

11th February, 1947

Relief Section 109 / IVSP  
British Red Cross,  
B.A.O.R.

Dear Ralph,

Thank you for your draft report and letter. They have only just reached me, and as you do not mention having received my short report on the food, I presume it has been similarly delayed in the post.

I have read the report, with Basil, who happened to be with the team, and have made a number of alternations of facts or emphasis which Fritz has interpreted and which you will see in the enclosed revision. Fritz's interpretation of English is not perfect, and mine of German very slight, and so I cannot guarantee that the interpretation is always apt.

Now to deal with the points of the letter and report in turn. First the food report. You will probably have received this by now. It was posted from Vlotho, where I could not have it typed, and although I have the information, I have not the exact copy, and would be very glad if you could let me have the report for a short time when you have finished with it so that I can have a copy made.

My comment on the feeding are as before. First, Basil told me that the food supplies were likely to be unsuitable, inadequate, and late in arrival. From our unit, (whose own rations are short since they voluntarily feed an equal number of Germans), from the British Red Cross, and by a "wangle" with the army, I managed to get enough to keep us going rather frugally in case of emergency and planned meals at first on that basis. When the liberal Scandinavian and Swiss food arrived later, and when in the last few days I managed to get heavy workers rations for some of the Germans, the position was quite different. I believe that feeding should be planned in accordance with three points, (1) the need of the recipients, (2) the amount and variety of the food available, and (3) the wishes of the recipients.

In this case, the work was hard, the weather wintry, the house cold, and the Germans undernourished; and after the first few days, our stock of food plentiful. The policy was obvious, to give meals as large and varied as reasonable, keeping to nourishing and filling foods to provide as much energy and heat as possible without including unnecessary luxuries, or cakes etc. except at the final party.

The men volunteers were asked from the start to give criticism or suggestions about the food, which we said we would gladly consider and follow if possible. They never objected to the food or quantity, and we followed any suggestion that they made. After the first few days, the German sister said that they thought more food was needed at all meals, and a pudding at lunch, and this was therefore given.

Toward the end, when it was observed that the German volunteers were no longer so hungry, smaller portions were given, and less was cooked. In our opinion, that was the only reasonable plan to adopt. As I said, I had expected that we would have to feed very frugally and dully, and we were glad that was not necessary. A considerable amount of food, brought for the scheme was left unused, and this has been distributed by the team to the most undernourished in certain refugee camps.

Now to deal with the house. I agree that the work in the house was too great compared with the outside. Outside, the work had good tools and good conditions. Inside, many tools were lacking, and conditions were bad. Cleaning up after one meal and preparation for the next took until mid-afternoon, when it was soon too dark to see to clean. The dining and common rooms were cleaned daily, the hall and corridors swept, the tables scrubbed; and five minutes afterwards the fires had smoked dust lay sticky again. Apart from lack of time, it was often found unwise to wash stoned floored rooms, since they were too cold to dry; and there were several narrow escapes due to the ice which had covered the floors when this was done. We had no mops or floor cloths, and the dirt was one of my chief complaints. As for the division of work, I have added my comments to the report. I do not like rotas, and therefore it was left to our joint agreement as to who would do what work, and we took it in turns to get up early and prepare meals etc. As head sister I felt that it was right for me to do this oftener; the reviewing of the day's work, writing up records etc. daily meant later night's than most.

The men on water carrying, early rising, fire lighting, and win meals washing up were at first volunteers. They then asked Steve to make a rota so that the distribution would be fairer for these regular jobs. For other odds and ends they volunteered as cheerfully as IVSP folks do, although, (as is always the case,) it was largely a smaller, regular section who did this. I cannot understand why you feel that this voluntary work should have been avoided. It has never seemed fair to me that women's work should be endless, while men's should finish by the clock. The men work hard until 4.30 outside. The women were still at work when they came home. I rarely had time to wash until a minute before the dinner gong rang, which meant that it was not easy to be in time to serve. All work should, I believe be shared, and as housework goes on longest, it should be shared until it is done. There were not as you had written, 4 women and 1 man daily in the house. On some days the men was not at home at all. On most days, after a brief help, he disappeared to the cellar to saw logs, etc. for the rest of the day.

The work to obtain German rations, to get permits and Police permits, to get travel permits and have them stamped, to carry out urgent commissions for volunteers to work out and queue for rations, took an amazing and most undesirable amount of time. For the heavy workers rations, it was necessary to make repeated visits to both Schleswig and Flensburg. Bruno's permit to reside outside the Berlin zone, and Baldor's visa also required several visits. Such visits often upset the plan of work for the day, and it may not have been realised that they were as unavoidable as they were unpleasant and regrettable. On no occasion was a visit made to Schleswig on any business not connected with the scheme.

Regarding the preparations of the scheme, this was in the hands of three persons from the Schleswig team, apart from the leader, (Stan Slee) and Basil Eastland, Basil and two of the others had to go on leave, previously fixed, and the team was desperately short of members, with the refugee work at its height. No other accommodation was possible, and it was only by the most persistent efforts, entailing journeys of over 500 miles, that made the house available. Even then, an official blunder created difficulties, and the General in charge of Mil Gov in Flensburg ordered the scheme to be cancelled the day before it was due to begin. Only good fortune enabled me to persuade him to change his mind at the last moment.

Naturally that meant that the heating, water, repairs and cleanliness etc. were unsatisfactory. No one realised that better than those who had tried to prepare the scheme, but we know that volunteers are prepared for difficulties on a pick and shovel service. Had it been possible we would have had all repairs complete and the house in order. We were very sorry you could not have been in Schleswig before the group arrived and there to start the scheme off. Some of us went early, before any heating or water was available.

I think the good work done then started off the cheerful spirit which characterised the scheme. Had you been there then, we could perhaps have organised the work rather more according to your plans and wishes.

Then the financial side. The unit at Schleswig lent us money in B.A.F.V.S., and Reichsmark to defray costs. The German voluntarily made a collection (of 65 RM) for incidentals and food. In actual fact there were two grocery bills for German rations, a telephone bill, a wood bill, amounting in all to 72,05 RM. I.V.S.P. paid this, and the 65 RM were given to I.F.D.F., and the B.A.F.V.S. returned to Schleswig. The Army provided the accommodation, repairs, equipment, and some of the fuel, free, and the Schleswig team lent the vehicle, some food and equipment, and arranged for petrol, etc. free. Clothing was dealt with by Steve, and Stan has given Basil what is left, he, Basil, is now in charge of the question.

Suggestions for future schemes. These I have largely embodied in my previous comments; in brief they are as follows: -

- (1) Someone, preferable a volunteer of the scheme, should go to proposed site of the scheme to make all preliminary arrangements. The leader, if not directly in charge, should be kept fully acquainted with all these arrangements from the start.

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- (2) The leader should be on the scheme from the outset.

- (3) Whatever nationalities are on the scheme, the language known should so overlap that all may be

kept in full touch with the rest.

- (4) The leader and head sister should be fully conversant with the common language.
- (5) There should be the fullest emphasis throughout on the fellowship and social spirit of the scheme - and less on a rigid time-table and target for the amount of work to be done. The work is only an excuse for the group to live together and learn understanding; although it should naturally be done as efficiently and as keenly as is possible for I.V.S.P. unskilled workers.
- (6) It should be regarded by all as a primary duty to make comments, suggestions and criticisms throughout the scheme, including good and bad aspects with equal generosity.
- (7) The work should be so near the house that transport is unnecessary.
- (8) Volunteers should arrive when the scheme opens, with rations, not ration cards. All permits, visas etc. should be obtained before hand.
- (9) (Minor point) Volunteers should bring postage stamps if required.
- (10) It should be left entirely to volunteers discretion as to bed time, except on Youth Schemes, provided that quietness is observed.
- (11) To ensure punctuality, there should be an understanding that the vehicle, if used, should set out at an agreed time, whether volunteers were ready or not; and that meals should be similarly served.
- (12) Food to be brought should be definitely fixed, both kind and amount, long beforehand; in order to ensure that everything necessary will be available, that there will not be too much or too little, and that some preparation can be made by the sisters if necessary.
- (13) Established customs of the organisation should not be imposed on groups of new volunteers. Use of silence, of morning readings, of I.V.S.P. Formulae, to which the 'old hands' are accustomed should be explained and discussed by the group, and not used unless wished. (There was some comment on this point by newer volunteers).
- (14) It should be clear that everyone helps, When, where and how, they are best suited, irrespective of sex or custom, and without persuasion.
- (15) The head sister should be able to take more part in the social and common life of the group.

Final Comment. I agree with you that the scheme must be regarded as successful. In difficult circumstances, and with an overburdened time table it is not easy for people already familiar to each other to live in harmony all the time. There was a very fine spirit of helpfulness, of willing service, of cheerfulness under difficulties of comradeship, and this was most satisfying in view of the varying nationalities, ages and types of volunteers, the fact that most were fairly new to I.V.S.P. and the political differences.

I have learnt much from my first job as head sister - and think that with your help and suggestions, for which I am indeed grateful, I could certainly make any improvement in future. It is the first international scheme on which I have been privileged to serve and I think each of our national S.C.I. groups has much to learn from the rest.

Yours very sincerely,

Margaret Hickson