

### My life in the mine

Immediate of the Ruhr district, where now many, many chimneys are smoking again, - perhaps more will never smoke again - lies among low hills near the Ruhr the former industrial centre Essen. The city as well as the steel works "Krupp" were totally bombed down. You can hardly see a house where people still are living in as far as your eyes are looking. Only big heaps of rubble on which the grass is growing.

So you will be surprised all the more if you enter the suburb Kray. No house at all bombed or burned. Clean streets, rather clean houses, above the roofs two churches. Of course there is an enormous traffic in the streets because this untouched suburb is overcrowded. About two times more people are living today here than before the war.

One Industry has been developed after the war in this town as well as in the Ruhr district at all. And it is increasing continuously, the production of coal. Every possible support is given to this in order to get coal as much as possible out of the earth. -- And here begins already the trouble. It is a well known thing, that the USA, Great Britain, and also other countries are sending enormous quantities of food to Germany, Germany is not at all able to pay this food supply -- consequently the citizen of each country has to pay higher taxes. Because of Germany's total industrial and agricultural breakdown it doesn't seem that this situation can be changed within the next few years. On the other side a great percentage of the produced coal is taken abroad just as it has come out of the earth. Why is Germany not allowed to produce of this coal or at least a part of it chemical productions, highly developed oils etc. in order to pay this imported food and not to lie for innumerable years on the pocket of citizens of other countries.

But I wanted to tell of my life here and not to put economical questions on the table. But thinking of this I must ask myself whether I can keep off economical, social and other questions? --

I am working with two miners in a weekly changing shift. (6am - 2pm; 2pm - 10pm; 10pm - 6am) not before the coal itself but in the preparing work, to get the way free to the coal. With long drills and drill hammers driven by pressed air we drill a number of holes into the hard stone. These holes are filled with dynamite and then it is blown up.

Afterwards big heaps of little, bigger and very big stones are lying on the bottom. This is the hardest part of the work, to load them into trucks on rails and this as quickly as possible. In a normal situation the piece work may be necessary although I don't agree with. But under the momentary circumstances this kind of work becomes a problem not only below the ground where most of the work is done as piece work. The man becomes a machine, driven to do harder and harder work. The more he works, the more he earns money of course. After six weeks of work down in the mine I know that men ruin themselves. I feel it myself after having finished my shift, that I am exhausted. I am only longing for sleep. I can do that and I really do as much as possible. But most of the miners cannot as they are married and have to care their families and have still other duties. No wonder that I see many tired faces coming in the large hall to change into the black work clothes before going to work.

Closely connected with this is the food situation.

The food is good and well prepared and also almost sufficient, if the full rations can be obtained which is not the case for several months. Especially fat is needed. The miner especially needs fat because of the dust. But still if you eat all alone, you may get almost enough. But most of the miners have their families, who are starving too, often much more. Would you eat all alone knowing your family starving? Still I must say that much is done and more is tried to make better the situation of the miner.

In addition to the normal ration and the heaviest worker's ration - latter given as a hot meal in the mine itself and four slices of bread with butter and sausage, the miner gets other advantages too, which any other worker does not get up today. Coupons of goods of scarce, coupons for food, for alcohol and cigarettes. Recently a new action had been started to get more coal.

If 325000 of coal are daily produced, this for a period of a month, the miner will get an American food parcel. Right now the capacity is about 290000 tons. I know the miner will get this demanded production, he will bring more coal out even, but I am absolutely sure, that this stresses him far too much.

The problem of houses and flats is also a very serious one. I said already that this suburb is overcrowded but still everybody has a roof above his head. How many thousands of refugees don't! I am living in a young miners hostel. The situation was there in the beginning not too good. But it became much better now. I am living in a recently new built house with 11 other fellow miners. We started to make it more comfortable now. Table lamps, curtains, table cloths, pictures for the walls are there and we feel quite a bit at home now.

The people I am living together with are most refugees from the east. Many are married and have their families still in the Russian zone. Hardly anybody was a miner before. Among them are nice boys and also some who sank morally very deeply. They have to be cared especially.

Although there are many advantages, why I found hardly anybody who really enjoy the work. Is the earn to low? Certainly it is compared to the work and its value, but this is the same all over Germany today. It is the hard dangerous work itself (About 30% monthly are getting accidents). Is it the fact that many people are getting a dust lungs already within a few months? Of course there may be many other causes which I don't see yet. The fact is, that about 20% of the miners are missing daily their shift. This without being ill! About 64% of the newcomers have disappeared again, more illegally then in a legal way. Many leaving for France to work in a mine there. What are the real reasons for this all?

Especially while loading stones I found much time to think, drilling I can't be absent with my thoughts.

It would be a very valuable thing, if more young people of all classes of the nation would have this opportunity to work for a while in a mine. Especially students! They would understand much better the worker, the work, the thoughts of the miner, his living conditions, his life at all. They would see as I did, how much more one is a human being their deep below the ground. They would see how wonderful also here a comradeship can be. It is there much more a closely belonging together, than anywhere else. Often one will find a very friends spirit. That is one thing which made me very happy.

They also would see how much the miner is the slave of his work. They would see how tiny the care is for him in the real way, although very much is done. In USA the cleverest lawyers are engaged as the advisories for the trade unions, and here? Some workmen who want to have a special position who also often are something in a political party are the leaders here and what really they can do? What can they do for the right of the so hard working miner? It is the same with the Workers Committee. Very often the people are following their own interests or cannot do anything at all, because they have no experience.

I know that I am accusing and that I perhaps write down more bad than good things (what I am not used to) but when I saw the urgent need and this situation I couldn't but say this.

If there would be a bit more of faith, of love to the neighbour, a bit more selfless care for the other, many problems would never be such ones.

Written Mar 15, 1948, Wolfgang Harms

#### My life in the mines (Continuation)

Today I finally find the time, to tell a little bit more about my life in the mine and my thoughts I had during the last months about.

Most of the miners don't know at all, why they are working. But who knows today in Germany? The only hope for a reconstruction, the last undamaged factories are shipped away at a great deal. If a bricklayer has to give away his last hammer he cannot build the house which he is supposed to live in, - Instead of this the "Marshall-Plan" enters in action.

If the miner like any other worker or businessmen in Germany knew, what he is working for, if he saw clear ways and aims, the initiative would increase enormously.

Another point I must mention. The miner, especially the young one does not or only little like his job. This I stated already for several reasons before. But this may be still more decisive. There are deep differences and distances between the miners and the foremen, the offices of the mine. These people get profits and percentages. Naturally they try to get as much as possible of the work done.

Many forget then, that their people are human beings and no machines. The miner is the slave of his work. Perhaps more than every worker else. Most of the miners have a big family. So they are obliged to work as hard as possible, to care their families. This is especially difficult under the today's condition. Also the attitude to the workers above the ground is often a very strange one. Several times I heard the people say like this : The best thing that could happen would be if the people up there and these damned foremen would disappear some day. On the other side it is the same. The people above the ground say : The best thing to me would be if these mad folks down in the mine would disappear, if some day water would break into the mine and all the people were drown. Hatred and mistrust also were raised because the miner gets things which the other people don't get.

A very strange thing is that many young miners are married already with 21 or even 20 years. This fact has after my opinion its very deep and serious reasons. I must touch here some thoughts, which don't seem to belong directly to this. -- A dangerous life, a hard work lead people closer together. During the war I often found again in this special aspect. But here in the mine I experience somehow the same. Why this? The reason seems to be the danger and the helplessness which is in the frontiers and in the mine likewise or, in another dangerous life. This kind of comradeship is absolutely different to any other relation among men. Every relation grows naturally but this kind of comradeship I named before is suddenly there raised on the basis of fear, helplessness and the feeling, you must co-operate with the others otherwise you are lost in this dark labyrinth. This comradeship also raises some great dangers. It creates the blind obedience, and can be used on the other side into the absolute inhumanity.

Going out from this feeling and from the hard work making the miner indifferent and interestless in life and in the work I found with many miners, especially young ones the same symptom I experienced during the war. See that you get from life as much as you can before it is too late. One day you may not return to the sun and the daylight and then it would have been an unforgettable mistake if you had not enjoyed and entertained life best (May be I am seeing this point too serious but is my impression after talking with many miners). And from this point of view continuing it is quite understandable that the miners again especially the young ones have after their shift in general only one interest, the girl. Occasionally on Sunday football. Many many people are going Sunday after Sunday to the football ground. The women most stay home.

It seems quite understandable that the young married miners will have a big family. And it is the fact. But having a continuously growing family the man must consequently work harder and harder . And so he becomes besides many other reasons more and more the slave of his work. What could be done to create better and healthier conditions and situations?

May be I am considering points too seriously but I must tell my impression as I have it.

Something touching me more and more is that there are much more old miners than young ones. But asking them : Why are you still working, friend, so mostly I get in reply : Well, I could have stopped work by 55, should have stopped work by 60 latest, but shall my family be starving? Shall we be

slowly going to die? The social taxes in the mines are naturally much higher than everywhere else. Why does the miner not get a sufficient social rent?

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After 25 or highest 30 years of work he certainly has deserved a rest. And the rent with the miner is so low that the miner only living on it cannot live and cannot die.

In general each job in a mine below the daylight seems to me for a whole life inhuman to be. But how can it be changed, coal is the key to industry. One thought moves me again and again. It is natural that many more bad things come out of war and soldier life than good ones. Life as a soldier has been created in order to destroy to kill men, negative, destructive purposes, a life of violence. Why do they defend with violence and weapons, because men do fear each other and don't trust each other, because they all think egoistically. But it seems that there are also some virtues which never may raise so strongly as in such a hard life Comradeship ( at least for a certain time), readiness to sacrifice, self-overcoming etc. These virtues appear particularly in special situations. In great difficulties, in neighbourhood of death. The more difficult, steep and high the mountain is, the more dangerous situation is, the more increase virtues, the will to resist and to overcome. From this point of view life is sometimes little senseful, if it runs smoothly. Man becomes weak and ill. Remember the old Romans, who having become weak and demoralised were swept away. -- These virtues must be kept awake. But now and in the future not for a negative and destructive purpose, but for a positive, constructive and helping one.

Life in danger, under humble and simple conditions, with a hard work, building and helping men, not destroying her, may be for a young man at his time just the right thing, to prove his strength, to increase his virtues and to grow himself. Life of a fisher, struggling against waves and storm with his little boat, life of a miner, may be an example. But not for a long whole life this dangerous life! Would it not be possible, instead of a military service to have a civil service, perhaps for one year for the young men? Perhaps just in the mine? This a positive service creating and helping, a way of a hard, dangerous life, I refuse force and conscription also with such an alternative service. But somehow I believe that one day this will have taken place, a voluntary service in the mine instead of a professional life-job. I do believe that each difficulty may be overcome, as great as they may be.

So, everybody would experience this life himself, would do a good helping, serving and rebuilding job. All young men who insist intend to get a mental profession would see, realise and consider, how manual work is and would learn to estimate its value. Differences and classes of men already raising dangerously again would not to be removed, but they could be resisted effectively.

May 6, 1948

Wolfgang Harms

*Wolfgang Harms, Jahrgang 1922, stammt aus Greifswald. Nach gut vier Jahren Wehrdienst erlebte er das Kriegsende in einem Lazarett in Österreich. Er ging nicht in seine Heimat zurück, sondern blieb im Berlin und Westdeutschland. Da er außer dem "Notabitur" nichts besaß, mußte er sich den Lebensunterhalt und sein späteres Studium als Keramik-Ingenieur selbst verdienen - als Holzfäller im Harz, in einem Steinbruch in Mülheim und als Bergarbeiter in Essen. Über das IVSP Relief Team in Berlin lernte er den SCI kennen und nahm an zahlreichen Diensten teil. Nach seiner vorzeitigen Berufsunfähigkeit war er noch in der Entwicklungshilfe aktiv, bevor er 1988 verstarb.*