

FOUNDING A GERMAN BRANCH OF SERVICE CIVIL INTERNATIONAL

Report by a member of Relief Section 143, IVSP Germany of the
Conference in Hannover, 26 - 27 Oct 1946

FROM FAR AND NEAR

Karl told me he had been standing up all night - "on one foot" - as he put it, from Frankfurt, and each of the other seventy people who attended the Hannover Conference arrived by various more or less comfortable means. Willy Begert, the S.C.I. international secretary, and chairman of the conference, arrived, so to speak, with the mud of five different countries fresh on his boots; and two other Swiss friends, relief workers in the French Zone of Germany, were equally far from home.

WIDE REPRESENTATION

In the chapel itself which served as a conference room, there were splashes of khaki where members of the Education Branch of the Control Commission of Germany, and of IVSP relief teams, mingled with the German folk. Not a few of the latter had been invited because of their special interest in the work of the International Voluntary Service for Peace and S.C.I., its parent organisation. The remainder, some 34 German men and women, had been elected to attend.

ELECTED DELEGATES

Each of the five German summer workcamp schemes had elected each week, a volunteer to represent their particular scheme for that particular week; and now, here in Hannover, all was set for an exciting battle against the clock and against the inevitable fatigue and hunger, to win through to the end of the agenda :

"to receive a report upon, and criticise the summer schemes; and to explore the possibilities of organising future work-camp schemes in Germany and of forming a German branch of the Service Civil International."

AS IN BRUSSELS, SO IN HANNOVER

For a moment the conference became a replica of the previous week's meeting in Brussels where all the national secretaries of the Service Civil International had met, and exactly the same criticisms of the work-camp schemes had been

aired : firstly, the schemes had not been international enough

THE INTERNATIONAL ELEMENT

That criticism, at least, would not arise in the two projected winter 46 - 47 schemes, when 18 selected German volunteers will be working for ten days side by side with 18 volunteers from nine different countries. Three volunteers will go from Britain, two from France, two from Switzerland, two from Holland, two from Denmark and one or two from Norway, Sweden and Belgium. The work in the SCHLESWIG service will be fuel-cutting for refugees, and in the DUISBURG scheme, preparing a plot of ground for a vegetable garden in a children's hospital - work useful to the community and work which would otherwise not be done, and certainly not competing with paid labour.

SUITABILITY OF WORK

On this score, of the suitability of the work, the conference could only praise the summer schemes. There had been hard, unskilled manual work to do; work with a worthwhile aim and beneficial to the community. Having visited and worked on all of them, I felt sure that, for instance, the young boys on the TWISTEDEN summer camp felt glad, as they crawled into their tents after a hard day's chopping and bundling faggots - that is if they were not too tired to think at all - that the old people of the nearby town would at least have some fuel in the coming winter. Perhaps there had been insufficient work on the schemes for the "sisters" to do; or rather, insufficient suitable work. It takes an abnormally strong girl to shovel sand eight hours a day, the way the men on the HAMBURG summer service had done.

SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY ASPECTS

The third main comment was that the social life of the camps should be equal in importance to the work itself. A good leader, good organised discussions and contact with local people helped as much as the physical job of work well and cheerfully accomplished. I remember with what pride the leader of the RENDSBURG summer service told me how the volunteers had asked to forego all their evening cocoa in order that a weekly party could be given to the local refugees.

A PROBLEM PECULIAR TO GERMANY ?

Volunteers should stay a fortnight if at all possible; they should include all classes of people and not students alone all these were criticisms of SCI the world over. But there were certain problems peculiar to Germany : was not the provision of extra food in a country where millions were living on a starvation diet, a method of bribery? Yet the truth was that the hard work demanded a higher ration than the volunteers as students or nurses or factory hands would usually get. And even if the motives of some who volunteered were not entirely pure, there was an amount of very sober education in the mere contact and working together with folk from other lands.

THE WAY FORWARD

As a parenthesis I must interpolate some of the constructive work of the conference : the decision to form a German branch of S.C.I. and to ask all four powers occupying Germany to recognise it; the forming of a working committee, and of regional groups; the accepting of the Swiss statutes temporarily; and the keen acceptance of the invitation by the international Committee of S.C.I. for two members of the German branch to attend their next meeting.

SCARCELY POSSIBLE UNAIDED

The last criticism that I am going to mention, and the one most difficult to answer was that the British IVSP had the resources and the power to organise these summer work-camps and the two projected winter ones; a German branch could not possibly do that. In a land where accommodation for a work-camp would be at the very bottom of the list all the time refugees were living like cattle penned in wooden huts and sleeping on plain straw; where camp equipment is pressed into the same urgent service; where working clothes and boots are as difficult to find, even with a special permit, as nylon stockings in Britain; how could they organise work-camp schemes themselves?

ENTHUSIASM A VITAL INGREDIENT

But the whole spirit of enthusiasm and desire to give of their very best, which had been so evident on the summer schemes and at the conference had now been mustered for tackling of this problem. As a sign of their determination to overcome all barriers, especially the great barrier which they feel to be between them and the outside world, the German branch of the S.C.I. is organising a long-term summer service in 1947 at the youth castle in Burg Ludwigstein near Kassel. This is a supreme example of the implementing of the motto of S.C.I. - "Deeds, not Words". It is a challenge to us in Britain to face all OUR difficulties with fresh ideas and new energy, so that a friendly "rivalry in good works" may grow up between our two branches.