

American Friends Service Committee

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School children of France are this summer tilling tiny patches of land, planting seeds that there may be food for the school canteens next winter. Quaker delegations in the various cities of unoccupied France are cooperating with municipal officials and with teacher-gardeners in efforts to find seeds and tools for this venture in self-help. In the absence of sufficient seed, the projects underway are pitifully inadequate to the need. Something of the difficulties which have been experienced in launching these modest projects is reflected in a recent report from the Quaker delegation in Toulouse.

It reads:

"One of the things we have had most at heart in our Toulouse activities has been the feeding of children.... This winter, the importation of food being practically impossible, we have had to give less, and this prompted us to create as many school gardens as possible, which could be worked by school children for school children.

"At first, this seemed to be a very sensible and simple proposition, but when it came to realization, we began to feel the audacity of our enterprise. First, we had to find the grounds, which had to be located near the schools - we must not forget that there are no means of transportation any more - then we had to find help for the ploughing; then the authorization of the municipality and the Inspector of the Academy. Then, the agreement of school directors and teachers who were to give us their cooperation. We knew the children would just love the idea and that we would have no trouble with them. At the end of February, we began taking steps, and having heard of a 4,000 square-meter piece of land not too far from a school, we had it examined by a specialist and rented it. At the beginning of March, and after numerous visits and requests of all sorts, we were further allowed to cultivate some grounds in three different gardens belonging to the town and located near three houses used for summer colonies.

"We had no tools and no possibility of buying any, since one can do so only by giving in exchange an equivalent amount of the metal necessary to manufacture them. We solved this difficulty by borrowing from the municipal undertakers (&) spades, pickaxes, etc. It sounds rather gruesome, but we got a good laugh out of it!

"Then we went to an institution for unemployed workers, and they promised to send us 20 men and a superintendent to clear out the grounds. This resulted, for us, in a feeling of triumph. In imagination we could already see the children at work and the beautiful crops (potatoes and beans) gotten out of the ground. After a few days of hopeful waiting, 20 old men arrived, so tired out by the

effort of coming over that they just sat down, motionless. Many of them had never seen a spade - much less did they know how to use one. They were terribly underfed, and had no strength whatever. A great friend of the Quakers, whom we had helped with her Restaurant Populaire, came to our help. She got some energy into these poor rags by feeding them, and after a fortnight's work they had cleared the land and we were ready to proceed with the ploughing.

"But now came the matter of gasoline. There was none available, and so there was no use in thinking about a tractor. Also, all the valid men were already out working on farms, and of course 1,500,000 of our best men are prisoners in Germany. We realized that the ploughing would have to be done in a happy-go-lucky way by hand, or - when we could obtain the loan of the undertaker's horses - with a horse-drawn plough.

"At the end of the Easter vacation, one plot of land was completely ploughed and the children were able to start work. They had visited this garden before the holidays, and each child had already chosen his bit of ground. We felt, therefore, that true agricultural vocations had been stimulated. Three more gardens will be ready the middle of April.

"We now have a most urgent need for tools (shovels, spades, rakes, hoes, watering pots, etc.), a few hundred of each. We do not know whether it is possible to send over seeds from America. If it were so, we would feel there was special significance in the symbolism of such a gesture. . . . We hope to grow cabbage, carrots, turnips, leeks, beans and potatoes.

"We feel convinced that in spite of all the difficulties we must go on with this project. . . . We will not have wasted our efforts if the idea of school gardens is taken up by the town and the villages in the departments. Nor will we have worked in vain if the children have had the joy of laboring in the sunshine for their schoolfellows, and if they have learned to take a real interest in so wholesome an occupation. We feel it is for them a lesson in solidarity, and that it will give them a realization of their own responsibility in the reconstruction of France."

During the winter months the Committee was able to supply supplementary rations to 84,500 children in 11 of the most needy departments. In some communities local authorities gave additional provisions. This canteen program is continuing in vacation schools on a limited basis.

That the little extra food which the Committee and official services provide does make a difference in the health of the young people participating is emphasized in all the reports. A school-master in the Alpes-Maritimes wrote as follows after the Easter holidays:

"On April 14 we weighed all the 113 children eating at the canteen. At the close of the Easter vacation two weeks later we weighed them again. The figures show that: 102 of the 113 children had lost from one pound to three pounds in weight during this period of absence from the canteen, during two weeks. When the Prefet was advised of this fact he at once undertook measures to secure the continuation during the summer of all the school canteens. He appointed me to be his personal delegate to supervise and create new canteens where necessary."

There are stories of the care with which weight charts are kept by community leaders. Sometimes the children march once a week to the only scales in town in the railroad station or drug store. A gain of as much as a pound becomes an occasion for general rejoicing. Earlier in the year it had been indicated that one of the difficulties of providing canteens in some communities arose from the lack of adequate kitchen facilities and fuel for the preparation of the food. It is not surprising, therefore, that in many towns there should be a central kitchen with the distribution of hot food to the various school units by horse cart.

The Committee representative who has supervised the canteens in the town of Carcassonne emphasizes that the food distributions have made an appreciable difference in the health of the children as reflected in the weight charts. The gains reported by the mayor of the city after two months of canteen service are as follows:

"From 800 grs.	to 1 k 600	for children from 6 to 7 years			
" 1 kilo	to 2 k 200	" "	"	" 7 to 8 "	
" 1 " 200	to 2 k 500	" "	"	" 8 to 9 "	
" 1 " 300	to 2 k 700	" "	"	" 9 to 10 "	
" 1 " 500	to 2 k 800	" "	"	" 10 to 11 "	
" 1 " 500	to 3 k	" "	"	" 11 to 12 "	
" 2 "	to 3 k 600	" "	"	" 12 to 13 "	
" 2 " 500	to 4 k	" "	"	" 14 years and over."	

It is increasingly difficult to find supplies in Europe to meet the needs of France's hungry children. Fresh fruits and vegetables will supplement the inadequate rations during the summer months, but the winter looms ahead with previous reserves of food exhausted. The Committee is seeking new food sources to mitigate another winter's deepening misery.

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