

VOLUNTARY WORK SERVICE CAMPS IN EUROPE, SUMMER 1948

With Special Reference to AFSC Camps in Germany
By Gordon W. Allport

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WÜRZBURG (Schweizer Students Barrack)

My visit to Würzburg (July 18) coincided with the delayed opening of the camp. A large part of the expected 25 campers were there under the leadership of Barbara Walker (Canada). At least 5 nationalities were already present. As at Nürnberg all campers had an Umgangskennntnis of German, but not a sufficient knowledge for deep discussion.

Here as in Nürnberg there were housing, feeding, currency reform, and project difficulties. Housing was obtained for boys in the laboratory of the anatomy building, for girls in the adjoining physiology laboratory. Bathing facilities were virtually non-existent. A nearby freshly constructed wooden barracks, erected by the Swiss for the feeding of students, served as eating and common room. Mealtimes had to be staggered so as not to conflict with the feeding of 200 Russian Zone students who were unable to return home during the summer vacation. Often in good weather the campers ate in a small garden adjoining the barrack.

The work project had not got under way but its nature was causing some concern. The plan was to clear some debris from bombed government buildings in order that eventually new government buildings could be erected, thus enabling government offices to vacate a student hostel. In the very long run university students might thus benefit from the labor of the campers. But the objective was remote and the accomplishment not readily visible. Further, the work promised to be monotonous to an extreme degree. Both camp and project were situated in the center of the town, a condition detracting from camp unity and from the benefits of living close to nature. It is possible that improvements in the work project were made in the course of the summer.

My dim view of the Würzburg project was challenged by a law student from Hamburg whom I met at St. Stephan (vid. Infra), and with whom I was discussing the situation. He insisted that all reconstruction in Germany must be accomplished via long detours. He felt that in this case the long way round was after all a normal and justifiable procedure.

In spite of these initial handicaps at Würzburg the spirit of the campers seemed excellent. The quality of food was good. Being prepared by the girl campers it had an extra touch of homelikeness not evident at Friedensdorf. Supper, the night of my arrival, consisted of white bread, jam, cheese, a taste of cauliflower salad, a large farina pudding.

What the Campers say

Approaching now the problem of evaluation, let me record in summary some of my many conversations with individual campers. Sometimes I talked with them while we were working side by side in the garden or cleaning bricks; sometimes during the rest periods or at the end of the day. (Especially in talking with the young men I found it necessary to let them quiz me, first about American automobiles, the subject apparently topmost in their interest).

In talking to Americans possessing some prestige, can we expect German Youth to speak candidly? Other American interviewers have reported in despair that the "Germans will say whatever they think you want them to say." Long years of dissimulation have destroyed courage and integrity by the expression of thought. Was it a coincidence that the most popular folk song at camp was the Schwabian "Die Gedanken sind frei"?

The wistful manner in which it was sung seemed to indicate an acute awareness of the gap existing between freedom of thought and freedom to speak one's private thoughts.

Even if fear and habits of dissimulation do not cloud the responses, there is the question whether German youth -- whether all Germans in fact -- are not now actually "many minded", inconsistent and disintegrated in their Weltanschauung, and given the believing and saying now this and now that according to the prevailing winds of opinion. Many seem no longer to have their inner consistency that springs from a well-knit philosophy of life.

These sources of error must be borne in mind in evaluating any interview data from Germany. I believe they are more likely to bedevil casual contacts with unselected groups, than to effect response in the secure and friendly setting that surrounded my interviews. Further, I was dealing with a highly selected group, selected for their idealism and for their "integratedness". They were likely to say what they believed.

Wolfgang (a blond German in his late 20's) for example, was not dissimulating when he told me that his wartime job was with rocket bombs, that he underwent a revulsion and religious conversion, that after the war he barely escaped the Russians who were intent on taking him to Russia to work further on rocket weapons, that he had discovered Thomas Kelly's book, "A Testament of Devotion" which he now considered his guide to life. Without doubt the ideas of the work camp were Wolfgang's own ideals.

Less nature were other German youth who had little or no war experience. (An eighteen year old would not have had any actual Arbeitsdienst or any experience.) From them I had reports to the effect that the camp offered much opportunity for reflection upon the best way of life. The camp prescribed no political system, nor any prefabricated solutions from outside. They did not fear that its ideology would lead again to disillusionment, for they recognized that self-reliance is not the same thing as prescribed formulae. One lad said he wanted to find his "fundamental convictions" and that to do so he felt that "work is absolutely necessary". At Würzburg, I asked the group, "What do you want most in life?" A young German replied "ehrliche Arbeit". This answer drew universal assent. The thought was amplified by another German. "We have our own philosophies of life that are taking form. These camps give me a chance to alter and to fasten certain portions of this philosophy. We need to work while we think."

Others spoke of the value of being with young people "whose thoughts are flowing in similar channels". One said, "We live all year in an atmosphere of evil and suspicion. It is wonderful for a summer to see more good around one than evil". *)

I conclude that for the Germans in my sample to clarify their inner convictions was for them the chief psychological goal. Many spoke of the facilitating effect of living with young people whose quest was similar. It seems probable that this fact accounts for the favourable response of the campers to the periods of silence and to the hand claps that followed, also to the ritual of singing Amicitie song when any camper took his departure from the camp.

*) The extent to which suspicion and distrust have settled upon the Germans may be seen in the public opinion polls comparing German and American responses to the following question :

"Do you think most people can be trusted?"

	Germany	United States
Can trust most people	6 %	66 %
Cannot	93 %	30 %
Undecided	1 %	4 %

(Opinion news, August 1st, 1948)

Material motives cannot, of course, be ruled out. Food was better and more plentiful than at home. It was good to relieve parents of their responsibility for their grown up children during the summer. Moreover, a motive not openly mentioned by Germans (but often by Americans in camps within the United States) is the desire to get away from home and establish independence of the parents. **) A value peculiar to Germany came to light: the pleasure of escaping for a few weeks from red-tape restrictions, paper work and oppressive regulations that surround civilian life. When the red-tape of the occupying army is added to the red-tape of German existence, the result is beaurocracy indeed. How pleasant to let AFSC take care of the red-tape for a few weeks! Non of these "material" considerations account wholly for the motivation of the campers, all of whom had an extra large bump of idealism. But they played an understandable part.

The camps had few rules. To an extreme degree the atmosphere was permissive and free. One's conscience should be one's guide. Margaret, an English girl, greatly preferred this atmosphere to the more regimented climate of certain Service Civil camps she had attended. And the Germans, as already indicated, appreciated the freedom of such an unfamiliar mode of life. Just some campers -- two Swiss come to mind -- disapproved of such "laissez-faire". They were accustomed in other work camps to more discipline and felt its lack. Although generalizations in national terms are hazardous, I had the feeling that only the Anglo-Saxons were entirely at ease with so permissive and easy-going an atmosphere. This issue raises the question pointedly as to the nature of democratic leadership. It is a basic question in the entire work camp movement. Later in this report I wish to comment further on this issue.

Since my interview were conducted in midstream they do not reflect the final gains of the 1948 camps. Most campers, however, had attended other camps previously and their reports were thus based on considerable experience. Several mentioned the fact that "false images" were destroyed in camp. A Swiss girl told of her previous deep prejudices against the French. A summer spent with French campers showed her how untenable her previous hostile convictions were.

An American camper, not more than 20, told me that the sheer content of his experience in terms of learning language, history, culture, was of profound value. Specifically he mentioned the fact that aesthetic interests acquired in connection with visits to cathedrals, museums, etc. Were of deep value to him. While in America he had considered such interests "sissy". He added that he felt the gain in poise, self-assurance, freedom in meeting strangers, and overcoming childish fears of travel and sickness, were central in his development. Having to sink or swim, he learned to swim. Meeting people from all lands persuaded him to the commonness of human nature, of the basic equality of men. He found it especially wholesome and sensible to live on terms of strict equality with girls. Finally he felt that his collegiate education had supplied none of the value obtained from work camp experience. Like other Americans he mentioned the role of the camp as "laboratory work in social science". This particular conception is not yet familiar to most European students.

European campers expressed fewer of the type of gains mentioned by the American informant, though this fact does not mean that the maturing experience is not present among them. More often European campers stressed the introspective and philosophical advantages of the camps. Their quest for a suitable world-view is more self-conscious than among Americans. No European, for example, would worry as American boys do, lest interest in culture be regarded as a "sissy" occupation. Yet to the European, the content of what they learn is likewise important. They are full of questions regarding America (its automobiles, its education, its customs); they want to learn the English language; and eagerly follow current movements in art, music, philosophy.

**) The openness with which the American youth "reject" their parents for a summer, and the failure of German youth to mention this motive at all, is an interesting reflection on the "basic character structure" of the two groups.

Falze ideas concerning the culture and language of another country are subtly corrected by the work camp contacts. I have told already of little Leo's discovery that the "King's English" did not mean the same things as the "Führerprinzip".

The Significance of the Camps for German Youth

In the three camps I visited I had the distinct impression that by and large the German members are more reflective and more sharply impressed by the camp philosophy than the youth of other nations. (If generalizations in national terms are allowable I should like to add that the English youth impressed me as most clear about their purpose and most civic minded, as well as most imbued with a sense of responsibility toward the camp and toward the world in general.)

The very term "Freiwilliger Arbeitsdienst" has interesting significance. In Germany "work service" is associated with Hitler's compulsion. It is necessary to use the prefix "voluntary" in order that Germans may understand the nature of the work camp movement. In other lands, the voluntary nature of the camps is taken for granted.

German young people have much to think over. They no longer start with the premise of secure family, religion, school, and national traditions (although to them traditions are vastly important as anchorage). Nor is the concept of internationalism familiar to them. Probably more than the youth of other lands they are at sea.

To find a new balance they must first overcome many suspicions, find somewhere a ray of hope, discount their former disillusionment's, and strike out for themselves. As I have previously suggested this latter step is especially difficult for the German trained to discipline rather than adjustment.

The following letter, here translated in part from 'Le Service Civil' expressed a state of mind and an evaluation of work camps that I found among other German youth. The writer is 35 or so year-old Anton from Freiburg :

"A newspaper notice called my attention to a small group of foreigners who were going to cut firewood for the aged people of the city. To be sure, wood-shopping did not seem to be the only objective, but what really was the idea behind? Were the victors coming to show a bit of mercy and generosity toward us, or to teach us how evil and guilty we Germans were? Were they playing theatre with us? Or did they mean business and really desire to begin at the beginning? I had to know, and decided to go and work with them.

My first contact was with the Quakers. 'How long do you want to work with us?' was the first question. I answered 'fourteen days', but I was clear in my own mind that I would leave the first night if I wanted to. We shook hands and I returned with inner joy to my house. Was it the man I liked, or was it my own victory over my misgivings?"

After telling of the hard but agreeable work and wholly congenial life , Anton adds :

"The thought came to me, why is the world so? Why am I after four days a different person, or rather why is the 20 year-old in me again awakened, living naturally as if the past 15 years had never existed? I looked at my companions. They were no saints, nor dreamers staring only at the heavens. They were very simple really : men with all sorts of strengths and weakness ... There were three things that lifted them from the destructive level of daily life and gave them brighter eyes. They love humanity for humanity's sake and are ready to help where needed. They despise war. And they have a full measure of tolerance for one another ... I felt less worthy than they in these respects, but in the work camp community it was not difficult to become trained. There I discovered that my belief suffered no injury if I cut down trees together with an atheist, and in the evening discussed God and the world with this atheist, even though (or just because) he was a Frenchman".

"And that is what I found: life quite simple, genuine, strong living; the kind of living that God would vouchsafe to all people in all lands although for the most part we mortals trample it

under foot."

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Such conflict and such reflectiveness seem "typically" German. The "idea" behind the work camps intrigues them, and when it is accepted, they are likely to find it all the more satisfying, since no other ideas in their post-Hitler existence seem to them valid or viable. Hans in Würzburg assured me that the method of the cooperative work camp was "the only way" the world had found for solidly repairing its human relations. Perhaps German youth tend to be categorical and to run to extremes in their thinking. The idea is what important to them. Other nationals often answered my question, "Why are you here?" with the simple statement, "I wanted to do something practical for international understanding and this seemed to be a bit of something I could do". Most German campers seem to seek a larger validity, a larger frame of salvation. Perhaps it is because they now have greater need of it, or perhaps their culture sensitizes them always to the abstract value of an idea. In this connection, I was struck by the member of times young Germans told me that their ideal now was to see created a United States of Europe. Federalism is beginning to appeal.

My conclusion is that especially for German post-war youth are the work camps valuable. For them, above all other nationals, work camp experience can play a strategic part in the process of spiritual rehabilitation.

The term "democracy" I have never heard used in connection with camp life, at least by a German. This omission is not a bad thing, since confusion now reigns supreme concerning the meaning of "democracy". The Russians have helped discredit the term. But in actuality, of course, the camps are an experience in democracy from start to finish. It is sounder to democratize through participation than through words, through inner experience than from a rostrum.

Though I am not acquainted with all the "de-nazification" program under way in Germany, I do know that many of the plans proposed by educators and psychologists have been lost the occupation shuffle. Many of these plans were sound, pointed solely to teaching respect for the person and self-reliance. It now seems to me that virtually the only activity in Germany actually carrying through principles of "democratic re-training" is the work camp movement. Although much honor goes to those who have quietly and effectively put this program into effect, I suggest that further improvements might come from a study of some of the analyses and blueprints drawn by psychologists and educators during and since the war. These planners were not effective in implementing their good thoughts, but some of these thoughts can be of great value to work camp organizers and leaders. Of this matter I shall speak further in connection with my "Recommendations".

Many Germans assured me that the camps deserve to be multiplied many-fold. Not only is there endless work to be done, but their spirit, their message should reach as many Germans as possible. It would take time to penetrate the crust of suspicion, but this task is not too difficult to accomplish (as the public relations of the Nürnberg Camp demonstrate). Especially in the Ruhr is there need for camps, not only because of the devastation there, but because the suspicion of the foreigner is there unusually intense. It seems agreed that the campers' work will be watched closely. To be successful it must (a) involve the German community as co-participants; (b) accomplish as much as full-time laborers could accomplish; (***) and (c) be located in regions of obvious need.

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***) This condition does not rule out the possibility of a combination work camp and seminars for teachers of which I shall speak later.