

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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A VISIT TO THE EASTERN ZONE

This winter we have been participating in a food distribution in the Soviet Zone, as one of the several agencies carrying on this work through the International Red Cross. This project was given a high priority by our workers in Germany who felt, from the reports available, that the needs were very great.

At the invitation of the Commission for Distribution of Foreign Gifts, and through the courtesy of the Soviet officials, Alice Shaffer, the AFSC representative in Berlin, has recently made a three-day visit in the Soviet Zone where she was able to see the distribution centers. She and Mr. Eckert, a Swiss representative of the International Red Cross, were accompanied on the tour by Mr. Rentmeister, the Commission representative.

Following are some of the highlights from her report of this trip:

"As a representative of the American Friends Service Committee, permission was granted by the Soviet authorities for myself to take part in a tour made by the IRC to observe the organization for and distribution of foreign gifts in the Russian Zone.

"The Red Cross were especially anxious that an opportunity be given to hear first-hand reports on the use of Quaker supplies.

"The members of the Red Cross were also interested that I should get a picture of the way in which local committees determine the projects and make preparations for them, the relationship between the Land and Kreis Committees and the control of the distribution by more than one group, also some of their more recent programs of child care through children's villages where the children live in small groups of a family character. With this in mind, the trip included visits to a children's village, children's rest home, hospitals - especially wards for children with tuberculosis, children's clinics, diabetic clinics, child feeding projects, kindergartens, sewing rooms, warming centers and shoe repair shops. At various stops, contacts were had with officials of the Volkssolidaritaet, church groups, women's groups, volunteers from the community and with the recipients of the food, clothing, cod liver oil and insulin.

"It was explained that the Volkssolidaritaet is a movement throughout the Soviet Zone by which the people are attempting to help themselves through united action in many different fields. It is said to have begun when, after the bombing of Dresden, people of Mecklenburg and Brandenburg sent a shipload of supplies to help the people of Dresden, and other similar projects started.

"Now, systemically organized, some of the objectives are to build a given number of new houses, collect scrap material to be turned in to the factories, raising and canning vegetables and fruits to be used for hospitals, feeding programs, etc., volunteer service of all kinds, assisting with the establishment of kindergartens, children's

villages, warming centers, shoe repair shops, sewing rooms, collections of food, clothing and money, swap shops, work with youth groups, etc.

"In so far as the distribution of International Red Cross supplies are concerned, the community as a whole participates. A special Committee for the distribution of foreign gifts is set up and is composed of representatives from the Public Health and Welfare Offices, Youth Offices, political parties, church groups, women's organizations, trade unions, etc.

"The Volkssolidaritaet aids persons who do not fall within the groups eligible to assistance through public welfare. It coordinates all the work, administers the program with a minimum of paid and maximum of volunteer services. It sets up committees on the Land-Kreis and Stadt and Ort level. Their goal is to help themselves through their own efforts. They take seriously their duty to use foreign gifts in accordance with general principles of the International Red Cross and contributing agencies. Much depends, as it always does, on the individuals who are working at the various jobs and what they personally bring to it. In the contacts during the trip, one met the variety of representatives that might be found in any organization - the over-enthusiastic, the objective, open-minded person, those with much vision, those with narrow concepts, those eager to learn, others afraid lest they make a mistake."

#### Alt Rehse Children's Village

"Our first stop was this village located in a beautiful section of Mecklenburg. One large house - now used for Administrative Headquarters, school and work shops - used to be the property of a baron. In the Nazi time it was taken away and several attractive brick houses were built which were used as a training center for doctors. Someone stated that it was here that the doctors received special training regarding the selection of the 'unfit' according to Nazi theories.

"Today 60 children, expellees from Poland and thought to be orphans, live there in the three remaining houses. With a mother in charge of these children, they live together in groups of 6 to 10. Typical arrangement was to see one family on first floor and another living upstairs. There was a living room, dining room, separate bedrooms for girls and boys, bathroom and hall. These rooms were furnished by different communities. Brothers and sisters are kept together by the same mother. The administrator and his wife have contact with all the mothers, have a special attractive room for them at the main building where they meet weekly for discussion of their work with the children. Food is prepared centrally, with washing and sewing done outside the family houses. The children have only two hours of school daily and it seems they have had great difficulty in securing teachers and in finding proper persons to serve as house mothers. Those in charge recognize that the children need the presence of a father substitute, too, but with so many men killed in the war or still away as prisoners, they have been unable to secure house parents. The children ranging from 4 - 12 years are to consider this as their home always. When they are older and leave to work or are married and living away, they plan to have a special guest house so they can return for visits just as any child would return home.

"Letters are frequently received from parents, relatives and friends, trying to find lost children. In the last weeks, several of the children left the village after establishing this relationship and they are being reunited with relatives in the West Zone.

"The children in the various families were engaged in a variety of activities. Some were eating supper, another group was celebrating a birthday, others were doing homework. The director said these children are starved for love. One noticed how they came even to strangers and wanted to put their arms about one and to be loved.

"Eventually when other houses are completed, a total of 250 expellees (children) will live in this village. It is hoped that they will be included when the next child feeding program is organized in the Zone. The children looked very pale and were, for the most part, quite thin. They were very poorly dressed with thin clothing and wooden sandals. They seemed to have special trouble keeping their stockings up as they have no elastic for garters. One little boy, aged 10, wanted to put his arms around me every time he saw me but he had to constantly hold on to his stockings which did not meet his very worn out trousers. Finally he put one arm around me and with the other hand he tugged at both stockings to keep them up. The Volkssolidaritaet plans to care for such children in family groups through children's villages. Having lost their families, gone through so many hardships prematurely, with great insecurity because of it all, they believe that the old form of children's homes no longer meets the needs of children today.

#### Hospital in Neustrelitz

"In the summer of 1948, the hospital of Neustrelitz received 4800 units insulin out of a total of 316,000 units given to Land Mecklenburg which together with Land Brandenburg and Land Thuringen received 916,000 units from a contribution of American Quakers. This distribution was based on medical findings indicating areas of greatest need for insulin. At the time of the visit, all the insulin had been distributed and the Head Doctor reported that they now have access to very little insulin and that they have some patients in coma for the lack of it.

"Both at the hospital and the Carolinerstift, special attention was paid to the way in which the reports were kept, the amount of foreign contributions on hand in the way of medical supplies, to what extent they had shared these with other institutions, or had received supplies which they had not used.

"A visit was paid to a Lutheran pastor who is Chairman of the Volkssolidaritaet Committee for foreign gifts. He said he wished personally to express his thanks to the Quakers for their help. I explained that it is not just the material gift we would share but through it a sense of fellowship with others because of our conviction that peace must be based on mutual understanding.

#### Neuruppin

"Around 4 o'clock on the second day of the trip, we arrived at the Headquarters of the Volkssolidaritaet in Neuruppin where they had a number of self-help projects and a kindergarten. It rather resembled a neighborhood center.

"A visit was made unannounced to the large hospital where whole buildings are set aside for men, women and children with tuberculosis. We visited the children since they had received extra food through the Quakers. Wards were filled with small, very pale-faced youngsters, all of whom seemed to have such deep, dark circles around their eyes. They looked listless but did take notice that visitors were there. In one room a bunch of little girls seemed more lively as they had been under care for a longer time. The doctor asked them how they liked the figs which had been sent and from where they came. The children said: 'America' but knowing that the figs had come from the Turkish Red Cross, I said: 'The figs came from Turkey but I have come from America to see you.' Almost in a body the girls sat up in bed to take a look and the doctor said: 'They can't really believe that they are seeing an American.' I said a word to them and when I passed their beds as we went through the room, they stuck out their hands to say good bye. The rate of tuberculosis among children is especially high in this area.

### Community Fest

"This being 'Rosenmontag', a community costume ball was taking place in a large hall in the center of the town. We were invited to attend and went there about 10:00 p.m. just as Prince Carnival arrived in the presence of 1500 persons, almost all in costume and extremely clever ones. A group of persons whom we had met in the course of the visits were waiting for us and they seemed anxious to bring their friends to meet us. The Chief of police, the county judge, doctors and others came up to greet us. Dancing was in full swing and there was a very lively atmosphere with two orchestras taking turns playing in the large hall and two others in smaller halls. In the big auditorium many Soviet soldiers were sprinkled throughout the crowd in the balcony who were watching the performance. They did not take part in any way. People were eager to talk and while dancing, they asked questions in rapid fire about America.

### Child Feeding in Guben

"After a five hour drive from Neuruppin to Guben, we arrived at the Headquarters of the Volkssolidaritaet. A Quaker doctor who was in charge of the physical examination of all the children for the Child Feeding Program, had been notified of our coming and they sent for her at once. Special care was taken to have the complete operation of the child feeding explained from the time the notice was received that a gift was available. Guben received oatmeal, milk and sugar from the American Quakers. They reviewed the process of warehousing, of giving out the daily rations to kitchens, of transporting the cooked soup to the feeding centers where it reached the children. In addition to the actual food items contributed by the foreign contribution, the Volkssolidaritaet must secure storage space, transport, kitchens, pay for a limited amount of help and organize volunteer services. The process goes further as the teachers in the school help the children to write 'thank-you' letters and finally these, together with pictures, clippings, etc. are placed in an album to be given to the foreign contributors. The pictures are especially nice and interpret well the feeding program. It is to be hoped that in the future there might be a closer contact between those receiving and those contributing, the kind of contact which need not necessarily end when the material contributions end.

"The feeding program in Guben began on October 18, 1948, and ended around February 15. 3500 children in the four schools in Guben were examined and the neediest selected. It was possible to cover all children from 3- 14 years who were classified as needing special food. In conversation with the two doctors, they said it is difficult to be absolutely sure that one is just because of the differences in the social situation of the families, but in so far as it was humanly possible children in greatest need were selected.

"Guben lies just on the Polish border. Where 8,000 persons formerly lived, there are today 28,000 in Guben. People are living on top of one another in unbelievable fashion with ten persons in a single room, often representing two or three different family units. As we later looked at a warming center which was packed with old persons, men and women, they reported that in this way the people find a little escape from overcrowded rooms. The atmosphere in the center was friendly with the men busy reading, playing cards or chess and the women knitting, darning stockings, or repairing clothing.

"To sum up, I would say that the contributions are reaching the persons for whom they are intended and the people know that some of the gifts come from the Quakers in America. This project presents an opportunity to demonstrate our basic faith in the fundamental brotherhood of man and our hope to encourage and strengthen friendly relations between peoples regardless of boundaries and barriers. Their

need is great, and there is probably no more significant and worthwhile piece of work anywhere in Europe today than this "gesture of help and friendship from the West" brought to these people in the Soviet Zone of Germany."

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We are in the process of revising our mailing lists and would like to continue to send you reports of the work in Germany. If you feel you would like to remain on the mailing list, please write to the German Desk, American Friends Service Committee, 20 South 12th Street, Philadelphia 7, Pa. If we do not hear from you, we will assume that you no longer wish to remain on the list.

(The above paragraph applies only to persons who are receiving the News from Germany directly from the American Friends Service Committee, not to those who receive it through another organization.)