

American Friends Service Committee

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BULLETIN ON RELIEF IN FRANCE

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Violet and Felix Ansermoz, Swiss Friends, were able to visit French and American workers in unoccupied France during October. A section of their report, presented herewith, gives a vivid picture of the tasks as Service Committee delegates are meeting them.*

A Visit to France

Leaving Geneva at 5 P.M. on October 7, we went successfully through three custom examinations, the Swiss, the German and the French, and we got off at Valence a little after midnight. On Wednesday morning, our first action was to hunt for the Mairie in search of food tickets which were granted without difficulty. We then crossed the famous bridge (blown up last year and only recently reconstructed) to Granges where we visited Suzanne Rette, correspondent for the French Friends in the non-occupied zone. An important correspondence had been going on between Geneva and Granges for a long time, and we had so many things to tell each other that we were soon plunged in a lively conversation, jumping boisterously from one subject to another. She told us of the little colony in Charmes near Valence where a dozen children are now housed. The colony had a difficult start but now it is under the supervision of the Marseille Friends and prospects are better.

When lunch time arrived, we had many more things to discuss. There was no sign of a meal being prepared in the little apartment which Suzanne shares with her mother (our first, but not our last shock in relation to food conditions) so we invited our friend to lunch at the hotel.

Marseille

We arrived in Marseille just in time for the workers' conference and most of our three days there (October 9, 10, and 11) were spent in the American Friends Service Committee offices. It was a privilege for us to sit with all these friends and to share their hopes and preoccupations. And we could have had no better opportunity to become acquainted with their chief problems, or rather with the various combinations of these two great puzzles: where to get the goods, and where to help first in presence of such overwhelming misery.

We were not long to learn in what difficult conditions workers in France live today! Having been invited to go to lunch by Mr. & Mrs. Kershner on the first day, we actually had to go to three different restaurants before we could find something to eat. It was strange for us to see the Director of Quaker relief work in Europe walk quietly out of each place after the fatigued words had come out of the headwaiter's lips:

"Rien à manger, Messieurs !"

Marseille is very depressing nowadays and we have witnessed scenes there which will not be easily forgotten. We could not see any food distribution in the "cantines scolaires" as these are scheduled to reopen later in the season. We did however, have interesting talks with Mme. Loyson who is appointed to inspect the "cantines", with Rosanna Thorndike who superintends milk distribution to babies, with Mr. Kershner and Mr. Holst.

Perpignan

But the time was too short, alas! and on Sunday morning, October 12, we left for Perpignan with Mary Elmes who was to be our guide and advisor for the next two or three days. It was a lovely trip through the many-colored vineyards, with a scarf of dark blue ocean showing here and there through the train window. The lagoons near Cette reminded us strongly of the New Jersey meadows where we used to roam ten years ago, and dozens of hunters - hunting is only permitted on Sundays and Thursdays in France - helped to make the comparison only the more real. It was dark when we arrived at Perpignan and we had supper with Mary Elmes in her apartment.

La Coume

The next two days were to be very different. We drove with Mary Elmes to La Coume, one of the seventeen children's colonies operated by Friends in unoccupied France, where we had a good visit with the Krugers. The Krugers have eleven children, including their own two, and they are the best behaved family we have seen anywhere. It was simply delightful to see them eat, the bigger ones helping the tiny, without fuss, spill or tears....When lunch was over the children quietly cleared the table and washed the dishes while Pitt Kruger was playing Beethoven's Ninth symphony on the gramophone.

Time to go came much too soon and after we had signed our names in the guest book where so many English Friends have signed theirs, we reluctantly walked down the hill trailing a batch of happy children behind. Wednesday, the 15th, was our day in Perpignan. We went in the morning to Elne, an interesting little town with a magnificent cathedral. Our first visit was to the maternity center which has been started jointly by the Quakers and the Secours Suisse but is now entirely left to the care of the Swiss. The Directrice there is the sister of Annie Eidenbenz, a Friend from Aaru, and there was a general exchange of news. Pregnant women from Rivesaltes or other nearby camps are sent to Elne a month before the birth of their babies and they are kept there a month after. The house is very well equipped, they have a large garden and a certain amount of provisions for the winter but the need for soap and clothing is very great. There were about thirty little cradles occupied and the few nurses in attendance certainly have their hands full.

From Elne we went to Canet, the sea-resort of Perpignan, where we saw two children's colonies, one under the care of Friends, and the other of Mennonites. The children are almost all refugees from northern France, they come to Canet for a period of three months, and the sea air, together with good food and loving care work wonders on them. These colonies seem very efficiently managed and made the very best impression on us.

Hearing the stories of hardship of those coming to the Quaker offices, we felt a wave of admiration rising in us for those who accept to work on this glamourless front of the present conflict, for the courage and the effort it must mean to work day after day in conditions of tragedy and with such tools. And I shall never forget that remark thrown at us by one of the young assistant doctors as we were leaving, "les Quakers...c'est le dépanneur numero un", which is a rather slangy way to say that one can always reckon on the Friends, a phrase we often heard on our trip through France in this dark year, 1941.

Toulouse

We arrived in Toulouse at nine P.M. that same Wednesday the 15th. Helga Holbek and Ima Lieven were at the station to meet us and we had a glorious ride to the Hotel de Paris in an old-time cabriolet. We had met these good Friends from Toulouse in Marseille and we knew we were in for an interesting time while their guests. There was no disappointment. We started early Thursday, the 16th, with a visit to the office at 11 rue Fermat where Mr. Daniel gave us an "aperçu" of his and his colleagues manifold activities. It is with him also that we visited "La Rade" colony where some 60 children now live in a chateau at the outskirts of the town. Our programme was full and it is with difficulty and a bit remorsefully that we snatched a hasty visit to the cathedral (St-Etienne) and to the palatial new library.

Montauban

On Saturday morning, October 18, we left Toulouse for Montauban and this time it was John Wood, youngest among American Friends Service Committee workers, who was at the station to meet us. We lost no time and managed to see the general office (frightfully small!) plus most of the historical highlights before sitting down for lunch at the Quaker canteen. It was in Montauban that we saw the greatest misery in the streets. The food problem is very acute there, too, and it is a blessing that the Friends are able to work there although we wish they could do it in more favorable conditions especially as far as premises go. We do admire John Wood and his colleagues who will have no other food than the one in the canteen and this in no other plates but we also feel ashamed when we compare their fare with the one we still have in Geneva, for instance. We had brought some gasoline coupons from Toulouse and this enabled us to fill up the car and embark on one of the loveliest drives we have taken anywhere.

Penne and Puycelci

John Wood is an excellent driver as well as a charming companion and the two picturesque villages of Penne and Puycelci, which the Quakers are trying to rebuild and to reinvigorate, are among the nicest "buts de promenade" one can dream of. And can we think of a more useful service than this rehabilitation, than this effort to give a new life to a community? The idea of the Friends, as you know - it is mostly a Toulouse concern, I believe, although considerable interest was shown by all workers at the Marseille conference - is to help these two forsaken villages to their feet again by rebuilding houses, settling solid groups of refugees, and above all starting new industries that might permit them to live on as the agricultural possibilities are very limited. In Puycelci they have started to manufacture furniture and in Penne toys. There seems to be new hope and a lot of courage in both places, and our visit there struck a very optimistic note as we neared the end of our trip. We shall long remember the drive home at sunset and the excellent meal we were happy enough to find in a little inn at Negrepelisse. As a matter of fact the meal was so good and the Stimmung so high that it was quite late when we arrived in Montauban. And as it is forbidden to drive after dark without a special permit, we soon had the police peeping at us through the window. But there again the good reputation of the Society of Friends saved the day!

"Nous sommes les Quakers," said John in his best French, "et ici ce sont les Quakers de Geneve."

The officer saluted politely and waved us off. We felt very important! but, as we hated even more than before to part, we had coffee in John's room with Mr. and Mrs. Cornelison and a fine discussion on the message of Friends in the present world.

We were off on Sunday morning enroute for Geneva and after a stop of a few hours, to visit friends in Montpellier we were back in the city of Calvin at 1 P.M. on October 20th. We felt very tired and very dirty, but I see no point in concealing that the first thing we did was go to directly to the restaurant and that ours was a hearty meal indeed.....!

As I look back to these two weeks in France and to our experiences there, my first feeling is one of gratitude that we were able to go on such a trip and to cover so much ground without the least difficulty. When people have to wait and wait for visas and other papers, we got ours in 24 hours. We had no troubles with the customs nor the trains. And I cannot say enough how kind and obliging every Friend we met was. We came back to our job full of admiration for what they are accomplishing in their various fields and full of the desire to be more helpful to them in the future. It was a depressing trip in a sense if we dare think of what France was only eighteen months ago when we last crossed it to go to Woodbrooke, but it was an encouraging trip also in view of the tremendous effort that is apparent everywhere and of the huge amount of good-will, kindness, and sympathy that means so much to those who suffer.

Geneva, 30th of October, 1941

Felix Ansermoz

* An additional section of the Ansermoz report will be presented in the next bulletin on refugee needs.