

British Quakers

WORK CAMPS AND EASTERN EUROPE

During recent months there have been various suggestions made regarding the possibility and advisability of Friends making contacts with Eastern Europe about work camps.

The following notes are an attempt to show what has been done by groups in time past and to cover some of the suggestions made. The correspondence and the discussions took place before the events of the past two or three weeks. It is difficult to estimate how these effect the position.

1947 - 49 The Anglo-American Quaker Mission (joint FRS-AFSC, then FSC-AFSC) organised a number of international work camps in Poland during this period. It gradually got more and more difficult to get permission to run these camps. They ceased when the mission withdrew at the end of May 1949.

AFSC considered running a camp in Hungary, but did not finally organise one there. Their workers recruited some volunteers for the Polish camps.

1952 - 53 British Young Friends had the concern to hold an Anglo-Soviet work cam in Britain. They were unable to get any Russian members for the camp.

1954 The invitation to a party of young Russians to come over on a visit was accepted (see Roots of Friendship).

Service Civil International organised a work camp in Warsaw in conjunction with the World Federation of Democratic Youth in 1955. The camp took place in the same time as the youth festival. It was somewhat overshadowed by the festival and East European members of the camp were fewer than anticipated.

SCI has kept up their contact with the WFDY. Some East Europeans took part in a special East-West camp in France this year. No camp was held in Eastern Europe.

Germany Yearly Meeting tried to organise a camp in Eastern Germany this summer. The plan was to hold it in Karl Marx Stadt. Permission was not given by the appropriate authorities for a work camp to held (why work ?), but a gathering took place. Two British Y. Fs. attended this.

In July 1956 the WFDY organised a camp at Leipzig in Eastern Germany. I do not know any people who took part. There were 19 campers in all, coming from Denmark, Holland, Bulgaria, Austria, Trinidad, USA, and East & West Germany. They published a long statement at the end of the camp which includes the words : "In general, we feel that our coming together has been quite successful, though as a new trail-breaking attempt it had certain organisational shortcomings. We have certainly all learned a good deal. We feel that for international rapprochement and the development of tolerance and mutual understanding among the people of different nations and especially between the peoples on both sides of the notorious 'Curtain' many more such camps should be organised in the future. This is one of the ways - and one of the best - in which the peoples can learn to see each other as they really are."

In correspondence David Richie (Secretary of the Social Order Committee of Philadelphia Y. M.) has raised the question of work camp contacts with Eastern Europe. AFSC sent observers to the preparatory meeting for the Moscow Youth Festival which was held in Moscow this past summer. They may send observers to the festival itself and David Richie suggests it might be right for him to be one and, if so, for him to return via Poland where he could renew contacts made in Polish work camps in 1947 & 48. If he goes to Poland he suggests that Dorothy Abbott (at present one of the SCI International Secretaries) and I join him for that part of his visit, as we were both concerned with the development of work camps there. (Other considerations ruled out, timing would make this difficult for me). The question was also raised as to whether the time was right for Friends to make an approach to Poland to see if a Quaker work camp could be held there.

Recently David Rutter has been in this country on holiday with his Polish wife Nina. He has raised the question as to whether he should make approaches to the Polish authorities regarding work camps and if they accepted the idea would we be able to organise a camp there. He is doing nothing till he hears from me.

The question of work camps in Eastern Europe will come up at the AIWCP meeting in Kassel, November 8 - 10. The matter should be considered by the Work Camps Committee at a later date, possibly on November 14th. The whole question will probably need wider discussion. It seems to me that the following matters have to be discussed :

Is the time right for Friends to make an approach to one of the East European countries with a view to organising a work camp there ?

Is so, to what country ? How should the approach be made ?

What would our relationship be with the World Federation of Democratic Youth ? To what extent should we cooperate with them ?

Which body would make the approach on behalf of Friends and be responsible for seeing it through ?

Where would the necessary funds come from ?

Is Eastern Europe the most important place at present ?

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AMD / LD
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