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HQ 5 - Vlotho - I.V.S.P.

International Voluntary Service for Peace - Work in Germany

I must begin by saying two things; first of all how glad I am to be here and able to talk to you about the I.V.S.P.; and secondly, to apologise for my German. This little talk I wrote out in English, and have had it translated by a good friend of mine.

The I.V.S.P. (Internationaler Freiwilliger Friedensdienst) which is the British branch of an International organisation with the same name, whose headquarters are in Switzerland, had, of course, during the war years to stop sending volunteers abroad to help in other countries and, of course, other countries had to stop sending volunteers to England. But when the need for Relief Teams became urgent towards the end of the war the I.V.S.P. saw an opportunity for that International service which had been its aim since it was started in 1920. Consequently Relief Teams were sent to Greece to Italy and to Holland and finally to Germany. It is the German ones in which we are most interested at the moment.

By the beginning of 1946, the I.V.S.P. had three Relief Teams in Germany, helping with Displaced Persons and also with German Refugees; but the work of the twelve volunteers in each of these teams was not exactly what we I.V.S.P. volunteers had been used to. We were used to hard manual work with pick and shovel, or to some other unskilled, but useful job, which was helpful in the community. So we looked around for ways in which we could help with our hands, ways apart from the Relief work that we were doing - distributing bulk supplies, helping German officials to get on to better terms with Mil Gov officials, and so on.

Our chance came in the early spring of 1946 when the team helping refugees at Friedland near Göttingen enlisted the help of some Göttingen students to help carry the refugees' luggage the weary two miles from across the Zonal frontier. They also helped build one of the huts in the new Friedland transit camp for the refugees; they lived, worked and fed alongside three of the members of the Relief Team - and - an I.V.S.P. scheme had been born - the first one in Germany since before 1933.

Encouraged by the outstanding success of this service at Friedland, the I.V.S.P. reported to the Control Commission Germany, and enlisted their support to help run more similar schemes in the British Zone in the summer of 1946. The summer schemes have just come to an end, and we can now review the results of these five "experiments" as the C.C.G. regard them, to find out our mistakes and to plan to avoid them in future; to be reassured of the value of these schemes, even though the "International" aspect was not very prominent this time; and to prepare plans for organising future services. These will be the aims of the I.V.S.P. conference which we are organising at Hannover at the end of October. Delegates for this conference were elected from each scheme, a different delegate being elected by the volunteers for each week.

With the exception of the Berlin scheme, all the schemes were of the same size; about twenty German lads and about five German lasses. All the schemes ran for two months approximately; all were engaged on useful work - work for some-one other than themselves; simple work, but hard and demanding a high standard of conduct if not of actual quality. All five schemes had two to four British people from Relief Teams working and living alongside them. There was created a free, unrestricted atmosphere - and feeling of "being at home" for discussions and expression. The services tried to be an object lesson in democracy, where decisions were made and difficulties met by common consent of all volunteers. Each scheme had a leader, who was approachable and certainly not sheltered from criticism - for there were the weekly "house-meetings" where each volunteer was allowed to make his contribution in criticising the scheme. Responsibility for the scheme rested on the leader. In the special circumstances of the present time the leader of each scheme was a British person, who had had a lot of experience in the ways of I.V.S.P.

The value of the services can be estimated by this example, which was quoted to me once or twice. Usually the new volunteers who arrived felt strange; a little suspicious, perhaps; a little aloof. On the second or third day they would be leaving the protection of their own little group of friends; on the fourth, taking an independent part in discussions, daring to speak to the "leader" or "head-sister"; the fifth day, leading the scramble when volunteers for a certain job were called for, and on the sixth, either regretting their departure on the morrow and begging unsuccessfully to be allowed to stay on for another week; or, being, fortunate and able to serve for a further week, busy introducing the new volunteers as they arrived for the next week.

At Twisteden bei Geldern, near the Dutch border, the creating of the community atmosphere was in many ways simpler and in other ways harder than the other services. The evening camp-fires and sing-songs, the continual battle with the elements - common to all tented camps, the steady work in the quite, open forest land, all helped to unite the group. But at the beginning of the scheme, the volunteers were so young, some being only fifteen, that they tended to regard it as "just another camp". They were perhaps too young to appreciate the "International" value of the camp experiment. An object-lesson would have made the thing clearer; for instance if their had been a larger number of young foreign volunteers.

But the fact is that in spite of these difficulties, many of the lads did go away with a full understanding of the possibilities of constructive peace-making through international cooperation in hard work for a common, self-less cause, and when, later, towards the end of the scheme, older people joined in, the impression of unity for a common worthwhile cause was even stronger. And, this winter many old and sick people in Geldern who would otherwise have gone cold will have at least a little warmth from the logs and faggots, cut and bundled by the willing volunteers on the Twisteden bei Geldern service.

But unfortunately nobody will benefit directly this winter from the work of the Meschede scheme. They could not complete the cutting of a new canal to direct the water of the river Henne into the river Ruhr and so prevent the usual winter flooding; but a big proportion of the work has been done; and perhaps it will be completed next year.

Like the I.V.S.P. schemes after the last war, when I.V.S.P. was in its infancy, the men and women of at least two nations, former enemies, were helping here at Meschede, in a war-scarified town, to start building for peace. The newly repaired vicarage, converted almost overnight by a grateful Stadt, from a bomb-shattered ruin to a clean, airy house for the 25 volunteers to live in, will be constant reminder to the people of Meschede of the International Volunteers who came there to help them. They will be specially remembered by the four families of refugees who have now made the vicarage their home.

But there were difficulties - difficulties for the leader to solve and answer for at the weekly house-meetings; difficulties for the head-sister to solve regarding food - but there was a spirit of willingness and cooperation which solved them all and left a good impression on all who served.

And so to Hamburg where the problem of food was so very acute at the beginning of the service. The children's Day Holiday Camp where the volunteers worked and lived was situated on the bank of the Elbe just opposite the city, but very difficult to access, particularly when bringing supplies across. The importance to organise such details well beforehand was emphasised by the difficulties on this scheme. But the set-backs and difficulties were more than compensated for by the joy of working all day in the presence of children playing happily in what must have seemed to them a real heaven. Each trolley-load excavated from the sand-filled buildings and emptied into the water, broadened the sandy beach for the children to enjoy; and each tree trimmed of its six years' growth let in more sunlight. In future years a little work done each year will keep the work of wind and water at bay, and there will be room for about 2.000 children to come out from the city and play next summer. instead of the 500 this summer.

The fourth scheme was in Schleswig-Holstein, at Rendsburg, where the volunteers were helping to supply peat for the old folk and refugees in the town. At 5am every morning the volunteers got up, and by 6am were sitting, shivering in the cold dawn, waiting for the lorry to move off to the moor. But stacking and loading peat would soon warm them up, and the sun would come out to assist them. In wet weather the volunteers helped in an old peoples home in a hospital and in filling in trenches in the Stadt parks and woods. Here was a real gesture in peace-making - the hoofed scare of war seen daily by the towns-people were being covered up to be forgotten for good by friends and former enemies together.

Many of the volunteers were refugees, and by the end of each week, a fine friendship had gradually been built up between them and the students who frequently constituted a big proportion of the volunteers on the schemes. The problem of bringing more working-class people on to the schemes is one of the biggest that we have to face.

Here in Rendsburg a discussion centre was gradually built up over the eight weeks so that a small crowd of people from all over the town used to come in on Thursday evenings to discuss "German Youth", "Work Camps - Compulsory or Voluntary?", "Democracy and its Application to Germany", "The Refugee Problem". The Military Government Commandant and the Bürgermeister joint in. The latter both attended the farewell party at the end. Indeed the visits from such officials were features common to all the schemes. Their interest was aroused, their support obtained, and soon the local press reporters were on the spot.

Perhaps you wanted me to say something of the past history of I.V.S.P., but the past is past - it was a good past; we know it was a good past - it is written up in books and pamphlets; but our job is in the future, so let's look to the future and concentrate on laying good foundations for a German branch of the I.V.S.P.; of finding the best volunteers, by running schemes in Germany and testing the suitability of such volunteers for possible leadership and even of service in other lands as soon as German people are once more allowed to go abroad. Meanwhile the way should soon open up for volunteers of other nations to come to Germany and work along-side German people. Much, of course, depends upon whether the Control Commission allows a German branch to develop, and then it developed. But a real service for peace will have been rendered when truly international schemes start in Germany.

Basil. Eastland.