

AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE

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FOREIGN SERVICE SECTION

News from Germany

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THE FORGOTTEN VILLAGE

Outside of Ludwigshafen is a little village of 1250 people on the heath between Weisenheim and Maxdorf. It has no name and it was described by one of the Ludwigshafen Quaker teams "as perhaps the most desolate on this continent." It was called the Forgotten Village.

It was forgotten because it was settled just before the war. It had no school, no governing body, and no church. It did not even have a cemetery. All it had was refugees, old people, poor people, and children. A report says, "The Forgotten Village is very rich in children - poor, undernourished children with rickets. Children who are far below the average mentally, physically, and spiritually."

Here is the story of one family in the village. They wrote:

"In order to escape from the overcrowded industrial town of Ludwigshafen on the Rhine, and in order to give our children fresh air and sunshine, we obtained in 1937 a home site 11 miles from our lodgings in Ludwigshafen. We had to have a certificate of good behavior from the police and a medical certificate which should prove that the family had no history of serious illness. Only families with at least three children came into question. The down payment amounted to 480 Rm. . . . The small house was paid for in monthly installments of 31 Rm. -- that is, 27 Rm. for rent, taxes, and administration expenses, and the rest for liquidation of the common debt of 4000 Rm.

"Every settler contributed 1-200 hours of work to the clearing of woods and improvement of the soil. This work-time was compensated with 50 Rm. and deducted from the cost of the house. Plans and projects for the settlement had been put before us; how wonderful it looked and how happy we were to obtain our own home in such ideal country, in a communally and politically ideally administrated village. The heavens were promised to us --- but it became hell.

"On October 15, 1938 we moved in. This is what happened.

"All the communities near-by have shoved off their poorest families who were an economic burden to the communities: old-age pensioners, invalids, etc.

"Modestly we lived here. The men went to work in the industrial towns as far as 12 miles away, the women tried to add a little to the income by working for farmers.

"But the settlement was not finished. No school was built, no cemetery made, and we did not become a community. We were a no-man's land without name, without communal ties -- the Forgotten Village.

"The war came and with it conditions became catastrophic. Suddenly it was there, this spectre of horror. None of us had called it, but what could we do against it?

Nothing! Most of the men were called to the forces. During the second year of the war emergency-houses were built -- huts without light or water.

"The people who were to use these were families from surrounding little towns who found a way of earning their living. They were bombed out without possessions, in despair and ill. With these poor people our distress grew even greater.

"Nor did the war leave our settlement intact. An ocean of tears flowed from many a mother's eye, as children or other loved ones died in the wreckage of homes. No authorities, no church, no community has looked after these most unfortunate.

"Forgotten, forgotten.

"The refugees came, from the East and the West. Almost all the huts are occupied. Homes of social misery.

"The Forgotten Village is very rich in children. Poor undernourished children with rickets. Our children had not been to school for 4 years, nor to church. Prayer and commandment are foreign notions to them. Nevertheless we call them our beloved children. What is their guilt in what has happened? In the war they have suffered most. We have all tried to help, but what can a single person do against an existent social order? Everywhere we find pitying consternation, but nowhere understanding, nowhere even an attempt to help.

"The first relief was brought to us by the American Quakers last year. The gratitude of the settlers is unlimited.

"In a small primitive kitchen cooking is done every day for 140 very undernourished children. The feeding takes place every other day. 276 out of 580 are fed.

"They get a quart of soup and a bun (50 grams). Last week a sculptor came to the kitchen and asked for permission to make hunger-masks of the children. He had heard about the forgotten village and actually nowhere seen such old, careworn, child-faces! There are all kinds of people. This one wanted to make business out of our misery.

"In November last year our school was at last finished. A wooden house, quite insufficient, with three rooms for 380 children. The lessons are given by three teachers, who had to be drafted by the government because nobody could be found to go voluntarily to the forgotten village. Many German missionaries have gone to other continents, but we must strike them as worse than savages. There are 10-15 illiterates and mentally abnormal children. But we are not to blame even for this disgraceful situation.

"16-17 year old children who already have a profession are not yet confirmed, because they have no proper clothes or shoes to be sent to church. The church to which we belong is 4 miles away.

"The children are often carried to school by the mother as there are neither shoes nor socks. Any child-illness becomes epidemic, as the badly undernourished children have a much lower resistance. As a result of the lack of clothing there are often two or three patients in every house. Often as many as 100 children stay away from school with the excuse that they have nothing to wear or eat. Many families here have neither blankets nor sheets. They lie on strawstacks without covers.

"We are the very last to get our apportionments. Often we reach the end of the month and the children and babies have received neither sugar nor other rations.

"A few weeks' ago 5 infants died in the course of a few days. Born healthy, children of God whom we believe in, they are the sacrifices of the terrifying conditions. The worst thing for a mother is to have to refuse to give her child a piece of stale bread! There are old people here who spend their days in bed because they have no fire. They stay in bed till lunch in order to eat only once, because the food will reach no further."

When Trudie Hunt visited the village it became a concern of the Ludwigshafen team and a small feeding program for 200 children was started. Trudie wrote:

"This small town is perhaps one of the poorest, most desolate spots to be found anywhere on this continent, yet most remarkable of all is the selfless devotion, the struggling against seemingly insurmountable odds, the religious dedication of a handful of local women, who work night and day to bring help to their community."

In November, the "dedication" of these few people opened a three-room barrack for a school.

A local newspaper report:

January 19, 1948

"For a long time the people living in Maxdorf Siedlung -- on the heath right off the highway between Maxdorf and Weisenheim -- were forgotten. Anyone passing by in a hurry would never notice the pitiful little houses -- not even the bureaucrats. And so of course there was no one who wanted to incorporate the Siedlung with his own community, neither the mayor of Maxdorf nor the one from Weisenheim. They accepted their name, 'The Forgotten,' with dignity!

"No one longed for the War to end more than did these 1250 people. They all felt there would then be an improvement in their lot. The end of the War came, but without any improvement. Only this newspaper took the interest to publicize the conditions here, especially regarding the absence of any educational facilities. Today it can report a much happier state of affairs.

"Representatives of the government, schools and the public were invited to attend the inauguration of a brand-new schoolhouse. The mayor of Weisenheim marvelled at the work done by the courageous workers . . . Oberregierungsrat (Government Council) Hoffman thanked them for the government - the workers, Quakers, Frau Scherer, and all who were responsible - after a four-year lapse in getting schooling back on its feet. Even a school-feeding project has been established. The leaders of the Siedlung put some of their urgent needs before the government officials."

Recently a group in Portland contributed enough to enlarge the feeding program from 500 to 700 children.