

REPORT AND EVALUATION – VISIT TO OBERHAUSEN WORK CAMP – Sept. 6 to 24

BACKGROUND

The Oberhausen camp, sponsored by the IFDF with considerable help and cooperation from the IVSP and the Oberhausen FRS team, lasted from July 20 to the end of September. The work project was the converting of a rubble dump into a playground for the 300 or so children in the Expellee camp where the work camp was located. The work camp itself shared the first of the one story concrete barracks that comprised the total refugee camp with the manager and the caretaker of the camp, the camp office, the Kindergarten and the office of the Krankenschwestern.

Living arrangements, as far as rooms and facilities were concerned, were fairly satisfactory -- no more than six or eight sleeping in a room, adequate kitchen and dining room, heavenly hot showers available in the washroom of the cement factory next door. But if the cement factory provided hot showers, it also provided dust and dirt and smoke for the atmosphere on a 24 hour basis. Many of the campers and camp visitors found this aspect of the camp particularly trying; I, having grown up in Kansas during the dust bowl years and having lived a few years each in Chicago and Philadelphia, sort of felt at home!

The Germans in the camp received worker's rations allotments, and the camp received rations for six foreigners (from CCG) for the entire camp period whether there actually were six foreigners there or not. The rest of the food supply came from CARE packages, surpluses of the Oberhausen FRS team, and allocations from the food supplement sent to German work camps from various sources. Work pants came from the US army (via the AFSC, I believe) fatigue uniforms; elegant green and white vertical-striped football jerseys made fine work shirts; shoes-high-top and hob-nailed -- came from the German Wehrmacht; and the British army supplied (via BRCC, I guess) jungle-camouflage mottled rain slickers. The total ensemble assembled was not Saks Fifth Avenue, but it was imminently practical and served the purpose nicely.

MAJOR STRENGTHS

The work project, as first conceived, was a worthwhile one. Certainly the children needed some place in which they could play with a relative degree of safety. And grass and trees in such a dreary place as this camp was will no doubt be welcome. The fact that the play space and "park" are located just in front of the building where the Kindergarten is held will no doubt make them that much more useful. I'm sure any Teachers College nursery school expert will tell you that it's utterly impossible to work with as many children in as small a space and with as few facilities as the two teachers in the camp there seemed to be doing quite successfully. Even so, the teachers saw the work of the work camp as a very welcome and much needed expansion of these facilities. Perhaps the greatest weakness of the work project was that the camp lasted too long and it became necessary to find supplementary projects to occupy the campers. These projects were not so well organized and planned, nor were they, I felt, particularly significant in terms of the over-all need. A great many man-hours were spent on building a street at the side of the camp; and in converting the two huge concrete water storage tanks (built for protection from incendiaries) into a swimming pool and a wading pool for children. None of these projects were finished by the time the camp closed, and I have little faith that they ever will be finished, although there was some discussion of having weekend camps to polish them off.

The work spirit, when there was really enough work to do, was fairly good. There was little gold-bricking; when the campers were expected to work they were on the job. This was both good and bad -- good because it is after all one of the purposes of a work camp to get the work job done; but bad because doing what is expected of one eliminates the necessity of doing any thinking for oneself. This is spinning a fine psychological point, but I wonder if there isn't some validity in this analysis: the willingness and the yearning to do something is a terribly strong, and perhaps the reason for its strength is that when one is given something to do he is not longer faced so immediately with the necessity of dealing with his own problems and making his own decisions -- work becomes an escape. How much of the work at Oberhausen was escape and how much of was motivated by a desire to be a creative member of the group, I certainly couldn't say.

The household seemed to me to be particularly well managed. No undue burdens fell on anyone and the organization of the household work was such as to make it as easy and as equitable as possible for all.

The breakfast cooks got up at the same time as the rest of the camp and cooked the breakfast while the rest of the campers put in an early hour and a half of work -- a wonderful system, as any bleary-eyed breakfast cook will testify! The cooks volunteered for a day at a time and were encouraged to take as much initiative as they would take in the planning of menus, ways of cooking, etc. -- within the limits available, naturally. Laundry and housecleaning happened regularly and efficiently even under considerable difficulties. Perhaps the best proof that the household organization was truly well done was that in the time I was there the head sister-ship changed three times, but there was no indication in the food or the cleanliness of the place that any change had taken place. I think this indicates that the girls were accustomed to take a real share in the responsibility of the household affairs.

The education program received a healthy amount of attention, as far as the camp program was concerned. The group made visits every week or so through a coal mine or a local factory -- not just to go slumming but to attempt to understand the problems of the workers there. One evening a week seemed to be given to cultural activity -- a play or a concert. Speakers were invited to the camp to discuss significant problems and there seemed to be a real attempt to make the best possible use in the educational program of the camp personnel. My only real criticism of the educational program as such was that it came primarily from the leadership and not from the campers, but then, given the rapidly changing camp population, perhaps it's asking too much to expect the initiative to come from "the ranks". However, even those campers who had been there for several weeks apparently felt little responsibility in the educational life of the camp.

MAJOR WEAKNESSES

The terrible fluctuation of camp population was certainly one of the most discouraging elements of the camp at the time I was there. I don't believe that within the time I was there were two days in a row when the camp population was the same. Trying to build "community" in a situation like that is about as frustrating as trying to lay an egg on an escalator -- by the time you get set for some action your whole situation has changed and you have to begin all over again. You can get acquainted with a tremendous number of people in that way but the real values of the group process cannot emerge.

If work camps are really going to contribute to the building of a peaceful World, then they must provide for those who participate in them the actual experience of living together in a beloved community, facing and living out the problems of such living that are basically miniature versions of the problems of international peace. If Poland could pull up and go live next to Mesopotamia when it found living next to Germany very trying, then perhaps international peace might be more possible. But the reality of the situation obviously is that Poland must find ways of living happily next to Germany; and if international work camps are going to be worthwhile they must demand that their participants face through the problems of living together in a realistic manner. There are in addition, of course, extreme values that come from having been a member of such a group. Most of the campers, I felt, were missing the real life-changing experiences that such group participation can give. Some of them seemed to be "collecting" work camps -- a week here, a week there, and a week at the next one. And to complicate things even more, the administration of the camp had no idea when the volunteers were coming. We got in one evening at 11 p.m., for example, from one of our weekly Ausflugs and discovered seven people waiting on our doorstep. At 11 p.m. seven new campers can be a bit of a problem, particularly when your camp population is already five over the maximum. (N.B. to Philadelphia readers : let's not assume this problem is indigenous to German work camps -- recall very clearly some letters that sizzled up from the Baltimore camp in 1945 on that very subject. The point is that it's one more stumbling block in the achievement of work camp purposes, no matter where it occurs.)

The whole question of leadership was another of the problems that this camp faced. Perhaps the campers' attitude toward leadership was as important an aspect of the problem as the quality of the leadership itself.

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What I mean can best be illustrated by a remark one of the campers -- a girl who had been there for several weeks and had been in the IAL camp in Hamburg previously. It was a rainy day and work morale was low. She came out of the little discussion on whether or not we would work and remarked to me, "I would hate to be a leader in a winter camp - it would be too hard to get the campers to work".

I think her attitude was fairly typical of many of the others -- it was the responsibility of the leader to get people to work rather than a joint undertaking and joint responsibility. The leader of the camp was not helpful in creating an attitude of camper responsibility. On the one hand he was criticised for being too militaristic (that's the German version of being called Communist in the States!) and on the other hand he was condemned for being too easy going. I think both criticisms were probably valid! Certainly he was confused and very uncertain. As a former Nazi captain and a member of the officer class in Germany, there is no doubt that he was saturated with the militaristic pattern. But I felt he was trying very hard to be a different kind of leader and in the attempt to be democratic he would swing too far and become laissez faire instead. He simply was not quite ready for the job that he found on his hands.

Community relations was another point where the Oberhausen camp fell down a bit. There was little contact between the campers in the work camp and the refugees for whom we were ostensibly labouring. There were individual cases -- like the lady we borrowed the clothes line from, and the man who one time came out and fixed the shovel handle, but unfortunately these were isolated instances.

The "position of women" left something to be desired, said she at the risk of being called an ardent Feminist. Although the girls participated in the work project on quite an equal basis, the boys did not participate in the work of household on anywhere's near and equal basis. When one camper (boy) did go out and help in the kitchen one evening after he was through on the work project, it did move some of the other boys to follow suit for a few days thereafter, so that I'm sure such equality is not impossible to achieve. I felt it was very much needed also in the leadership -- the woman leader should have an equal place of responsibility and direction with the man, instead of merely being in charge of the household.

The selection of volunteers was another problem, I felt. Apparently there was no selection on an application basis, but campers heard about it through their friends or some such manner and just came. Consequently there seemed to be a number of people there who were not deeply motivated by the real aims and purposes of IFDF. (In fairness I should say that there was considerable confusion as to what the real purposes of IFDF were, due in large part to the shortage of paper in Germany that makes adequate publicity impossible.) But I also felt that there was some tendency to strive for getting large numbers of people into the camps without adequate consideration of whether they were the right people. I don't mean to imply that the work camp movement should be a Main-Line country club outfit as far as membership is concerned, and I recognize that growth is possible only as people who are not complete fellow-travellers are brought in. But I feel that a work camp group, if it is to achieve real community and to develop leaders of the people that are participating in it, must be rather carefully chosen and can absorb only a very few "problem cases" and people who come for reasons other than the basic principles of the movement. Given a bottle of serum, one can put it in a Flit gun and spray a hundred people, but fewer people will die of cholera if you put it into a hypodermic needle and inoculate ten. I am firmly convinced that ten people, feverishly on fire with the experience of the way of peace, can do a great deal more than a hundred who have only sniffed of the spray.

In conclusion I should say that, in spite of all the problems I have outlined, I am not hopelessly discouraged about the camp nor do I at all regret the time I spent there. My main regrets are that I myself didn't do more to help some of the situations that I felt were discouraging -- perhaps the next time I can do a better job of it

Marjorie Hyer