

**A Report on the International Work Camp at Biezanow
near Krakow, Poland; July - August 1958
sponsored jointly by Service Civil International and the Polish Students' Association**

Report written by Wendy Elliott

This was the first year in which the Polish Students' Association had participated in an international work camp. (At least one had been held in Poland in 1957, co-sponsored by the S.C.I. and a Polish rural youth association). The leaders of the Polish Students Association were very eager to make the camp a success, which would lead to more such camps and to increased contact between Polish students and those from other countries. The camp, however, had to contend with some of the difficulties of a trial flight. There was apparently very little contact between the S.C.I. and the Polish Students Association beforehand. A printed folder describing three work camps projected for the summer had been sent out, and from this those in the West were able to glean concerning the project of the S.C.I. - P.S.A. only that it consisted of the "erection of a railway manoeuvring depot". The S.C.I. camp leader (whom I accompanied from Paris to Krakow after a week's wait in Paris finally produced our Polish visas) was prepared to take a back seat in directing the camp, since the main part of the planning had been done by the P.S.A. As things worked out, he directed the work, the P.S.A. leader the rest of the arrangements.

When we got to the Students Hotel in Krakow we were greeted by the Polish leader of the Work Camp, the director of the P.S.A. from Warsaw, and a Polish boy who had participated in an S.C.I. Work Camp in Sweden the year before and was volunteering his assistance to help this one get started. Our reception was a warm and friendly one. Throughout the camp, I felt that the Polish boys were very eager to have foreigners see Poland, and to make the experience in Poland enjoyable for us. The director of the P.S.A. in Warsaw, Mr. Jan Wilanowski, seems to be especially dedicated to his work.

We (two French boys and I), arrived Sunday evening of the week-end which had been scheduled as the beginning of the Work Camp. It was meant to be a socializing and sight-seeing week-end in Krakow, but only one of the foreign volunteers, a Swiss girl, had arrived in time to enjoy it. The rest of the foreign participants were all held up for greater or lesser periods of time due to delays in the granting of Polish visas. The Bulgarian and German students never did arrive. The rest of the volunteers from outside Poland dribbled in during the course of the first two weeks. Oddly enough, the greatest difficulty was in obtaining Polish students, not foreign ones. We started with only two in addition to the leader. Another who came in during the second week later mentioned that he had understood the Work Camp was a money-earning project.

At about the middle of the Work Camp, our ranks were swelled to about twenty-five by the diversion to us of those Polish and foreign students who had signed up for one of the other P.S.A. camps. There had not been enough of them to make the cam possible.

It seemed that the newness of the Work Camp idea was one of the main reasons for the shortage of Polish volunteers. The other was the fact that most Polish University students are poor and have to do remunerative work during summer. Their university education is free, but they have to pay their own living expenses, and few Polish families can afford to support a son or a daughter living away from home.

The work at the Biezanow camp was not of a social service nature. It consisted of having dirt from huge dirt piles into trucks, digging dirt to level the ground where switch tracks were going to be laid in front of the depot of the new electric railway, and, on the last day, after our diggings had been flooded out by rain, of unloading bricks from flat cars. For this work we were paid according to the number of cubic meters of earth we moved from one place to another, and this money was used to defray our living expenses (For this, our earnings turned out to be inadequate and the P.S.A. absorbed the difference). In other words, our work was regular paid employment. I gathered from what was said that the P.S.A. had had to search a long time to find this project for us. Thus, while we did have some parties with the railroad engineers and the workers, we lacked the feeling of working with and for a group of people, and of doing something to meet a basically human need.

In several discussions, the S.C.I. leader and others of us who had had previous experience with S.C.I. and Friends work, went into its aims and philosophy at some length. In our final meeting, Jan Wilanowski said that the P.S.A. was tentatively planning two international Work Camps for the summer of 1959. One would be for volunteers eager to do work having social significance, who did not care whether or not they saw very much of Poland. The other would be for young people whose principle aim was to see something of Poland, who could do so only if they could earn the money to pay their expenses while in Poland.

The overall experience of the Work Camp was a positive one. However, we had leader trouble. The Polish student leader, whose field was art, had apparently never encountered the concept of "group development" by that or any other name. The ability of a group to work out its own modus operandi, to plan cooperatively and to bring out the creative potentials of individuals was never fostered. Instead, signs of independence on the part of group members seemed to be felt as a threat to authority by this inexperienced leader, and resulted in his further asserting himself in various little unnecessary ways.

Our program of activities was set up for us and the whole group was expected to follow it without question. The excursions planned for us were very worthwhile (a visit to the new steel factory at Nova Huta, to the salt mines at Wieliczka with their marvellous underground chapel, the historic buildings in Krakow, and a grim morning at the Nazi concentration camp at Oswiecim (*Auschwitz*), and a three-day visit to Warsaw at the end of the camp). Discussions with staff members of two Krakow newspapers were also arranged for us upon request of members of the group. These things added a lot to our understanding of and feeling for Poland. But the arbitrary way in which we were told what to do made the group experience somewhat disappointing for some of us. The difference in viewpoint came to a head when several English boys went into Krakow on the personal invitation of a man they had met there, instead of attending a meeting at which the Polish director and his wife sang Polish songs, from which they had decided we should choose one to learn to sing for the party for the engineers. The leadership, both P.S.A. and S.C.I., took the boys to task for going independent ways, and the boys were extremely annoyed.

Interestingly enough, the group which found the leadership poor consisted largely of the English-speaking volunteers, including two English-speaking Polish boys. This may have had something to do with the fact that the basic language of the camp was French, although it seemed also that those who were most willing to follow along whatever the leadership was, were either French or Polish.

At a final meeting requested by some of the group members, the discontents were aired at last, with several who had had previous experience in S.C.I. camps stressing the more democratic atmosphere which usually prevailed. Unfortunately, the P.S.A. leader was unable to be present at this meeting.

As I remember the report of other Work Camps on file at Pendle Hill, criticism of leadership was a frequent item, so I suppose our troubles in this area were nothing unusual. The language split as a factor in disagreement was interesting. Even more basic seemed to be the widely different kinds of experience of and expectations of leadership between those from different countries and between those who had previous Work Camp experience and those who had not.

However, as I mentioned, the camp was a good experience for most of us, and something which the P.S.A. wants to repeat.