

AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE  
European Commissioners Office

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Report to : Reinhardt Burkhalter, Leiter  
From : Pat Dunham, Schwester  
Date : January 15, 1948

Re : MÜLHEIM NEW YEARS CAMP  
December 28 – January 10

Background. Mülheim, located in the Ruhr valley, was heavily bombed during the war. Many workers' homes were destroyed. The work camp, which opened in October, 1947, is assisting in rebuilding these homes by digging bricks out of the rubble, mixing cement, transporting materials, assisting the brick-layers and carpenters. Since the IZD did not have enough volunteers to open three New Years camps as planned, Mülheim continued through the holidays. Except for two veterans, all the campers were new to the camp.

Contact with the community seems to me to be good. The skilled workers whom we are assisting are very friendly and seem to understand why we are there to help them. Campers often talk to them about the Internationaler Zivildienst. They ask many questions of the foreigners about life in their countries.

I learned how hard it is for them to work without enough to eat. One brick-layer with whom we had worked because so weak from malnutrition that he had to stay home in bed. Many were talking about a hunger strike because they were not to receive fat on their ration cards for five weeks.

The camp seems to have good friends among the officials, too. While I was in camp, the military commander of the area and two Swedish Red Cross representatives visited us at the various work projects. Later, the civilian major (I believe) ate dinner with us.

Since the camp is working with a building society rather than for individual families, I did not know any of the families who would be living in the houses we were rebuilding. I would enjoy knowing more about them and perhaps the camp could meet some of them. But two weeks is a short time!

Certainly camp life is very happy. I felt a warm welcome from the first round of hand shakes. I was glad to see that each new comer soon felt at home. Although there were many who came and left during my stay in camp, I felt a family feeling. Even those of us who stayed only two weeks made many good friends.

Work. I was pleased with the conscientious attitude towards the work. It seems to be well organised and men and women power is used to be best advantages. Work for the girls was not too heavy, and, at the same time, it is important. Only one day did I feel my work was not very useful and then the workers enjoyed our entertainment!

Food. Although very simple, I felt the food was sufficient to keep the campers in good health. The camp has succeeded in making a happy compromise between the high standard of living which the foreign campers may have in their own homes and the low standard of living in the town of Mülheim. I was glad to live near the level of the community for I was able to understand better what problems Germany is facing today. But I was also glad the food was good enough so that the German campers could build up their strength before going back to work or school.

Silence. I remember that a Monday's house meeting we talked about whether we should continue to have a period of silence each morning as had been the custom in the camp previously. Then there seemed to be no strong opinion either for or against it. Maybe because it is easier to say "yes" than to say "no", we decided to continue having a silent period after breakfast each morning. I noticed that some of us used it for reading inspirational books or the Bible; some of us sat thinking; some of us wrote. We did not seem to know just what we should be doing. Maybe we could have talked about it more.

Before a camp tries a quiet time each day, I think it is important to decide why we have it. I wish I could be in on a discussion of this with everybody there, but since I can't, may I write you some of my ideas? As I said last Sunday, I feel we should use this period as a common meeting ground on which all campers of whatever belief can come together and think about why they have come to the work camp and what they want to make out of the experience. In silence everyone can search in his own way for the answers. Each of us can do this alone, perhaps, but in camp, we have the wonderful opportunity of meeting with our friends. Working and learning together, laughing and singing, discussing - as we do in our camp - we become a "family". And as a family we may meet in silence to find the true meaning of all that we are doing.

Sunday I spoke also of how I felt at the end of the quiet time when we stood in a circle, hands joined. At that time I feel particularly close to all the other work campers in whatever country. I think of a camp in Mexico or in Finland or in France, all working towards peace and friendship among peoples as we are. In this quiet we can feel the "Togetherness" of our international work camp movement, and we can see where each of us can carry these ideas into our own lives.

These are some of the things I would be saying to you if I were in Mülheim now. I wished I were! Then I could hear immediately what you think! This way I must be patient and say "next time".

Ich möchte gern alles auf Deutsch schreiben, aber Sie wissen schon, daß ich es nicht kann. Ich würde Ihnen sagen wie fröhlich ich in dem Lager gewesen bin. Immer will ich an alle meine Lagerkameraden denken. Jetzt habe ich viele deutsche Freunde zu besuchen, wenn ich noch einmal nach Deutschland komme.

Grüße an die Maurer und an alle, die noch im Lager sind. Auf Wiedersehen !

copies to : Heinrich Carstens, Herbert Böttger  
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