

1917

RELIEF WORK AMONG REFUGEES.

In September 1916 a visit was paid to Bogdanofka - a long straggling village picturesquely situated between low lying hills - to interview the Priest and the Secretary, who were the two head men of the village, about the condition of the refugees residing there.

We found that these numbered about 600 and represented 140 families. There were also 240 refugees living in 7 other villages from 3 to 30 versts from Bogdanofka. All these were in the Priest's charge and as the harvest had been very bad he was looking forward with much anxiety to the winter. Therefore both he and the secretary warmly welcomed any suggestion of help from the English Mission.

We thereupon decided to take a small house in Bogdanofka and to spend a short time there getting into touch with the refugees in order to judge for ourselves the conditions obtaining amongst them.

We felt that the knowledge thus gained would be very valuable and even necessary in order that future work among them might be started on right lines, and assistance given in the most effective way possible.

With this in view and also that we might choose out specially suitable cases to send to Mogotovo we visited all the refugees in their homes in this and the outlying villages. We found many of them in poor plight with the Government allowance in arrears and with no other means of subsistence save the charity of the inhabitants who were themselves in far from affluent circumstances.

The small amount of land cultivated in this district appeared to provide little more than enough employment for the inhabitants and any work done by the Refugees was generally for the landlord of the house in which they lived, and in return for bread or potatoes supplied by him. Those of the men who had obtained work as shepherds or herdsmen in other villages would have to return when Summer was over and it seemed probable that the distress in the winter would be great.

Most of the women could either spin, weave, knit or embroider. Their linen garments ornamented with cross stitch embroidery in red and black cotton and the beautifully woven many coloured skirts being their own production at home from the raw material to the finished article. But here they had no loom or wheel or material to work with and had nothing to do all day but sit and brood over their sorrows.

In the month of November three of us, a nurse, an interpreter (whose valuable help we had for two months) and the relief worker settled in a house conveniently situated on the public square. An adjacent room was taken as a dispensary from which much needed medical help could be given. The only place obtainable at the time for Relief work was not an ideal one consisting of a peasant's house with one small mud-floored room and tiny kitchen, the ventilation of which left much to be desired.

However, work was given out from this room the first week at fixed rates of pay, to be cleaned, spun and knitted into stockings, linen to be embroidered, materials for making padded coats and sheep skins to be made into coats.

The eagerness of the women and children (the age limit of the latter was 14) for work may be judged by the following figures which show the increase both of workers and wages during the first month -

1st. week,	90	working	Wages R.	38.00
2nd. "	120	" (85 families rep'd).	"	71.00
3rd. "	140	" (100 " ")	"	115.00
4th. "	170	" (120 " ")	"	134.00

This workroom however continued long after the above losses, and a great deal of vigorous work was going on there at the end of the period covered by this report. Some idea of the sort of place Bogdanofka has been during this latter time may be formed from the following extract from a hurried note written to a friend. Saturday morning in my village is pay day in the workroom, also market day. For the relief worker running the centre it is apt to be a nightmare too. The workroom opens as usual at 8 a.m., about 45 women being employed in the room. These women have to be attended to first, their names entered and their weekly pay given. They all come early and want their pay quickly, as often they have no other money for their weekly shopping, and if they are late the cheap or better food will have been snapped up. Next, women who worked earlier in the week come for their pay. Almost before these have left the workroom, the refugees from the outlying villages come in with their work. These live in four villages at a distance of 7 to 12 versts away, there are no markets in these smaller villages so that they all try to come to our village for the Saturday market, frequently getting a lift on markets carts. About 60 of these come regularly to our workroom, some of them spin wool, or do embroidery, but the majority are the German-speaking refugees who can only knit stockings, or sew. Even when all the wool is ready weighed for the spinners, and the garments all out for the still its no small job seeing whether the work they bring back is well or badly done, paying them, and then counting out buttons, cotton, and so on for the next week. You can't perhaps settle off hand how long a piece of embroidery really did take, and what the pay should be; or some refugee has a new relation come to live in the village, and wants to know whether we can give them work. It is almost the only time the relief worker sees them, so that many little questions crop up and have to be settled. On certain days one has to see far more people than usual, and sometimes as many as 70 people are waiting their turn. Naturally, as waiting is rather dull they prefer to wander in the workroom to look at the work and chat, but not making it easier for the relief worker to get among her work. In addition to this is a similar crowd of sick persons come to see our nurse who has a dispensary in the room next door. At the same time

it is the only day we ourselves can do our marketing, we try to escape if the rush gets slightly less for a moment, to do our own shopping. Meat, fruit, vegetables, flour, potatoes, and so on can only be got in the market and even if the maid can buy these, one always hopes for a chance to buy buttons and materials for the work room. Linen lining and wool that cannot be got in this way has to be sent from Buzuluk. If you are lucky enough to get good wool the cart has to come up to the workroom in order for it to be weighed. One small room with several German~~s~~-speaking refugees waiting for new work, the regulars asking some questions relating to their weaving, a Tartar in the middle trying to weigh 400 lbs of wool, when you only have small sacks to weigh it in and a hand weighing machine; it has to be seen to be realised. The old work does get taken in, the new work given out, the women do all get paid the wool etc does get bought and paid for, but by the time the poor relief worker gets home to lunch and a slight rest, she thinks with a sigh of joy that to-morrow is Sunday.