

Report on the SCI joint camp in DDR
by Leen Voorhoeve - co-leader

The camp at Tuchheim, D.D.R., from 7th to 28th July, 1969 was attended by 27 volunteers representing 9 countries, and was jointly organised by FDJ, BITEJ, and SCI. The work was manual and involved improving the efficiency of the canals in a former moorland region, to make agriculture there more profitable. We were lodging in the village school, and the food was quite adequate. Our programme was full and varied, and apart from the daily 8 hours manual work, we had lectures and discussions on varying topics such as the background of the region and the 20th anniversary of the DDR, as well as other social activities, often in conjunction with young people from a junior camp in the village. On the whole, the camp was very well organised, both in the work and social aspects, and various excursions into the surrounding region were organised.

We enjoyed both private and organized discussions on subjects such as socialism, capitalism, Czechoslovakia, Vietnam, the press and agriculture. Some of the non-German volunteers spoke reasonably good German, therefore they could contribute fully to the organized discussions by asking many questions. Translation left much to be desired, especially the translation into English, but this was definitely not the main reason why discussion was so difficult with our DDR friends, as we often had completely different conceptions of the same terms. This was not helped by the fact that all our questions were answered in the same way : the way of socialism in the DDR is the best and really the only way; you people from the USA, Western Germany and Holland are living in countries where the working class has great problems and is living in poor conditions; there are 10 million poor people in the USA; neo-nazism in Western Germany, etc. etc. In the discussions, there was in fact a big barrier between participants from East and West Europe, but fortunately this did not extend to the work. The volunteers from the other socialist countries did not contribute much to the general discussions, and that was not simply because of the language problem.

The leader we had during the first two weeks was a teacher in Russian and English at a nearby village school. He was a very likeable and understanding person, but was afraid to make decisions on his own, without advice from FDJ, and was frightened of doing something wrong. The leader after him was an official from FDJ, and was in fact more of a 'functionaire' than a camp leader.

In my opinion this camp was a very valuable experience for all who took part, irrespective of the fact that we were in the most dogmatic socialist country in Europe, and that the discussions were sometimes boring. I consider the work is far less important than the unique opportunity of discussing and speaking with young people of quite different opinions. Of course, these workcamp have a completely different meaning for FDJ than they have for SCI, as the DDR volunteers are paid and those from other socialist countries have their travel paid and also receive a certain amount of money.

I think it is important that for the camps in the DDR in particular, the participants should have a good knowledge of German and also at least a basic knowledge of socialism and the DDR. I very much hope that these camps will be continued, for to me they seem to be very necessary for a better understanding of the young people there, and for widening of both their and our horizons.