions arrived at were put into effect. In the evenings impromptu and arranged discussions covered wide fields; bridge, chess and table tennis tournaments were held (and one of us almost

learned to play écarté); a weekly visit was made to the Göttingen theatre; each week-end we went hiking together in the surrounding country.

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We had been asked to do what we could in assisting social life amongst the camp staff while there; two dances and a social life were held for the entertainment of the German Red Cross sisters and others connected with our work, and we put on a full-scale concert, apparently much enjoyed by the two hundred and fifty camp workers who attended.

However, all this still sounds dreadfully like an official report; it does not paint the picture as we knew it, a picture of a communal life, no different in essentials from that amongst any group of young people. We three went with a varying but generally poor knowledge of the language; some of our companions spoke English well, but even when this was not the case, the little we did know and an abundant goodwill were more than adequate. One week the standing joke was the unlucky effort by one of us who meant to say, "Pardon", and got the word for "Parsley". We think of cheery sing-songs round the fire; of good-natured chaffing in the dormitory, when the 'Cracks' flew thick and fast; of pleasant rambles and exchange of country lore. We learned to shake hands, to use the second person singular, but jibbed at "not cutting our potatoes with the knife". We introduced them to porridge and marmalade for breakfast and learned to like black bread and sausage (but not sauerkraut).

Now as to the lasting impressions. We think our little bit of 'democracy at work' made an impression, though obviously deep-seated ideas and opinions will not be eradicated in a week's time. Free access to English papers and books of various opinions gave rise to question and discussion; what they read and what we could tell them of Britain - its national and local government, its work, opinions, attitude in war and peace, many things mere commonplaces to us - all had an effect, often one of admiration. The opportunity of lightening the darkness of ten years or more was welcomed; most of them want to think internationally. Almost all had been in the Services - the sisters always voted for an ex-Navy man in the house, as being the handiest, though all maintained a high standard of cleanliness, personally and communally. Reasons for military service varied greatly; there were those who were protecting the Fatherland (all had love of this in great measure); there were those who bowed to the inevitable, though inclined to democratic ideas and seeing the faults of the regime without being able to oppose them. Some, formerly whole-heartedly in favour of Nazi policy, had been disillusioned and were looking for another way. And some still hankered after the dictatorship idea, felt National Socialism still offered a solution, and the Nazi leaders blameworthy chiefly in losing the war. Generally these volunteers were older, more seriously inclined than our average students at home. All gave serious thought to the future of their country, though their thinking was muddled, the result of the despair and disillusionment which fear of that future cases, but all were anxious to take their proper place and assume their responsibilities. There was a strong desire to resume contacts with other countries, and a corresponding will to work for the success of this scheme as a forerunner of future schemes of an increasingly international nature; all had faith in and the urge to work for international understanding.

We are only too conscious of the limitations of this service, particularly in that it was possible only to have students as volunteers. But it is a start; we hope to be able to arrange further schemes on a wider basis in the summer. It may be that members of other relief organisations would welcome an opportunity to assist; such cooperation would be valued.

Marian Girling