

American Friends Service Committee

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BULLETIN ON RELIEF IN FRANCE

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FROM THE QUAKER NOTE-BOOK IN FRANCE

Undernourishment of France's children is rapidly deepening into starvation and the long months of inadequate rations begin to take their toll.

Throughout the winter children have been living on 1187 calories daily. Yet medical experts put the amount of food necessary to sustain life at 2,000 to 2562 calories.

Howard E. Kershner, director of Friends relief in France, writes:

"In certain departments we find evidence of the fact that children have lost during the past three months from three to ten kilos in weight."

He goes on to report that children are rummaging through garbage cans for food and that departmental officials are urging extension of the school feeding program beyond the present 40,000 receiving Quaker rations. These department officials add that food stuffs have been stolen by hungry children who have organized a kind of Brotherhood of Beggaryship.

It is true that occasionally rationed food can be supplemented by foods outside rationing control. A Quaker worker in Marseille gives the following description of these efforts:

Instead of dividing his monthly meat ration into daily portions, for instance, a person may eat meat only a few days each week, and try to get non-rationed substitutes for the other days. But the lines in front of the shops selling horse meat, fish, or tripe, are just as long as those in front of the butcher shops, and it is not nearly always possible to get these substitutes. Aside from the scramble for them, they are often expensive as well. Horse meat is not cheap, and fish, at least here in Marseille, is one of the most expensive foods we have, costing nearly double the price of meat in many cases."

Excessive cold in the winter months froze fruit and vegetables in the South of France, producing scarcity and prices prohibitively high for poor families.

With rising prices the millions who manage on a military, unemployment, or refugee allocation, cannot make their few francs stretch over the simple needs of food and shelter. An unemployed man with a wife and two children receives, for instance, 696 francs a month. The wife of a

prisoner of war with two children to support is granted a monthly total of 555 francs. The monthly allocation for a French refugee from the occupied zone together with his wife and two children approximates 1650 francs.

Yet the story is not alone in the figures but in the fragments of experience reported by American Friends Service Committee delegates in their daily rounds to the school canteens and the baby clinics. One writes:

"It is difficult to give you a true and accurate picture of conditions here - which vary each week and also according to the locality. The cities are suffering more than the average country district. As factories close, unemployment increases; all shipping industries here are greatly affected; now the factories making pates are closing as there is no flour.

"The bread ration, already meager, will soon be reduced again, we are told. The months ahead will be extremely difficult and perhaps tragic. They are courageous and uncomplaining, these French people. People leaving the cinema on Saturday night join a line for food to be among the first on Sunday morning - the line extends into the late afternoon. I have seen lines of at least 1,000 people waiting for eggs after an African shipment is announced, and lines of 2,000 people have been reported at the Central Markets seeking potatoes when any were available. All through the blizzards of winter, rain, wind and snow, there were long lines waiting for coal and food. Some fainted, one woman died of heart disease, but they are patient and long-suffering. It is heart-breaking to see, I can assure you."

The effects of starvation are not dramatic but slow and insidious, and the report continues:

"The tide of misery as I see it in the poorer parts of the city has risen steadily these past three weeks. Bread rations cut, less to buy in the shops, no farine food for babies from six months to two years.

"So many mothers deprive themselves and give up their bread for their children. One was heard to say:

'Don't you remember, dear, mother no longer likes bread, you are to eat it all.'

"The children are always hungry these days, the school teachers report the symptoms of listlessness - thin, little legs, nobby knee joints, pale wan faces, nervousness and inattention, among the children, the fathers out of work, or prisoners, or lost in the war, are the rule.

"It is wonderful to be working here and to feel that American help and sympathy is backing one up. Bless you all and thank you. Everywhere one meets with expressions of deepest gratitude for your timely aid and requests to transmit thanks from France to the American friends and givers."

One thinks of rations extending over a month, yet this bit from a recent report is revealing:

"One hungry girl of 12 has already, on the 11th day of the month, eaten up her full ration of bread for the whole month. She has no more bread tickets left and does not know what she is going to do now."

Already there are red traces of sore spots on the fingers of the children of Marseille, ringworm blotches on small faces.

Americans separated by a wide ocean from this need, feel perhaps farther from France than the children who are receiving extra food feel from their friends in the United States. Often our representatives have the pleasure of telling them about the people here at home whose sacrifices and generosity are making the work possible. A French teacher making the explanation one day in the presence of our delegate described the thousands of small savings by American young people for the children of France. She concluded:

"You understand, boys, this is not almsgiving, this is true brotherly love."

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