

A M E R I C A N F R I E N D S S E R V I C E C O M M I T T E E

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FOREIGN SERVICE SECTION

News from Germany

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FROM THE FRENCH ZONE

A little less than a year ago, Hester Williams, an AFSC worker in Freiburg wrote to Philadelphia:

"This morning I went to the most beautiful Easter service I have ever heard. It was in the cathedral in Freiburg, and I stood for two hours tightly packed among a crowd intently listening to some of the world's great religious music. If I looked up, I could see pure Gothic arches, of pink stone, which have stood untouched for hundreds of years. If I looked around me, I could see the same Germans I see every day - hungry, ill-clothed, bitter about the present, and fearful of the future.

"During the service, the Archbishop made a short and moving sermon, and I remember especially with what feeling he spoke the phrase: 'Das Elend des deutschen Volks.'

"Afterwards, as the strains of Beethoven's mass flowed through the church, I thought how this contrast typified the difference between the culture of the Germany that once was and the depths to which her people have sunk and from which they see no way of raising themselves.

"Another contrast exists outside the cathedral - it stands completely unharmed in all its former beauty, and beside it lie blocks of ruins, shattered walls and caverns in the ground, streets still covered with rubble, some of them impassable. When you walk there, you find here and there a wooden cross saying that in this place this person or these people lost their lives and lie buried. Freiburg was severely bombed only once; the attack lasted twenty minutes, and in it between four and five thousand people are said to have died. Half the city was destroyed, and I have heard the horror of that night described more vividly than any other event in the war.

"Into this beautiful but desolate city we have come to bring what help we can against cold, hunger, and misery. Food, clothing, and transport are what we nominally have to offer, but merely by living here through the longest and coldest winter in many years, and being always ready to listen sympathetically, we have perhaps accomplished something else as well.

"We have two barracks, and to them a constant stream of every type and class of people come with requests of all kinds, sometimes merely for information, other times for clothing or transport, most often for food. These are the most critical months, for the potato supply, which is the main item in the diet here, has given out, and about half the families are without. Time after time men and women come in and beg us for a little food, no matter what, usually for their children. "We have nothing at home," they say. "We have used up our bread coupons, and there is nothing left." The stories are all different and all heartrending, and yet there is a certain deadening similarity about them all. A woman with four children at home, one of them tubercular, a young man with a sick wife and two small children, a woman with a blind husband and three children - all are without potatoes and for each the need is desperate, yet it is always the same.

"Our regular feeding program consists of a monthly package for all children under three and for nursing and pregnant mothers. Last month it was two pounds of Purina for all and a box of sardines for the mothers and the children between one and three. Next month more of our supplies will have arrived and the package will be larger. The women bring their own bags or containers and we pour the Purina into them. "Schon" or "Fabelhaft" they often say, and some of them stop before they leave to examine or taste it. Many bring bags that are too small, for they had no idea they would get so much. Cases I remember especially are a father with twins in his arms; a young mother who was so overcome by the quantity she received that she spilled it all over the table and it was fifteen minutes before she could gather her bags together; and a little boy whose mother was sick and who had a note from the Ernährungsamt saying he had cut her ration card to pieces. We asked him how old his little brother or sister was, but all he could answer was "Weiss nit" ("Nit" means "nicht" in this part of Baden).

"It takes some time to really understand the value food has here. A pound of Purina is not a pound of cereal but something to keep alive on for the next few days, something that has a value apart from anything monetary and that no amount of money could buy. Clothing comes second to food in importance. The clothing situation here is very simple - there is none to be bought, and no prospect of any. It would be easy to write indefinitely about children who stay at home in winter because they have no shoes, men without overcoats, old people without gloves. But there is the same struggle for almost every obvious necessity: families of six or seven live in two rooms, people spend the winter without blankets, even stamps are now unobtainable here and sometimes you have to stand in line half an hour to mail a letter."

At the approach of this Easter season we have this report from Huldah Randall in Ludwigshafen where the AFSC team distributes food packages to 19,727 children, and old and sick people:

"The food situation is still extremely critical. I have examined the normal consumer ration cards and the food they provide would be totally insufficient for healthy bodies even if the people actually were able to pick up all the rations, but month after month there is a large part of the card left unused because articles just haven't been available - for instance, up until this date (January 24) there has not been a speck of fat of any kind distributed. The card allows 200 grams of bread per day per person (about four thin slices): one fourth pound of sugar per month: fifty grams of meat per month, etc. Sometimes a family of three to five save a month's ration of meat for one meal.

"I visited a Volkskuche here in Ludwigshafen which feeds about 200 people at lunchtime and the dietician was the most careworn human being I've seen in a long time. She figured the people who eat there get about 150 calories per lunch - it is mostly potatoes, gravy coloring and seasoning. Each 'Customer' gives his rations of potatoes and whatever else goes to make up a soup, and depending, of course, on whether or not it is available. I can hardly understand the courage of anyone's trying to run a soup kitchen with as little as there is to run it on.

"I meet with a group of about 16 women each Wednesday who sew either for barrack (Towels, and napkins from sugar sacks or curtains out of burlap bags, or patching clothes for our distribution) or for poor families. I remember one afternoon one of the younger women with four children (her husband is still a prisoner of war in Russia) was in tears.

"She had had bean soup for the children - the only thing she had - and one of the children had an aversion to beans. The child began to cry and the mother forced her to eat them - whereupon the child became sick and vomited the whole thing. The

mother, of course, felt contrite but the reason she was crying was because she had nothing else for the child to eat and that meant that the poor little soul just had to go hungry.

"One of the other young women then spoke up and scolded the first woman for letting the children know she had nothing more. She said it was terrible psychologically for a child to know she had nothing more. She herself had often been in the same boat, but she simply told the children 'here it is, and nothing more until tonight' when she could give them their allotment of bread."

About clothing she reports:

"Shoes are our greatest need - we are compelled to send away every day numbers of children who have nothing on their little feet but rags - at best, wooden sandals tied on with strings. This morning I found one little fellow looking desperately for a piece of string - sometimes shoes are tied together in our shoe-room with fairly heavy cord, and he happily found a nice one. I wish you could have seen his beaming face. It's so impossible to give a really understandable picture of things here - bits of wool tucked in here and there by some thoughtful souls bring tears to the eyes of the mothers - one even found a spool of thread in the pocket of a coat and was simply beside herself with joy, one would think she'd found a million dollars.

"We distribute daily from 9 to 4:30 (more often 6 or 7) except Tuesdays and Thursdays when we distribute only mornings - for the afternoon of those two days must be used to open and replenish shelves. The distribution has really taken on quite a Gimbel look - we've had our good night watchman suspend two broomsticks from wires so that we can hang up on hangers our coats and dresses. He even put up a smaller rod to hang up mittens and gloves - and another one for jackets.

"The thing that has hit us with a bang is that clothing worn here is so different from the American variety. For instance, when they ask for a slip and we bring one of the rayon or silk variety they laugh gaily (or in derision) and say, "nein, bittle, etwas warmes" - no thank you, something warm. Well we just don't have it. Also underwear - our "snuggies" are not snug enough for the German women - they want our old knit-flannel variety. And our children's winter panties are sniffed at dubiously and accepted only after we convince them that that's what the American children wear, and that it's all we have.

"However, on the other side, they are simply delighted with the dresses, coats, skirts, sweaters, etc. The children and even adults squeal with delight when we bring out a little assortment of things and the choice of only one out of the lot is very very difficult - and one has to remind them gently that there are lots more people waiting and anxious to go home. Today we had such fun bringing out those wonderful, new, khaki sweaters for men - the heavy variety with rolled collars. So many men ask for "pull-overs" - and there's not one that didn't hug him and say how marvellous they were. It's such a grand substitute for suit jackets, which so many men ask for and of which we have all too few - also men's trousers. Here also the long, 66 percent. wool, men's drawers fill in beautifully when trousers are asked for. Something new always brings an immediate happy response, for they haven't seen anything new for some years.

"Joan Murphy has practically taken over clothing, which will leave me free to begin pecking at the sewing room and shoe-repair shop which are such absolutely necessary adjuncts to any clothing department. She is at the moment making an inventory on our remaining bales of clothing and she and I both hope bales will keep coming - the more the merrier. Every little piece finds its way on some happy little

child or adult - when we unpack the bales we can almost see the very person the various articles are destined to reach. We do appreciate all the lovely things and the care and thought that we feel goes into each bale."

In Koblenz where our teams distribute food packages to 3,300 adolescents; the official number of calories for December were: persons of 18 and over, 1375; 10 - 18, 1481; 1 - 3, 1430; and 3 - 6, 1331.

However, the report continues, much of the increase is accounted for by the fact that a long delayed sugar ration was finally received during the month; this amounted to 1150 grams (about 2½ pounds) for persons above 18, and slightly more for children. The total ration of fats was only 300 grams for the month; 600 grams, meat; cereals, 500 grams; bread, 6200 grams; and potatoes, 15000 grams. There was no milk whatever for anyone over 6 years of age.

The December clothing report says:

"The demand for men's heavy clothing is almost unlimited and we are finding these requests particularly hard to fill.

"Our shoe supply too is rapidly dwindling and we look hopefully toward replenishment. Children's shoes have been out for some time, and these are among those in greatest demand. But men's shoes are also almost depleted.

"Among our clients there are at times some particularly pathetic cases of returned war prisoners. We had one such case shortly before Christmas. The man had asked for an overcoat, but when it was found that he had practically no other clothing, he was outfitted with underwear, socks and shoes as well. The Red Cross brings us returned prisoners from time to time also, some of whom are in the most deplorable condition as far as clothing is concerned. At such times we waive our rule which makes it necessary for an applicant to file his request with the relief agencies so his case may be investigated before clothing is given."

Beside food and clothing distribution, a group of young people hold discussion meetings every Saturday night in the barracks. English and French classes are held, and part of the Friday Evening Discussion Groups has a wood-cutting project which cuts and delivers wood to old people.

The December report tells of their Christmas celebration:

"The major social event was the Christmas party given by the Friday Evening Discussion Group. The young people had decided some time ago that they would have a Christmas celebration for a small number of needy children and had been meeting to make toys, sew and knit. The party was given on Sunday afternoon, December 21 in our big room which had been decorated profusely with small Christmas trees and branches, attractive lamp shades, etc. Bill Weber reports on the party as follows:

"It had been interesting, and those of us who had met every Wednesday and Friday evening probably had more fun building the toys, knitting and sewing dresses, slippers, and other items, than the twenty-five or so children who received them on the Sunday before Christmas. Let's go back a couple of months and see what had taken place. Some of the members of the Friday Night Discussion Group felt that it would be nice to plan a small Christmas party for children who otherwise might not have an opportunity to have a real Christmas. So we decided that each Wednesday evening all who were interested should meet here in the barracks and we would do what we could making toys and clothing. Sometimes there were as few as three and at other times as many as twelve or more. We used wood from the peanut butter and other food boxes to make

trucks, wheel barrows, barns, etc. The girls took certain outdated clothes which we could not give in the normal clothing distribution and made lovely little sweaters, dresses, trousers and slippers. One of the girls who is a wonderful artist made some lovely houses of cardboard and painted and decorated them. Each house had its little green fence with its lawn, and Hansel and Gretel standing in front of it, the old witch scolding them from the open doorway.

"The children with their mothers were invited to come on December 21st. Saturday and Sunday afternoon had been spent decorating and getting things in order. At 5 o'clock most of the children were here and shortly after five the program began with a Christmas carol. After that one of the group showed a few slides depicting fairy tales. Another song was followed by the reading of a story by one of the girls. Then came the play of the Christmas story, which I felt was very nicely done. The end of the room had been fixed with four or five fir trees to look like a wooded hill. One of the boys had fixed an artificial fire with a light bulb, red paper, and fire wood, which looked quite realistic. The shepherds came in, looking more like shepherds than we often picture them, in old, shaggy fur coats, tired and cold. They sat around the fire warming themselves, discussing the weather, when there appeared an angel dressed in white, singing the song of Jesus' birth and of peace on earth, good will to men. The shepherds stared with wonder upon the angel and after he had gone they said to themselves, as they put out the fire, 'What is this thing which we have heard? Let us go unto Bethlehem and see.'

"Then the scene changed and Joseph was seen standing beside Mary as she knelt beside the crib. Mary was saying, 'Joseph, what are we going to do? We do not have enough food and clothing for our child.'"