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AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE

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FOREIGN SERVICE SECTION

News from Germany

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The A.F.S.C. recently published a pamphlet "Twelve Million Refugees in Today's Germany" giving a general picture of the refugee situation in Germany. We felt that complementarily to this, it would now be appropriate to devote this issue of "News from Germany" to a more detailed and intimate account as seen by our own workers and to do a resumé of the work we are now doing among refugees. The following excerpts are from the reports of the Mobile Unit working in the Oldenburg area and from our Refugee Advisor in Germany.

The Program of the AFSC for German Refugees in Western Germany (from our Refugee Advisor)

"Ever since AFSC personnel in Germany came face to face with the problem of the growing millions of German Refugees, the Committee has been working with all the means at its disposal to help to take palliative measures and to find fundamental solutions. Supposedly one might call the 'means at our disposal' our deeply concerned workers, our material resources in terms of supplies, and the influence that we can bring to bear in all spheres to make the problem known and to press for humanitarian measures and economic, political and social solutions. For many months our personnel in Germany have been gathering data and publicity material; working on self-help projects in Refugee Camps in conjunction with other British and American Voluntary agencies; and trying to work out and to disseminate ideas for broad solutions to German local and national authorities, occupation officials and other interested persons. In Philadelphia, our staff has welded ideas for solution into a firm policy and has made efforts to interpret the problem and the need for action to the American Public, to the government and to the United Nations. In London, broadcasts are being arranged and other interpretive measures taken.

"All of our Centers in Germany have some kind of program for Refugees. The foundation stones of these programs are reconciliation with local natives and rehabilitation through self-help projects. More often than not, the first contact refugees have been given with natives is through the AFSC. They have been included in sewing groups, shoe repairing facilities, kindergartens and small, part-time employment projects. Material aid has been given from clothing and food supplies. Deep concern is felt to make the refugee feel included and wanted. In Berlin our staff worked with the Refugees in a nearby barrack to repair the roof and a wonderful co-operative spirit developed. Of the five AFSC Work Camps in Germany in the summer of 1949, two were fully concerned with Refugee Projects, and two of the others included Refugees.

"In spite of the hugeness of the problem and the human suffering inherent in it, there are many bright areas and positive factors. It should not be overlooked that the German authorities have done a magnificent emergency job of housing, clothing and feeding the Refugees. Over 5% are still in poor and isolated barrack camps and other hundreds of thousands are billeted in a miserable fashion but they are housed -- and fed, and supplied with money if they are unemployed, even though the standards of Public Assistance -- for Refugees, as for all recipients, are necessarily grossly inadequate, i.e., the maximum allotment is 105 DMarks a month (about \$30.60). Sometimes this must support a family of six or more.

"Although the Refugees long for and demand the return of Silesia, Pomerania, and East Prussia and all the political parties in the German Central Government have made requests for a revision of the agreements, this is not likely because of political exigencies. Nor is it likely that any large proportion of the refugees will emigrate. Germany could spare some women in the 25-35 age groups where the proportion is 155 women to 100 men, and large numbers of the Volksdeutsche farm families, but she needs her skilled workmen and her young people.

"Thus the only realistic answer to the Refugee problem is assimilation. For this, the legislative groundwork has been laid by Laender Laws and by a Directive from the Joint Chiefs of Staff in July 1947. Refugees legally enjoy the same rights and privileges as natives. But the practical necessities for absorption are employment and housing. These are interdependent and depend upon German initiative and financial help from abroad. Germany has spent and is spending millions of Marks on housing, and on training and retraining for industry. However, foreign investments and international capital are needed for credits to start up light industries for Refugees in present rural areas; for housing in these areas and in already industrialized areas; for improved transport facilities and for the social institutions that must accompany housing.

"Much can be done by Germany, especially by the Central Government, to organize the Country internally for an all-out effort of assimilation, but the responsibility for this should and realistically has to be shared -- both by the occupation Nations, and on a larger international scale.

"The Service Committee in its humanitarian concern for millions of uprooted people and because of the fear that the unsolved problem of the German Refugees will offer fertile ground for the seeds of political unrest and war is seeking to do what it can to lessen the suffering, to reconcile opposing viewpoints, and to promote understanding and the realization of the need for international action."

Oldenburg Mobile Unit: Our workers in the Mobile Unit in Oldenburg are becoming intensely concerned about the fate of this group because of their daily work in the camps. Here are some of their comments:

"During the bitterly cold winter of 1945-46, occasional articles reached the press of the outside world about the German refugees from the East who were pouring into Germany by the thousands. An English weekly even had pictures of one gruesome journey when thirty people died from cold and privation. At that time they were only part of the amorphous mass of misery, chaos, and destruction that was Germany.

"Today, three years later, one reads in the foreign press that the face of Germany has been utterly transformed, but scarcely an echo reaches the outside world that these same refugees are still in their emergency living quarters, in their huts and barracks. For most people they are only statistics -- figures, too astronomical to grasp -- a few paragraphs in the Potsdam agreement.

"If you know a family in a refugee camp you don't view them in the cold light of a statistical report; they are people with whom you work and talk and play. They are your friends. The sad part is that we are among the few who come to know them. Even in Germany many people do not know of the existence of the refugee camps. The barracks are usually tucked away in a wood, or, if in a town, then the refugees are concentrated a thousand strong in the old military quarters.

"Of course, all Germans are aware of the refugee problem to a certain extent. They have refugees billeted on them, or they escape this indignity by paying an extra

housing tax; they realize that the refugee comes into direct competition for work and they are quite aware that they are supporting the great body of unemployed, mostly from the refugee group, with their taxes. The division between the local population and the unemployed refugee becomes increasingly sharper, for the wage earner now has real purchasing power, and the plight of the refugee on his meagre relief money becomes even more desperate. Combined circumstances, the vicious circle of lack of housing and unemployment have prevented their being integrated either socially or economically into the existing order. The refugees have watched the outside change, but the three years have brought little change for them except to crystalize their position as outcasts, producing in its wake the feeling of despair and bitterness which sees the only solution in war. A new war which they naively believe would miraculously restore their homes and land.

"We are working in Oldenburg, Lower Saxony. It is an egg-shaped piece of land just west of Bremen with the small end touching the North Sea. It is approximately 100 miles long, and 50 miles wide. Before the war it was a wealthy farming district. A great proportion of the land had been won from the water; in the south it was the swamps that had to be conquered with ditches and in the north, the sea, with dikes. Most of the work had been done generations ago, and the farmers living in the area led good solid comfortable lives. It may be the salt air; it may be the flat unbroken monotony of the landscape; it may be an inheritance from the forefathers whose lives were constant struggles with the water; or there may be no explanation at all-- but the natives are cold and reserved and mistrustful of any foreign intervention.

"Into this section, as in others, the refugees poured in '45 and '46. Many were billeted with farmers, some in village homes, many more were placed in camps. But little was done to help them. The people grew into themselves, became embittered and disillusioned. Hitler had spoken of One Volk as an ideal that had been realized, but the refugees soon found that they were not considered a part of this Volk. Often they were treated with an open hate or at best, were coldly ignored. Most of the local people resented these 'foreigners' in their midst. In the three years the refugees have done nothing but sit and wait. 'Vegetate' is the word they use. A few people moved out of the camps on finding work in other parts of Germany, a few men came back from Russia, but otherwise there has been little change. Now, for the first time, a rather large number of people are moving out to the French Zone.

"An English Quaker team was in Oldenburg until April 1948 and worked in the whole of the Land, distributing what supplies of food and clothing they had at hand. It was a process of spreading very thin, for the west Germans in the cities were often as badly off as the refugees -- then there were thousands of refugees living in the towns and villages as well as with the farmers and in the camps. The team had a special concern for the barrack camps. This was turned into action in Philadelphia, where it was decided to send a small mobile unit to Oldenburg to work in some of these. We came in January and found, to our great surprise, that there were about 100 of them in the Land. Most of them were small, individual barracks with 20-30 people living in them. There were twenty-three large enough to justify concentrated work and we visited each of them. Fifteen of these were selected as being in the most need of help. Our criteria for this selection were degree of unemployment, distance from the towns, physical conditions of the camps and relations of the camp people with the indigenous population. The conditions were more or less the same in all fifteen. There was almost complete unemployment; there was a degree of isolation that seems strange in a country as densely populated as Germany, with up to one and a half hours' walk to a store. The camps were physically near collapse and an extremely bad feeling between the expellees and the natives reigned unchallenged.

"We are concentrating in the isolated camps for there are none of the possibilities for work or recreation or social gatherings that all people living in towns and villages have to a certain extent. And although we realize that many individual refugee families living with farmers are considerably worse off than barrack people, any form of concentrated work with people scattered over many square miles would be impossible. Refugees living near the camps are of course included in any social activity we may initiate; they use the sewing rooms and our lending library.

"When we started work in the camps we met an unexpected opposition. The people had been overwhelmed by group after group of well-dressed Germans and foreigners who came into the camps, remarked about the conditions, then went away, and were never seen again. We cannot say that the reports and surveys they probably made did not help the refugees in general, but the expellees living in the camps saw no results whatsoever.

"In some of the camps, after they saw that we were actually planning to do something, a contact was made with the people rapidly. We had seven hundred German books that we broke into nine lots, and thought that we would be able to start a sort of lending library in the camps. In some places they welcomed this, and we were able to find someone in the camp to take over the responsibility for the books. He would lend them and take them back in. The response has been extremely gratifying. In a camp of 250 people, the average has been close to 300 man-books a month -- and this from one box of 70-80 books. We doubt if there are many libraries in the States that equal this record. In other places there was a strong feeling against the books for they seemed to think we wanted to propagandize them when they wanted and needed food and clothing more than anything else.

"The books were the first and for a long time the only supplies we had, but the delay in the arrival of the others was valuable in that it gave us time to meet the county officials, the representatives of the local welfare agencies, the pastors and priests and everyone who had anything to do with the camp. The attitude of the officials varied widely. In some places they were most cooperative. In other places the county directors and the burgermeisters were openly hostile. They considered the refugees worthless and told us that we would be wasting our time and money in trying to help them.

"We received a number of bales of cloth donated by the different textile companies in America; all of it is good and some of it of an excellent quality.

"The problem of the distribution of cloth -- or, more properly, the decision of who was to be given the opportunity to make clothing first -- was not as difficult to solve as we had thought. We had the camp leader pick out a small committee of people who had the trust of those in the camp, or we had the barracks come together separately and elect a representative to the committee which would make all decisions concerning things we would bring in. Although there are the inevitable few who feel themselves victimized, the distributions are moving peacefully in all the camps and the decisions have been generally accepted as wise and fair.

"As is often the case, the people who were able to do the work for others were the most happy. They were all grateful for the gift of cloth from America and the loan of a sewing machine but what we had done was much more than a pure relief distribution -- it was an opportunity to do something for themselves and for others.

"We talked with the people, tried to get to know them and one day brought a group of young women from a domestic science school in Oldenburg into one of the camps. They sang and danced and put on skits and the whole camp played with them. It was quite

a surprise for the camp people. They had found that they could work together in the sewing room, now they began to think that they could do other things together. With only a few suggestions from us they were able to get singing groups started. We talked with them about youth groups, about women's groups, kindergartens, and hand-work groups and the response was equally good.

"In some camps it took a long time to reach this stage. It seems that a few of the counties have used the camps as dumping grounds for all the undesirable elements of the local and refugee populations. No one is disturbed except the other people in the camp. This policy has made it extremely difficult for the people who were put into the camps for the sole reason that they were refugees and had to be put some place. This is true to some extent of all camps, but in one of them it was the rule. When we came into the camp, about a third of the people were so-called asocial elements, and the entire body of people seemed to be sick through the infection of these members. They were hostile and distrustful. Our first visits were greeted with unfriendliness and a resistance to suggestions. No one had tried to work with them or help them in the past. The poverty of their lives and the hopelessness of the situation had killed any natural inclination towards cooperation. Almost everything we said was twisted and misinterpreted. Even the sewing rooms and shoe repair shops sounded strange and they thought that if we were to do any good we should bring in finished items. Besides, they said, no one in the camp could sew or repair shoes. They considered the offer of a lending library as almost insolent -- bringing in books when they needed butter and meat!

"In face of such antagonism and poverty, talk of cooperation with each other and with us, talk of brotherly love and reconciliation seemed almost weak and effeminate. The machines and sewing materials came but we knew that it would be impossible to start in the camp until there had been at least a measure of improvement in the feeling. We visited everyone connected with the camp, talked with the Gemeinde officials about their policy toward the camp -- with little success.

"At the same time, we made regular visits to the camp, trying to get to know some of the people. We learned to know the quieter and more reliable people in the camp. We began laying the plans for the sewing room. A committee was chosen. We found women to take over the leadership of the room. We found two who could do all of the cutting. In all camps they are very careful about the cutting -- they will have no cloth. We then said that we would bring one machine into the camp and one of the few women who had a sewing machine offered to leave hers in the sewing room from Monday through Friday. Then any women who wanted to could make arrangements with the two leaders and come in and sew; others would do hand work concurrently. The arrangement seemed satisfactory and we started. There has been some difficulty, but as a whole we are quite satisfied. The people grew more and more friendly and one day we mentioned the books again. The almost unbelievable change in attitude was one of the most gratifying things we have seen. They told us that they had not had an opportunity to read a book for three years; all of their books were lost in the east and none were available in the neighboring village.

"No one was more surprised at the developments in the camp than the Gemeinde officials. There are at least signs of a change in policy toward the camp. They gave us a firm promise that no more of the asocial elements will be put into the camp and, further, the worst troublemakers would be taken out of the camp whenever possible.

"We have had a few more material contributions to make in the camps. We got some shoemaker tools and quite a supply of leather and shoe soles and heels and have been able to set up a shoemaker's shop in every camp. It varies greatly from place to place. Several of them have trained shoemakers who have the entire responsibility

and who do all of the work for the people in the camp. Others have no 'Meister' but do have several who have learned the basic principles in prison camps and who take turns doing the work for the camp people. One has a refugee living outside of the camp come in to do the work. All of the arrangements are working satisfactorily and the work that has been done has been of excellent quality.

"Then we received large quantities of soap and have been able to start washrooms in several of the camps, that is, in all of those where there were some facilities that could be turned into a washroom. Then we delivered the soap to the people. Distributions are also being carried on where there are no washrooms. While actual laundry rooms have not met with the enthusiasm of some of the other projects, the people have always been thrilled with the soap. They have so pitifully few clothes that it is necessary to wash every day and often it is much easier to boil a shirt or two in the room than to start a fire and heat a large tub of water in the washroom. We have been unable to persuade them to do their washing together. At first we thought that it would be desirable for it would be considerably easier but the opposition was again in the fierce protection of their own property and the refusal to let others take any responsibility for it.

"A not unimportant part of the work has been in getting to know the people individually and helping them with their problems, supplying information, getting the authorities to help where they should. We have been instrumental in getting the county to repair one of the large rooms to serve as a common room, in getting employment information, in having several sick and undernourished children taken into rest homes -- work that the German social agencies should be doing but, through lack of funds and personnel and transport, can't. It is most difficult for us to ask the county which supports the camp to put a large sum of money into its repair for the camps should be torn down soon. Unfortunately, there is little chance that the living space situation will improve sufficiently to warrant the removal of any but the most decrepit camps in the next five years.

"We often find people like one of the Gemeinde Directors who asked us rather scornfully if we really thought that the people in the camps had lived any better in Silesia. It is generally true that the most ambitious and enterprising of the younger people have, by some means or another, managed to find places to live outside of the camp -- but not always. It has been almost impossible for those with large families to get out of a camp once they are placed in it. The only hope for the old people is the even less attractive old people's home. We've met some exceptional people in the camps -- people who've known different and better lives but have taken this change calmly and with little bitterness. There's Herr Otto, for instance. Herr Otto was an architect in Neisse. He had a firm and a successful business until he retired in 1940. Five years later the Poles came in, confiscated his business, took his property, put him on a train and he was dumped in Oldenburg. He was 72 at the time and is physically unable to start another life. But he's still proud. He has found scraps of wood and made comfortable furniture. He's living with his sister who is only slightly younger and together they've turned their small room into an almost attractive little hole. For a hole is what it is and what it will remain, no matter what they do to it.

"Or there's Frau Glinka. Frau Glinka is a cheerful, red-cheeked Hausfrau -- still quite buxom in spite of ceaseless hard work and a sparse diet. Her husband is a war invalid and his physical weakness has sapped much of his self-confidence and initiative. In fact, Herr Glinka now works as the camp shoemaker and it has obviously made a tremendous difference to be doing his own work again. They have two tiny rooms, one serving as living room, kitchen, workshop, and bedroom for the daughter. The two elder children are working on nearby farms and have their board and keep and

a few marks pocket money. The income for the father and mother and younger daughter who lives in the camp is 16DM - \$4.80 a week. Frau Glinka supplements this in the harvest season by casual work with the farmers - earning 2.50 DM (75¢), for a day's work picking peas or shocking grain. She had been rejoicing that every day's work brought her nearer to buying a bath tub and when she learned that the town authorities were to supply some for the camp, she was overjoyed, for it meant that the money could be used towards a sheet -- item two in urgency in her household budget. When she comes back from the field at night or in whatever spare time she has, she is always busy with a sweater or a pair of socks for someone in the camp.

"There are many in the camps who are so obsessed with the past and the fate that has overtaken them that it cripples any initiative to make the present tolerable. Frau Glinka, although she often thinks wistfully of her home in Pomerania, realizes that the present difficulties aren't solved by indulging in fruitless regrets. She has made the tiny rooms as friendly and homelike as possible. The fuel for the winter heat and wood is stacked neatly in the corridor of the barrack. The tiny strip of garden in front of the house is gay with flowers. 'American flowers' they proudly announce, for the seeds were given to the Service Committee by the children of America. There is a tidy and pleasant air about the whole barrack which in no small measure is due to Frau Glinka's mothering eye. The children, although they are denied in so many respects a normal life, are at least growing up in a happy family atmosphere instead of being tortured by regrets inculcated by the parents.

"For sheer 'non-functional' joy little we have done in the camps has had the reception of the English lessons. The parents had often spoken of the opportunities the children were missing compared with those in the towns, quoting English as one of the items, and we've been able to have a class for both children and parents. For the children it is one lesson of the week when they are not with 70 other children in a room with a distracted teacher having to cope with four classes simultaneously. Freedom of self-expression hardly makes much sense under such conditions but for an hour a week they are able to play games, sing and laugh and even learn a little English. In the second class are the adults, the women who snatch an hour from the eternal mending and patching, the men who come in tired from the fields or from the ceaseless search for work. They are from widely varied parts of Germany and even beyond, East Prussia, Silesia, Dresden, Lithuania, and Jugoslavia. Several were apprehensive; 'learning' for them bore an underlying idea of tyranny. But there is no academic flavor to these classes and so we were all laughing together over the pictures in the Saturday Evening Post, stringing together a few simple sentences. Some are complete beginners, others have a little rusty school English and one man demonstrates proudly (in shattering American!) the phrases he 'learnt' in his prisoner-of-war days. Through such communal activity they have come to know each other for the first time, they have remembered that there is still a world beyond the confines of the camp. We are hoping to find a group, perhaps in England, who would write to them, send magazines, and give life to the contact.

"Time and time again people have come to us and told us that their lives have been completely changed since we had been going into the camp. We haven't done much more than show them in a few practical ways that there are people who care for them as human beings and brothers and then have shown them a few ways they could work together. They themselves have carried on the work."