

INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTARY SERVICE FOR PEACE

SUMMER 1947  
INTERNATIONAL WORK-CAMPS IN GERMANY

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Between July and October 1947, four international work-camp were held in Germany under the aegis of the I.V.S.P. In most respects the camps were identical with similar camps or "services" already held in Germany during the last 18 months, with the main exception that a considerably larger proportion of the volunteers came from abroad, and the camps were organised by the Germans themselves. I.V.S.P. relief personnel had been responsible for organising the first international work-camp at the Friedland refugee transit camp near Göttingen in the Spring of 1946; for the five summer (1946) camps; and for the two New Year (1946/7) training camps. But by Easter 1947, a German organisation had been established, whose executive committee were able to take the responsibility for organising two Easter and four summer services.

Approximately 200 different German men and women, mostly in their 20's, from all zones of Germany, passed through these summer camps; most stayed for at least a fortnight. The average number of volunteers in a camp at any one time was between 20 and 25. This included the foreign volunteers, who totalled 77 in all four camps. These men and women who had been specially selected by the various branches of I.V.S.P. and similar organisations in 12 different countries, and whose visit to Germany was for the specific purpose of working and living in these work-camps, as a rule stayed for considerably longer than a fortnight. Their entry into Germany was arranged by the I.V.S.P. Advisory Officer in Vlotho with the consent of the Deputy Commissioner of the British Red Cross Commission (Civilian Relief) and with the sponsorship of the Youth Education Advisor of the Education Branch, C.C.G.

A responsibility similarly borne, was the sending of 26 young German men and women for periods of six weeks each, to Switzerland, Britain, France and Holland for international work-camps organised by the branches of I.V.S.P. in those lands.

The work in the four German camps in Hanover, Duisburg, Oberhausen and Freiburg (French Zone) was of the hard manual variety, where good will and unskilled hands were able to help a refugee community or a hospital through a difficult period in the construction or reconstruction of their buildings and surroundings. Women and men worked side by side on the work-sites, the sense of fellowship in work being thus greatly strengthened, a sense which already bound together the representatives of so many different nations, and members of many religions (or absence of religion), and of so many different political parties including a handful of those who had been members of the Nazi party.

Each volunteer had had to apply in writing on a special application form before being accepted for a camp, and the camps themselves were organised on the traditional I.V.S.P. basis of democratic control, and the cultivation of the sense of individual responsibility for the services as a whole.

1) DUISBURG

refugee colony - "Maria in der Drucht".10 weeks - 20 Jul / 27 Sep.

This was a convalescent colony for German refugees from the Eastern provinces. The present wooden huts were gradually being replaced by more permanent brick and concrete buildings which, upon completion, would accommodate about 1.000 people. The Catholic relief organisation "Caritas", runs the colony, and is providing the building materials. The international work-group lived as a separate community in a hut of its own, integrating gradually in a friendly way with the life of the colony through such social activities as parties for the refugee children.

The work consisted of clearing scrub and large tree stumps over a wide area to provide cultivatable land for the colony; removing and spreading topsoil on levelled areas; digging and filling in trenches for drainage and light cables; digging out the foundation for the large communal hall; and, as a lighter part-time occupation for some of the women-volunteers, sewing.

As in the other camps, spare time, after the 7- or 8-hour working day was profitably spent in discussions or excursions, foreign volunteers being able to give very vivid accounts of problems and points of view regarding Germany in their own lands. Some idea of the scope and variety of these discussions, both organised and spontaneous, can be gathered from the following list of topics

- "Folk High Schools in Denmark"
- "German-Danish situation"
- "Holland yesterday and today"
- "Switzerland, political outlook and characteristics of the people"
- "Berlin past and present"
- "The importance of work, in the community"
- "Hero worship"
- "Socialism"
- "Lyric Poetry"
- "The administration of a city" by a mayor
- "Russian films"
- "Treason"
- "The individual and the community"
- "The basis of family life"
- "Modern Art, and the aim of Art"
- "Relief in Progress"
- "Resettlement and emigration"
- "Work-service, voluntary or compulsory?"
- "Should there be a period of national or international service after leaving school?"
- "Conscription and the conscientious objector"
- "What is IVSP? Its aims"

The group was interviewed by radio and press observers, and visited the theatre, cinema and a model hospital in the vicinity.

## 2) OBERHAUSEN

refugee colony - "Cement Works". 10 weeks - 20 Jul / 27 Sep.

There could be no stronger contrast between the woodland setting of the camp number one, and the squalid surroundings of this second camp; surroundings which tended to knit the work-group very closely together; and which made the group excursions especially important. The work began by clearing approximately nine tons of scrap iron, and vast quantities of concrete rubble and of refuse from the surroundings of the dozen or so concrete huts which made up the colony. Work has then commenced on digging out and levelling the land for a vegetable garden and a playpark for the children. The latter included a sandpit and paddling-pool; the former entailed the transport and spreading of about 120 cubic metres of top-soil. Finally, hedges and paths were prepared, and a new road for the camp, laid down.

The presence of volunteers from the United States, Denmark, Finland, Holland, France, Switzerland, Sweden, Canada, Norway and England, encouraged, as in the other camps, a very rich range of topics for discussion. In addition to those already mentioned the following also arose

- "The Nationality problems in India and USA"
- "The Jewish problem"
- "Atomic Energy"
- "UNESCO"

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"International work-Camps in Poland, Finland and Italy", by participants

"A united States of Europe"  
"Youth hostelling in Holland"  
"Life in an American High School"

As in the first camp, difficulties were experienced in the first two weeks of the camps by too high a proportion of very young under-20's who seem to find it extremely difficult to fit in with those over 20.

### 3) HANNOVER

Langenhagen Old Peoples and Mental Hospital. 10 weeks - 20 Jul / 27 Sep.

Lying just north of the Autobahn this colony covers many hundreds of acres, and it was at one time almost completely self-supporting, having had among its seventy buildings, factories, work-shops, farm buildings, power plant and so on. After bombardment about 8 buildings now remain standing, two of these being mere shells. The rubble from the one was, however, being used by the city authorities to help in the rebuilding of the second, and the international work-group cleared some 850 cubic metres of rubble. Most of this was pushed in tip-wagons along a "home-made" railway into a pond, a quarter of a mile away; but valuable beams of timber and other wood, together with whole bricks, were salvaged, cleaned and taken up the ladders to the skilled workmen reconstructing the second building. Collapsed concrete floors had to be broken up with pneumatic drills but in the end, the building was completely freed of rubble, and the cellar completely cleaned.

As in the other camps, the life of the work-community was guided by a "leader", at first a Swiss, and later a German; whose function were to represent the volunteers, assess their wishes and the "group-feeling" about questions of work and the use of leisure, to exercise a little guidance, keep the records of the service, and, in conjunction with two other members of the community, to write reports on each of the volunteers. The special problems of the girls were dealt with by a "Headsister" - in this camp at first an English girl, and later a German girl, who dealt with all questions of food, and kitchen and household arrangements, delegating her responsibility as much as possible, in the same way as the leader, and co-operating with him in looking after the welfare and comfort of the volunteers. The minimum of compulsory duties were assigned, volunteers mostly coming forward of their own initiative. A feature common of all camps is the weekly "house-meeting" where full opportunity is afforded for openly discussing internal affairs, and voicing complaints, and putting forward suggestions.

It was true of all the camps that the discussions and talks were a remarkable revelation for German and foreign volunteers alike. They showed that there was still a great deal of ignorance of other districts and other lands, but that many who did still retain their nationalistic prejudices would be prepared to accept hitherto unknown facts and to get to know other opinions, when they were not forced upon them, wrote a Swiss leader in one of his weekly reports.

### 4) **FREIBURG** (French Zone)

Children's Hospital. 12 weeks from 30 Jun / 21 Sep.

It is estimated that the work would be completed here if the camp were to continue until mid-November. The resemblance to a miniature league of Nations was strengthened in this camp by the presence of volunteers from two more countries, - Luxembourg and Austria. Unfortunately all efforts have so far failed to bring volunteers from the Slav lands in the camps. Most services, it was agreed, suffered rather too much from rapid changes in personnel, the community consequently tending to be rather unstable. This will be inevitable until sufficient good leaders, money, food and foreign volunteers can be found to support many more camps, where the many German volunteers can be absorbed and each can stay for many weeks instead of being obliged to surrender his place to the many who are waiting to come to the camp.

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The Freiburg camp worked on a children's hospital where only one of the seven buildings had escaped bombardment. Plans for an emergency building to house 100 more children had been passed by the city authorities and the group helped to demolish and remove the ruins of two of the old buildings, to make way for the new one. 150 cubic metres of rubble were removed from the cellars; building stones and bricks being salvaged and cleaned ready for further use. Next, the foundation for the new buildings

were excavated, along with the trenches for drains. Cement, gravel and sand were brought to the site, and a concrete mixer set up ready for the commencement of the concrete work, which began in the ninth week.

Difficulties were experienced with food at the commencement of the service, but these were solved with the ready help of the French Military Government, and with help from abroad. As in every other camp, all food was pooled whether German rations, C.C.G. food, or bulk supplies from Denmark, Holland or Switzerland. The latter were made available to international work-camps in Germany by the generosity of the American Friends Service Committee, who were able to supply a certain amount of working clothes as well. Gifts from Switzerland also helped to swell the food pool, and provided a certain number of pairs of working boots, which were later repaired by the Swedish International work-centre in Hamburg.

All arrangements for accommodation and for tools and equipment in camps were left to the authority or colony for whom the work was being performed; and they were often responsible for a share of the costs of food, railway fares, insurance and so on.

#### OTHER CAMPS

of a similar nature were run in Germany during the same period, The I.V.S.P. Advisory Officer sharing the responsibility of arranging for the entry of foreign volunteers into Germany, and of the distribution of gifts for such international work-camps among the various camps, with a member of the F.R.S. F.R.S. camps were held in Berlin, Aachen and Hildesheim, and Youth Hostels work-camps were held at the Harz mountains - Alfeld and Torfhaus. The Friends Ambulance Units (Post-war Service), also a member of C.B.S.R.A., whose members serve in Germany under the I.V.S.P. are co-operating with the Swedish international Work-centre in Hamburg, and with their project in Hildesheim. The F.A.U. in Berlin is co-operating with the British Red Cross Joint Relief Committee of the three relief teams, in their Youth Centre; and a further unit of six men have recently arrived in FARGE refugee hospital and colony near Bremen, repairing roads, clearing up the grounds and working in the hospital; they will work and live with German voluntary workers.

Encouraged by the attitude of the Education Branch of C.C.G. and of the British Red Cross, who see in these work projects, not only means of actual relief to distressed communities but also a form of intellectual relief whereby young German people can once again come into close contact with the outside world from which they have so long been cut off, the committee of the German branch of IVSP started a further international work-camp in Duisburg-Mülheim on Oct<sup>th</sup>4 They plan further services, and these plans together with a report of their work to date was submitted to and passed by their Annual General meeting which took place at the end of October, 1947.

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