

DUISBURG I.V.S.P. SERVICE, 1st. to 12th. JANUARY, 1947

Preliminary arrangements for the scheme had been made by Unit 7. They had discovered the job to be done and had obtained the co-operation of the local British and German authorities. The Jugendamt (Youth Office) was responsible for finding and partially equipping the house where we were to live. This was a very large one on the outskirts of the town, in fact it adjoined the wood where we were later to do our tree felling. It had been de-requisitioned by the military and was waiting to be refitted as an old people's home. The town authorities supplied double-decker bunks, straw palliasses, some blankets, furniture, stores and fuel. The house had electric light, and the town lent us some of their very precious bulbs, but most of those we used came either from the Unit or were brought from Denmark. All our kitchen equipment, crockery cutlery, &c., a large supply of blankets and some working clothes and boots were supplied by the Unit. The water supply froze up just before the scheme started, and all our water had to be carried from the adjoining house or from a pond in the garden.

We occupied five rooms on the first floor of the house and a kitchen on the ground floor. It all looked cold and uninviting at first, but once everybody had arrived it soon became a friendly sort of place. Everybody came with a rush on the evening of the 1st. January. The first to arrive were the Dutch, brought by the Unit from the frontier, and about two hours later the Scandinavians and the Germans, brought again by the Unit on the famous "shuttle service" under which the Schleswig Team brought them to Hanover, and there they were picked up by the Duisburg Team. We all felt very grateful to Basil Eastland and the Units for the excellent way they had arranged the schemes, and obtained permits and the transport to get the volunteers to them. The Swiss arrived by train the next day, and the only people who had serious difficulty were Pierre Martin and Madeleine Allinne from France, whose permits were delayed and who therefore could not arrive until the 5th. January. Otherwise things went according to plan in a simply incredible way.

FOOD.

This looked like being a serious problem at first. Red Cross supplies were not available and we did not know if the Germans on the scheme would get heavy worker rations, neither did we expect the other branches to send much. In fact, however, our fears were groundless. The Unit gave us most generous supplies from their store and daily rations, the German men were given heavy worker rations, and the amount of food nobly carried by the foreign contingents, especially the Danes, was simply staggering. We fed extremely well.

PERSONNEL.

Seven nationalities were represented, Norwegian, Danish, Dutch, French, Swiss, German and English. There were fifteen men and five women. The ages of the men varied from 20 to 42, with an average age for the group of 26½. The ages of the Sisters varied from 24 to 34 with an average age of 29½. Nearly all the volunteers, men and women, were past or present University students. (Some boasted, while others confessed, that we had six lawyers on the scheme.) The official language of the scheme, i.e. the language used at house meetings or for announcements, was German, or my particular sort of German.

Although I approached the service very optimistically, I am still amazed when I think how admirably everybody fitted in, and how the different nationalities got on together. Although not in a majority, the Germans were naturally the largest contingent, but they carefully avoided forming a clique, and were most anxious to see that our small working parties were truly international. The spirit of the whole scheme was excellent.

WORK.

The work consisted in cleaning a rough place of ground behind a Hospital, for use as the Hospital's vegetable garden. The ground was fairly thickly covered with young birch trees and bushes, and these had to be removed. For the first twenty metres, however, the trees were left in order to form a shelter for the garden and the Hospital, and in this area the soil was merely turned. After this, we got down to the main job of clearing the ground completely, and double-spit digging. We worked at this for 2½ days, from the first Thursday until Saturday mid-day, but over the week-end, heavy frosts made further digging quite impossible, and for the rest of the time we were on wood-cutting. This was done in a town wood adjoining our house. Several bombs had fallen in the wood, and we had to fell those trees which had been killed or badly damaged. The wood was to be used as firewood in the town kitchens, and after we had felled the trees we had to saw them up, split them and load the wood on to lorries. Later we were put on to much larger trees, which were to go to the Mills.

The standard of work on both the garden and the tree felling jobs was very high. The town gardener who supervised our work said he was well satisfied with what had been done. He needed 100 men for this sort of work, but could not get them because men were unable to do such heavy work on the rations they were getting, and our help was, therefore particularly welcome. We were, however, aware of one failing and that was unpunctuality. We started off quite well, but after the first few days we tended to drift to work both in the morning and after lunch in twos and threes, instead of all getting out together on time. It was a small point which did not interfere with production, as everybody was obviously working to capacity, but on a longer scheme it might have become serious. The hours of work were determined largely by the hours of daylight. We left the house at 8 a.m. (or soon after). The Sisters brought out "elevenes", when we had a break of ¼ hour, and we knocked off for lunch at 12.15. We left the house again at 1.30 and worked until 4.30 or 4.45, according to the state of the job. On the first Saturday we finished at 1 p.m. and on the second at 11.30, as this was our last day, and it was merely a question of completing work started on the previous day. On most days one of the Sisters worked with us. The total number of man hours worked during the scheme was 618.

We were extremely fortunate with the weather, which although very cold at first was quite mild towards the end of the scheme. We had some rain but never enough to stop the work. It was most unfortunate that the scheme was marred by an accident to Finn Redse. A log he was sawing fell on his hand and broke a bone between the wrist and fingers. He received attention at a local German Hospital, and had to spend the last days of the scheme with his arm in a splint and sling.

VALUE OF JOB

Most of us must have wondered I think, why in a devastated area like the Ruhr, it had not been possible to find more urgent jobs than digging a garden. Bearing in mind, however, that we were unskilled, had no transport, and were only available for ten days, the number of jobs we could tackle was obviously quite limited, and when one thinks of the urgent necessity of using every available inch of German ground for food production, one can understand why this job was chosen. Certainly we all found it very satisfying when we got down to it and there was a general dissatisfaction that the weather made it impossible to complete the garden. The wood cutting to which we were transferred was certainly a very popular job. Two factors made it a useful service to the town. First was the fact that fuel was lamentably short, which was clearly demonstrated by the way people came to collect the smaller branches once they knew cutters were at work, and by the fact that two of the trees were felled and left in the wood were stolen over night. Second was the shortage of labour as men were unwilling and unable to tackle this heavy work on the rations they were getting.

HOUSEWORK.

Perhaps all I need say is that a few words of thanks to the Sisters at the end of the scheme were greeted with tumultuous applause. Certainly the food was excellent and enabled the men to maintain a satisfactory output per man hour.

The house as we knew it was certainly not equipped with all modern conveniences. Having to carry all the water and the fuel for example was very heavy work, and one man stayed at home each day to help with this. One of the Sisters went down with flu' at first, but when she had recovered and the housework was going quite smoothly, one Sister worked with the men each day.

EVENING AND WEEK-END ACTIVITIES.

We had something on every evening and in fact it became obvious towards the end of the scheme that in view of the heavy work we were doing our social commitments were too numerous. We were, however, an object of curiosity in Duisburg, and it was difficult to refuse those people who wanted to meet us and hear about I.V.S.P. We were once the guests of Unit 7 and met there the Mil.Gov. Commander and Officials of the town and the Committee of the International Club, who also entertained us later in the week.

The Unit paid a return visit to us and we were also visited by groups of the F.O.R. and the Social Democrats Youth Council and various town Officials at different times. Two evenings were taken up by house meetings, and we had a discussion evening, when the subject under consideration was Pacifism. On the Sunday we had a devotional meeting and in the afternoon we had a trip round the harbour in a launch supplied by the harbour authorities. In the evening we had games and a sing-song - in fact most evenings finished off with songs.

DIFFICULTIES.

- (a) Food :
Before the scheme opened it seemed as though obtaining supplies of food would be a major problem. In fact, supplies from Unit 7 and those brought from abroad solved this for us, but future schemes may not find these sources available to them.
- (b) Clothes :
A supply of boots and overalls made available by Unit 7 was much appreciated. In view of the acute shortage in Germany (a pair of boots costs 1.000 marks on the black market) volunteers are naturally reluctant to wear out their existing stock doing manual work. If a supply of working clothes and boots can be made available by Relief Units for future schemes in Germany, it will be a great help to the German Branch.
- (c) Money :
Even a scheme as well supported by the Mil.Gov. and the German authorities as this inevitably entails some expense, e.g. train fares of volunteers and costs of insurance. This is quite an important point, especially as the German Branch is not yet officially recognised and consequently cannot collect, or hold funds. In our case, two of the German volunteers visited the finance office of the town at the end of the scheme, and were given a grant of 500 marks. It would be better in future, if such assistance could be arranged beforehand.

The scheme ended early - terrible early - on Sunday 12th. January, when the first truck load left on their journey to Hanover, to the strains of "Muss i denn" played on Harold's Harmonica. It was perhaps the best note on which to end a scheme, with everybody looking forward to a happy wiedersehen in the next.

Bruce Harrison