

A REPORT ON THE OBERHAUSEN WORKCAMP IN GERMANY

This report is what all reports should be understood to be - a presentation of one man's opinion. Of course, the opinion should be based on facts, and the facts in my case are that I am undertaking a report on the Oberhausen workcamp having been there only two weeks and completely lacking any knowledge of German. Keep this in mind, gentle reader, when I start getting dogmatic.

Let's take up the subject in orderly fashion, something like this The Project; Community Relations; Spirit of the Camp; Leadership -- the first three the adequacy important and interrelated parts of the workcamp triangle; the last the mainspring. (All good triangles have mainsprings).

The Project

-- was beautifying of a scrap heap upon which was constructed a camp for deportees from Eastern Germany. I never saw the place as it was Before, but descriptions already written make it a yard full of old girders, rusted machinery, broken bottles, old shoes, fallen smokestacks and assorted rubble, among which items the deportee children played and lived with their mothers, ants, and grandmothers. (The fathers, uncles and grandfathers were working involuntarily and sans communiqué in Poland and Russia. Statistic : there were 200 women and five men in camp).

With the aid of pick, shovel, wheelbarrow and FRS and IVSP trucks borrowed at sundry times from the Oberhausen and Duisburg teams, the twenty-odd boys and girls of the camp carted off tons of rubble and replaced it with tons of topsoil and sand, arranged in patterns of sidewalks and gardens and terraces and seasoned with occasional small trees and hedges. An experienced gardener of Oberhausen named Ernst gave the technical advice. The result was not at all unpleasant. The children seemed pleased with the sandpile built for them, and it was better for them than broken bottles.

A new road was begun by the campers to replace one which goes at the moment through the center of the group of cement barracks, but this project will have to be completed by a few hoped-for weekend camps, as a lack of cinders at the last moment held up the work beyond the end of the summer camp.

As a whole, I think the project was a good one. Georg Endemann, the leader, told me that it had been selected because they felt that the deportees would live there the rest of their lives, and they might as well make the best of it. A shortage of building materials (said he) made a reconstruction job unfeasible. I don't know about this reasoning, but workcamp projects in type reconstruction field are pretty hard to develop. At least it seemed so in Italy.

Community Relations

were poor. This was recognized by the campers, but little was done to improve it. The deportees had a better understanding of the camp than the citizens of Oberhausen in one respect at least they didn't think the campers to be political prisoners. But beyond this, they had little idea of why we were there, assuming, I suppose, that we were sent there by the government to clean up their residence. The workcamp was here, the deportees there, and seldom the twain did meet. The officials in Oberhausen gave sundry helps in the procurement of materials, and gave official recognition of our efforts -- but beyond that, the town was hardly aware of the camp's existence.

The Spirit of the Camp

was to me complex, rendered no less so in its being relieved to me largely through other peoples' opinions thereof expressed to me in broken English. However, I would make the following negative and positive observations:

1.

It was not my idea (gleaned from Quaker pamphlets) of a religiously centred workcamp. Silent meetings for meditation were sporadic and poorly attended, and considered by most as a waste of good working time. The moment of silence before meals was never a real unity in silence, but an enforced halt. Most of the campers were frankly irreligious. They had learned little good of religion under Hitler, and the rather orthodox approach of the German Protestant and Catholic churches does not appeal to their sceptical minds. One camper told me that she would like to be able to accept Christianity, but she couldn't believe it, that's all. "Believe what?" I asked "Oh, the Virgin Birth, Heaven, Christ as a Saviour, a sacrifice for our sins," she replied. I am convinced that these kids are seeking almost desperately for something to replace the perverted idealism of their pre-war days, with its demand on their whole being, its fellowship, its purposefulness. But they won't find a substitute in Christianity unless some way is found to present its essential truths in a form less orthodox, perhaps, meeting the needs of their minds in a sceptical age. (This is really a universal problem, isn't it?). A real religiously centred workcamp, with good leadership (of the David Richy or Bob Forsberg variety, for instance) might be the way needed. This, to me, was more impressive than all the ruins of Cologne and the starvation statistics I've seen - this great sense of loss, of indirection, of hopelessness, which seemed to me lie behind all of the overt actions of my fellow-campers. I think that a new idealism is the essential need -- I can't say of all Germans or all Germany or even all German young people -- but at least of those dozen or more students I got to know -- and certainly of those three or four with whom I shared some degree of intimacy.

2.

Lacking this religious motivation, the camp was naturally based by petty divisions, cliques, arguments, etc. The most critical of these, as told to me by Helmut Boettger, a rather critical lad from Berlin, was over the question of the group vs. the individual -- i.e. absolute individual freedom in the camp, or a strongly planned group life. Some felt that no phase of the camp life, not even the work, should be compulsory -- that is, they wanted to skip any activity of the camp they didn't feel like doing. Others wanted all personal inclinations sacrificed to a rigidly adhered-to planned program. What actually occurred, it seemed to me, was a normal, healthy medium. These petty divisions never got so strong as to seriously threaten the wholeness of the camp, as far as I could see. But, as explained in Paragraph 1, my sight was limited!

3.

With the possible exception of our one Swiss volunteer, who demanded of himself and others eternal self-discipline and hard work, the work was not done with any great enthusiasm. There was no appreciable loafing, either -- we worked fairly hard -- but there was little or no discussion of the project, none of that intangible willingness, almost eagerness, to get on the job and to do it well which I saw at times in Lettoplaena. I asked a Dutch girl on my first day why we were cleaning up a large but innocuous cinder pile on the edge of the camp. She said frankly that she didn't know, and laughed. Three or four of us spent three days constructing a couple hundred yards of small railway track with which to carry cinders from a siding to a new road construction, and then the cinders arrived by truck, and the railway was never used. Unavoidable, in this case, but not a contribution to the sense of purposefulness in the work. Of course, the railway gave the deportee kids ten days of unparalleled fun. But, as I say, the work on project was done, and done reasonably well, and there was none of the sickbed loafing I saw in Lettoplaena. No loafing, but no enthusiasm either. Maybe they were tired.

4.

Discussions of religious, social and political problems seemed to this non-German-speaking observer non-existent. There seemed to be a profound disciplination to talk out the problems which they faced. This was remarked to me by several of the non-German people -- Peder Schmidt from Denmark, Greet de Vries of Holland. Georg Endemann, the camp leader, once told me, voluntarily, that this lack of discussion was because they were "burnt out" (his phrase), that a great fire had burned in them once, and now it was dead, and they tended to close themselves up, to express their feelings, if at all, only in their play and work.

I think this was true as far as I went; the rest of the story lies in part, in their not being habituated to discussion. It seems to me that they accept, and leave it to the leaders to work out the problems. It is this way, more or less, in American workcamps for age groups 18 - 28, say?

A chap named Bruce came from England and spent ten days in the camp, a couple of weeks before I arrived. He knew no German, and yet he made a greater impression on those campers in ten days than most of us could have done in ten months. I read a letter of Bruce's to one of the German boys. It revealed a deeply religious spirit, a person whose faith came out of those pages with an intensity corresponding to that which must have come out of his daily living in the camp. He was outspoken in his faith (no apologies, hiding it under a bushel, etc.) but not preachy. He confessed his Christianity, but didn't blab it (nor blush about it). The German boy wrote him an answer, and showed me the translation : he had found in his brief friendship with Bruce a possible answer to the problem of how men could come to realize their common humanity; that, although he couldn't be a Christian as Bruce was, he had found in the simplicity of Bruce's gestures of friendship and understanding a relief from the bitterness and sadness of day-by-day experience, a relief which made each day worth living in spite of its darkness.

We need more Buss's in Germany to help those kids think their way out of a terrible situation. A.F.S.C. should send its very best to Germany: those men and women whose religious experience has been profound and which claims the whole of their minds and bodies. All the rest of us seem to me to be inadequate to meet the real need as I have seen it in the few young people I knew.

5.

The group's ability to entertain itself was tremendous. Their singing of Volkslieder to the accompaniment of a guitar played by a wonderful girl named Marianne was to this amateur music-lover one of the major highlights of the camp life. No day went by without such singing. And when we went out of an evening or on a sunny Autumn Sunday afternoon in the woods or on the canal bank to sing, darkest Germany faded out of the picture for a while and all was peace. Perhaps this is why we did it often, and they danced and played, and laughed and planned excursions to forests and riversides, and kept themselves on the move all the time -- very good in itself, but sad when seen in the context of the whole. For then, it seemed an escape, a fleeing from a very difficult reality. When you forgot this theory, those hours seemed joyful indeed. When you remember it, you wanted to weep.

One Saturday we visited a Ruhr coal-mine -- a terrible occupation, mining! I was told that each Saturday they had visits done of the industries nearby -- the cement-work, the steelmill, the rolling-mill. This was very fine.

Transportation for such excursions, and for the work project, was furnished by the FRS team in Oberhausen and the IVSP team in Duisburg, the former of which is planning weekend workcamps to finish off the rough edges of the project.

Leadership in the camp

I find this difficult to appraise, because of my own limited experience, and because of my lingual difficulties. I thought that Georg Endemann was a fairly good workcamp leader. He is not a religiously-inclined person, therefore may or may not come up to Quaker standards. He found it difficult, as he said himself, to lead as he was experienced to (i.e. democratically) and he would often prefer to do things as he had done them as a captain in the Wehrmacht. But in spite of his personal preferences, he never to my knowledge ordered, and always tried to get suggestions and volunteering from the others. Some of the other campers thought he went too far in this other direction -- that he was too soft, too undemanding. Considering that few campers took much initiative of their own anyhow, as far as I could see, I think Georg did a responsible job of it. And that seemed to be the feeling of the majority of the campers.

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The 'Internationaler Freiwilliger Dienst für den Frieden' was the sponsor of the camp, but the feeling of the campers seemed to be that IVSP was the real force behind the works. This feeling may have

influenced the decision of IFDF leaders at a conference held in Duisburg to be independent of IVSP, not to be officially pacifist, to change their name (meaning the same as IVSP) to a name less likely to be allied with the cause of pacifism, and to use some other symbol than the PAX-shovel-and-broken-sword emblem for their organization (I take these points from a report given to the campers by Georg Endemann, who participated in the conference mentioned), A small group of the serious-thinking campers from Berlin thought this conference decision somewhat of a disaster in the development of the German workcamp organization, and hoped that it would be modified some time in the future. This group took their position from the Socialist viewpoint, I believe.

So -- this is my report on my two weeks in the Oberhausen workcamp. I hope that A.F.S.C. will think that this report, plus whatever I was able to contribute as a person to the group and to the individuals in the group, will justify the expend of my going there from Italy instead of going directly home. I am profoundly glad that I went. I know little or nothing of Germany's problems, of German youth, of starvation in the Reich, the British Zone, Cologne, or even Oberhausen town. I know no statistics on unhousted peoples. Ido know that in the people with whom I lived and worked and played for two weeks there exists a great emptiness, and I felt a great desire to share with them whatever I could in the search for something to fill this emptiness. I leave Germany with a sense of leaving behind me an unfinished job. And I feel inadequate in the face of that job

I risk repeating: A.F.S.C. should send no one but the best to Germany, especially in workcamps another projects leading to close contact with young people. For it seems to me that the job is too big for any but the best.

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