

INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTARY SERVICE IN POLAND 1961

1) Arrival and preliminary organisation

The camp was organised by the Service Civil International in cooperation with the ZMW (the Polish Rural Youth Organisation) and took place between July 1 and 21, at KOWALEWO in the postal district of Slupca. The volunteers were given 250 Zloty pocket money by the ZMW, and in addition board and lodging costs were also covered by the sponsors of the camp.

The SCI participants of the camp were the following : 4 French, 1 Dutch, 1 Belgian, 3 American, 1 British. A volunteer from Italy, who had been at the Prague Christian Conference, joined the camp at a later stage. Participants from other organisations included 2 from the 4-H Club of the USA, 2 from the Swedish work camp organisation, 2 from the Freie Deutsche Jugend of the German Democratic Republic, 3 from Hungary, and several members of the ZMW.

We stayed two days in Poznan in the Tourists Hotel at the expense of the ZMW. During the day we had the opportunity of looking round the town, and in the evening we were taken to an operetta which was reminiscent of Place Pigalle in Paris. A guide, who spoke fluent French, English and German, was placed at our disposal, and we were thus able to learn a great deal about Poznan's cultural heritage and its position in contemporary Poland.

A coach took the group to Kowalewo - a trip of about 50 miles - and we had the first glimpse of our project from the road. At the old school, which was to be our Barracks for the next three weeks, we were met by the Polish volunteers, all members of the Polish Rural Youth Union, the ZMW. In the evening the head of the ZMW work camp programme told us about the work project at Kowalewo, the camp organisation and the proposed free time programme. Although we were asked to say what we would like to do - in the way of discussions, excursions etc. - it was obvious that the schedule had already been planned well in advance and that no basic changes could be made (It was impossible, for example, to obtain a member of the Roman catholic Church to talk to us about the role of religion in post-war Poland).

The work project in this camp was concerned with construction of a new school. Poland is in 1961 celebrating the thousandth anniversary of the foundation of the Polish state, and it is the aim of the government to construct one thousand schools before the end of the year. The ZMW also participated in this project and accordingly designated 1 million Zloty for the construction of a school for 150 pupils at Kowalewo. Although a professional firm has been assigned the basic construction, a large number of voluntary, unpaid groups have also participated in the work, largely doing the less skilled, but equally important tasks. The Polish scouts, the young pioneers, Polish soldiers, and members of the ZMW have all helped at one time or another during the summer months, and SCI had the honour of being the first international group to offer its service.

2) Work undertaken

When we arrived the main body of the school had already been erected. The cement floors had been laid, some of the rooms had been plastered, the chimneys were finished, and work was in progress of the roof. In a second building, however, the floors remained to be laid, the chimneys to be built, and the roof to be tiled.

The following tasks were carried out by the volunteers during the course of the camp :

- 1) Construction of a road leading from the school to the highway.
- 2) Construction on the school : supplying masons with materials, laying cement floors, plastering walls, building three chimneys.
- 3) Levelling ground and removing stones from space in front of school.
- 4) Digging drainage trenches and constructing cess pits.
- 5) Erection of concrete posts for a fence enclosing the school premises.
- 6) Preliminary removal of earth for a running track.

The skilled masonry work was undertaken by two volunteers from East Germany and one from Hungary who were skilled and qualified masons. The other volunteers, who were without specialised building knowledge, supplied the professionals with building materials and carried out the more primitive jobs, for which no professional knowledge was required.

Good points

- 1) Nature of the project itself : construction of a village school in a poor agricultural community, in an area previously occupied by the Germans and consequently neglected in the education programme. Finance supplied by contributions from young people in the Polish Rural Youth Union throughout Poland.
- 2) Intimate contact with the Polish workers employed on the site.
- 3) Wide variety of tasks, suitable for both males and females, eliminated the danger of monotony and boredom.
- 4) Good supply of tools and free provision of working clothes.

Bad points

- 1) Lack of coordination on all levels : architect - engineer, engineer - foreman, foreman - camp leader, camp leader - volunteers.
- 2) Inadequate preliminary preparation of work to be undertaken, both before the camp and during the camp itself from day to day.
- 3) Incompetence of camp leader : lack of organisation abilities, inadequacy of previous work camp experience, lack of supervision, failure to delegate work to specific groups and volunteers.
- 4) Slow starting work each morning.
- 5) Uneconomic methods of work; tasks often given merely to keep the volunteers occupied.

General criticisms of the work

When there was adequate delegation of work, the volunteers worked hard and well. However, the constant feeling that the work could have been done more efficiently with the help of machines available, undeniably harmed the camp atmosphere. During the first week, for example, when the earth was extremely hard, volunteers were given the task of digging holes round the school premises, 210 cms. apart and 80 cms deep. During the second week a bulldozer arrived, and during levelling operations it proceeded to fill up most of the holes. In addition, it was later discovered that the holes along one side had been dug 20 cms. too close, and they all had to be redug. Later it was also discovered that the holes needed to be only 60 cms deep.

At one stage, when the camp leader was at a loss what work to give the volunteers, he set them to work levelling a site for a running track 100 metres long and 7 metres wide. All this time the bulldozer was standing idle on the other side of the site. The bulldozer driver was not there that day, and no-one knew when he would return. The next day he was back in his driver's seat, clearing the site for the running track. The whole operation took him no more than three hours, whereas it would have taken the volunteers, armed only with picks and shovels, at least three days.

Whenever a complaint was made about the inadequate provision of work, those concerned were given the task of transporting stones from one side of the site to the other, seemingly without any definite purpose other than to keep them occupied. At another time, when it was necessary to transport the posts for the fencing, the horse and cart had disappeared, and all the posts had to be carried by hand. The horse was required by the farmer to bring in the harvest, but it had earlier been standing idle.

At times, specially when we were invaded by hordes of journalists, many of us had the impression that we were there not in order to complete an urgent job, but merely as showpieces to prove to the Polish people the government's readiness to cooperate with people from other countries of the world. We even wondered, in view of the expenses involved in the camp (free trips to Cracow, Warsaw, and other places of historical interest, frequent visits to the cinema and theatre, superabundance of food, etc.) whether our offer of free, voluntary service was of any net financial aid at all. Did our work even pay for our keep ? I hope so . . .

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3) Free time activities

Good points

- 1) Organised excursions to Kalisz, Gnesno, Biskupin (places of cultural interest), to Konin (power station and coal mine), and to Kornik (botanical garden and castle). Five day trip to Poznan, Auschwitz, Cracow, and Warsaw with all expenses paid. Visits to the cinema and theatre. Weekly visit to the public baths.
- 2) Organised talks and subsequent discussions :
"The Polish Rural Youth Union - its aims and internal organisation",
"The Polish political and economic system",
"Sixteen years of the Polish People's Republic - its aims and achievements",
"Poland's place in the world today - economic and political intricacies".
Great patience was shown by the speakers, who had to suffer triple translation and then submit themselves to a barrage of searching questions. Only rarely did they attempt to bypass the question or to give evasive answers.
- 3) Provision of a skilled interpreter for all the main discussions and also for the major excursions.
- 4) Numerous contacts with the village population, established thanks to Saturday evening dances and general amusements.
- 5) Provision of a permanent cook from the village, who was able to give the volunteers a good idea of the variety of Polish cooking; and provision of an officer in charge of food, kitchen utensils, washing facilities, and who provided information concerning postal service, bus times etc.

Bad points

- 1) Lack of effective discipline. The fault here lay primarily with the camp leader, who failed to set an example on all occasions.
- 2) Excess of organisation from above, e. g. from the ZMW concerning free time and the discussions given by members of the camp about their respective countries. When it had become obvious that the volunteers showed no great interest in these talks, they could have been discontinued or condensed into two or three evenings, or else attendance could have been made voluntary. Unfortunately the camp leader thought that organised discussions should be obligatory for all members of the camp.
- 3) Extreme unpunctuality for all meals - especially breakfast - and at all discussions. Here again, this resulted from the absence of effective discipline and from the failure of the leader to be punctual himself.

4) General criticisms of the camp as a whole

The main criticism of the camp concerns the incompetence of the leader. He was friendly and no doubt "did his best", but his best was not nearly good enough for an SCI camp. In the morning he was one of the last to get up, and during the day he often left the site to return home - sometimes, it appears, to catch up lost sleep. On the site he failed to divide the work efficiently among the volunteers and only rarely carried out any form of supervision. The leader failed to explain to the volunteers the aims of the camp during the three weeks of its existence and its programme from day to day. As a result, morale was depressingly low. On one occasion when the camp had supper with a nearby farmer, our leader was unable to resist the opportunity of imbibing free liquor and drank more than he could take. In addition to these failings, the camp leader understood no language other than his native Polish. For an East-West camp, in which there were volunteers from nine different countries, and whose purpose was to promote understanding through an appreciation of mutual problems, it is advise able to choose a leader who has command of more than one language.

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It was largely the incompetence of the leader provided by our Polish hosts that caused the lack of coordination between the organisers of the work programme and the volunteers themselves. For a work camp, East-West or otherwise, it is essential that there be work, and plenty ! More than one volunteer was heard to enquire why he had been brought all the way across Europe to dig holes which

were to be filled in two days later by a bulldozer, or to spend a whole day clearing earth which the bulldozer would have shifted in five minutes. The sense of uselessness of much of our work naturally contributed toward a certain tension between volunteers and leader, a tension which was further aggravated by the failure of both parties to make themselves adequately understood. Consequently, the knowledge that the work would not be delegated immediately at the start of the day, coupled with the obvious pointlessness of much of the work, led to the unpunctuality mentioned above. This had a demoralizing effect on the whole of the camp life.

In spite of these faults in the organisation of the camp, it was nevertheless a valuable experience for those who participated in it. It gave young people from both East and West the opportunity to work together in a constructive atmosphere. It showed that it is possible to live together, often in disagreement, and to work together, agreeing that the work accomplished providing a better basis for international understanding than the conference table. It showed that people in both politically opposed camps have the same aspirations and the same basic desire to live in peace together, free from the threat of imminent destruction.

5) Suggestions to SCI for more successful future camps

- 1) The first essential for the selection of volunteers (in such a camp having paid professionals) is not that they have specialised knowledge of bricklaying or plastering, but that they should speak at least one language other than their native language. This applies especially to the leaders, who should be able to speak the language of the country where the camp is held. Unfortunately in this camp, the leader of the SCI group spoke only French, which was a drawback and prevented understanding between her and her Polish counterpart.
- 2) More preliminary preparation of the nature of the camp should be carried out by SCI. In this case, where the ZMW was responsible, there should have been closer cooperation between the two organisations. This would enable more adequate information to be given to the individual volunteers before they arrive in the camp, i. e. type of work, travel to the site, special problems in the country of the project (visas, finances), living conditions etc.
- 3) More information should be given to the SCI leader before the beginning of the service, so that he / she is fully acquainted with the work, organisation and composition of the camp well beforehand.
- 4) Especially in a camp of this nature, it would be advisable to ensure that the individual volunteers know something about the recent history, political and economical developments of the country in which they are to work.

Michael Holman