

American Friends Service Committee

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A hundred European children arriving in New York last week stared incredulously at the milk offered them on the pier by their American hosts. Customs officials shook their heads at the sight of pinched faces and thin, bony bodies, seeing not those children but the millions in Europe living in hardship.

The Service Committee through its staff in unoccupied France has been reaching some 50,000 children through the daily canteen meals in the schools, converting the generous cash contributions of American church and philanthropic committees into stores of milk, vitamins, rice and vegetables. The following excerpts from reports of Quaker delegates abroad give a picture of the spirit of this service of goodwill.

Ecole Louis Blanc, Montpellier - "There were no tables available in this particular school, so the children chosen to benefit from the food were seated in a little semi-circle in the courtyard, their plates perched precariously on their knees. One could see these boys were hungry from the way they were shovelling in their portions, and their faces told one that they were indeed undernourished; so many pale cheeks, so many circles under the eyes; so many pairs of scrawny, dirty bare knees protruding under the plates.

"One of the older children chosen as spokesman expressed the gratitude of his schoolmates to the Quakers and to America. It pleased me to see that it was well understood that our committee was merely representing all the people at home who care about the welfare of the French boys and girls."

Ecole Clemence Boyer, Montpellier - "A blackboard had been dragged to the center of the room and on it drawn in colored chalk two beautiful American and French flags with the words underneath, "Vive l'Amérique, Vive la France." I tried to discover which little girl was the artist, but no one was bold enough to admit to what was obviously a painstaking and careful piece of work. The fact that the American flag was depicted with the staff attached to the stripes while the stars waved oddly at the other end - this slight poetic license somehow made the whole thing that much more touching; and I carried away a happy picture of those hungry youngsters and their wrong side-out American flag."

Mazargues Boys School, Marseille - "Fifty boys were inscribed for the school canteen last December. Since Easter the number has been reduced to 48 on account of the many demands of the parents for the free canteen for their children in all the schools in Marseille. To satisfy all the needs the children must be given admission to the canteen in rotation, so that all the boys will have a turn and parents will feel that all the children are being treated fairly."

Rue Lessor Boys' School, Marseille - "This school is an old one, the canteen is an old classroom transformed into a makeshift kitchen and canteen all in one, a very humble little place but the spirit here that animates the canteen is beautiful. The cantiniere has a child of her own twelve years old and she knows how hungry growing children are and sympathizes with them. They keep strictly to the prescribed rations but both the school director and the cantiniere say that these rations no longer satisfy the boys' appetites now that they have so little to eat at home.

"The director of the school has always done social work besides his school responsibilities. In his cupboard there was a solitary pair of small trousers left over from the time when such things could be bought. He showed me the table where, he said, the clothes used to be put out for the mothers to choose what their boys needed. But now all that was a thing of the past and I realized that not being able to do so any more was causing him real suffering. He still had a few scant provisions put aside for his proteges, a small bag of sweets that he showed me.

'What is this?' I asked. He looked embarrassed.

'That is a little bread' he said 'in case a child should be hungry.'

'But isn't that your bread, your ration of bread for the day?' He looked even more embarrassed and finally burst out.

'What else can I do when a boy is hungry and has no bread?'

I thought this was better than following the Bible precept to 'share one's bread with the hungry' for he was giving all."

Girls School of La Cathedrale, Marseille - "This time some photographs were taken of the girls at the canteen. They were very restless, so that it was almost impossible to photograph them. Since the war the children, especially the girls, have become extremely nervous. The old cantiniere, when she had made everything ready, came to sit beside me while we waited for the children. She has grandchildren but there is no canteen in the village where they go to school and she says she cannot help comparing what the pupils of this canteen where she prepares the food get in the form of a good nourishing meal and her grandchildren's meager meals in their parents' home. The cantiniere loves these suburbs of the Cathedral and she has lived there since she moved into her little flat as a bride of 18. Now she is 64, living in the same modest little flat and she says that when she goes to the door, all the memories of the years surge up. 'Why, my apartment speaks to me,' she explained."

Les Ayalades Girls School, Marseille - "Many growing girls attend this canteen and appreciate a good substantial meal. In the homes the food being so scarce the mother has every day to cut the food into shares. The small portions of bread are wrapped up in each child's table napkin and have to last for the whole day. This shortage for this bread-eating nation is a great hardship. The growing boys and girls feel it greatly. As usual the mothers sacrifice themselves to their children and most of them give their bread to the young.

"The distribution of fifty grammes of bread per child that the town gives the school children since this last week is much appreciated.

'I wish you could see them eat it' says Madame Guichard, 'they eat it as though it was cake and never let a crumb drop.'

"I am told that the baker of the Aysgalades got into trouble. The housewives would buy more bread than they had a right to with their bread tickets, and kept promising the baker that they would make it up before the end of the month, but they never did. The result was that the baker was only allowed flour for this month's bread to the amount of bread tickets he was able to hand in to justify last month's sales - so he was short. He now only gives out what is not only paid for in money each time, but the bread tickets also."

Les Aysgalades Boys' School in suburb of Marseille - "An old school in a quaint suburb at the end of a long alley - the entrance overshadowed by a great lilac bush in full bloom. The head master is quite a young man, demobilized a few months ago, after a strenuous period at the war front.. in the Vosges .. designated to leave for Norway .. then in the Somme .. then in the Aisne. He is full of pity for the fleeing populations and of the horror of all he has seen. Now in the calm of this country school he has taken up his work and a normal life again."

Les Crottes School, Marseille - "There was a sudden noise in one of the nearby houses, not very loud, about like a pistol shot. There was terror and cries in the band of children. One little girl had to be taken in the teacher's arms to be reassured. This school had been bombed and completely destroyed last June and the children are terrified still when they hear a sudden noise."

Les Crottes Infant School, Marseille - "The small children are now receiving the American vitamins. The teacher tasted one first to know what it was like and found it bitter. She was quite nervous as to how she could persuade the children not to spit them out. So she told them they were very good, that they had a taste that reminded one of the sea. They taste like cod liver oil. She tried to prepare the children in advance. To her surprise and delight the children love them and consider them a great treat. When she asked what it tasted like, one small boy declared stoutly that it tasted American and that everything American was good."

Ecole Maternelle, Marseille - "This part of the city is inhabited by working class people including railway employees most of whom manage well on modest incomes. Owing to circumstances many of them have had a hard winter. The father of a group of children I met had been demobilized to unemployment. His wife and children were in a painful situation and without good food. The four children were admitted to the canteen and this was their salvation. When the father re-established himself, opened his little shop and began earning his living anew, he came to the teacher and told her this good news, thanked her for what the canteen had done for his children and withdrew them to leave the place for other more needy children."

Concluding a report of a round of visits to the schools, a Quaker delegate writes:

"I wish the Quakers in America and all the Americans who contribute to this work could see the good that is being done in their names, and realize how infinitely worth while it is. If they have made a sacrifice to do it I know they would feel amply repaid. For the love of God and man may America send more to help these children."