

AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE

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REFUGEE SERVICES PROGRAM -- OLDENBURG, GERMANY

Three months ago Herman Rutiger sat in a dingy, drafty, cramped barrack room in a refugee camp in Oldenburg, Germany, huddled over a tiny stove which did its feeble best to bring some cheer into the neat but grim room. The wretched camp had been the family's home since early 1946 when they came from Silesia, deported as refugees under the Potsdam Agreement which brought nine million uprooted people to Western Germany.

Herr Rutiger's shoulders slumped, his chin rested in his hands. His face was lined and worn, although he is only 46. He was a picture of woe combined with indecision. Lethargy and fear, bred of seven years of camp life with its idleness and dole, struggled with a fragile dubious hope. He seemed a perfect example of someone socially and economically done for.

Today, Herr Rutiger is an energetic worker in a macaroni factory near Duisburg. His oldest son has an apprenticeship. Herr Rutiger, his tiny wife and their four children are snug in a new clean apartment. Hopefulness and industry characterize the whole family.

A Before and After Story - Between these two pictures lies the story of one of the small refugee services of the American Friends Service Committee in five of the numerous refugee camps in Land Oldenburg. In these five camps live about 1,100 refugees. The total refugee population of the District is approximately 175,220. Eight years after the end of the war, 400,000 refugees are still in camps, or in emergency housing; many are Potsdam Agreement refugees, others are newcomers from the East Zone. West Germany, which gives the refugee citizenship and full legal rights, has handled the staggering job of integrating more than two-thirds of the original nine million.

Ever since 1946 Friends have been working among the refugees in the Land Oldenburg camps, first bringing material relief, then starting youth groups, kindergartens, sewing rooms, and other activities to stir the individual's sense of his own worth and to remind him, in his physical and spiritual isolation, that somebody cares about him. As the years have gone by, some refugees have managed to get jobs through almost superhuman effort and thus to leave the camps. The remaining population has many competent employable persons, but it is predominantly the over-40 age group, untrained youths, very young children and the handicapped. To bring the employable, and their dependents, out of this situation now requires individual leading by the hand.

This is the task the Committee has undertaken in an operation which the Quaker worker doing it says is "still in its baby shoes." The years of work in the five AFSC camps give the Quakers personal knowledge of the families, their capabilities, their histories. The work rests on this foundation and in the firm belief that hope and energy will spring up in many of these men and women if helped up the first steep steps to normal life. To take such steps is not easy for those who have been uprooted one or

more times; who have received many promises and few fulfillments; whose inherent caution has been reduced to abnormal fear by the closed, isolated camp community where minimal demands are underwritten by the state.

This was the situation of the Rutiger family. An apprenticeship had been found by the Quaker worker in Duisburg for the eldest son, Werner. This made the family eligible for housing and by incredible effort and some good luck an apartment was found for them in a livable but not yet completed housing unit. The hardest task was still ahead -- to help the family decide to make the drastic shift from known discomforts to unknown risks. The son was eager; the father was hesitant and dejected. There was much earnest talk and long, heavy silences in the little room. Herr Rutiger seemed about braced for a positive decision when his sister-in-law bustled in, voluble and foreboding about the whole thing. Frau Rutiger, eager, snappy-eyed and anxious to go, called the Quaker worker outside and suggested that he tell her husband it was the law and he had to go. All of them knew the frightening economics of the decisions -- 150 DM per month unemployment insurance in the camp, rent there just 8 DM a month. Rent on the new home was 77 DM a month. It was touch and go in the minds of all, and then somehow the decision to give it all a try.

The Quaker worker was at the flat in Duisburg when the family, a few scraps of furniture and clothing arrived. Herr Rutiger's wages are augmented by the rent of a room in the flat to an apprentice about their son's age. Frau Rutiger explained her plans to replace the packing-case chests and tables with real furniture as soon as more urgent needs are met. Sauerkraut simmered on the kitchen stove, a spotless towel hung on the roller by the sink. The whole family beamed.

For about five months before this, the AFSC worker had been helping young boys in the camp find apprenticeship openings in Duisburg and the nearby areas. As an experiment, in October he placed a newspaper advertisement saying a locksmith and two boys were available for work, that they were refugees and that the AFSC could vouch for them. Fifteen employers responded.

To Stimulate Trust is the Heart of the Project. - Visits by the Quaker worker to these employers, to the government labor office and to other employers contacted through personal acquaintances and subsequent advertisements, have resulted in jobs for 23 men and apprenticeships for 18 youths. The Oldenburg camps are remote from employment possibilities. The industrial and other activity which presently gives Germany generally an exceedingly low unemployment figure, does not automatically touch these stranded workers. Refugees do not have the money to go search for work. The heart of this project is to bridge the distance by matching worker to job and at the same time to stimulate the employer's trust in a refugee worker and the refugee's faith in himself. The results have been infectious. After the first refugees wrote back to camp of the job, and of the living arrangements, others were more willing to venture out and some even struck out on their own.

Among the five camps where the Committee works, there were about 120 employable men, many with several dependents. The present goal of the little operation is to bring each of these to a suitable job and a satisfactory living arrangement. This will draw off from the camp the workers and their dependents. When the camps are thus depleted it is expected the remaining aged and heavily handicapped will be removed to permanent living arrangements. The object is to see the refugees back in the social stream and the hateful camps empty and burned.

One of the most difficult steps in the path to this happy end is finding housing. Housing is short nearly everywhere in Germany and over-crowding is high in the

industrial areas where jobs are available. When a refugee summons the courage to take a job found for him, he is confronted with a time-consuming search for shelter and must endure the added burden of loneliness due to separation from his family. Confronted with this bitter choice, workers have understandably chosen to remain in camp where at least they have the comfort of the company of their loved ones, about all that is left them in life.

Helping the worker get a place to live, with his family if he has one, is an integral part of the operation. To keep the family together is the only way to make the re-settlement permanent and to avoid new social problems for the breadwinner alone in the city and the fatherless family in the camp. It is necessary to keep in touch with the family some time after its transfer to the city. Many need help to redevelop the stamina to withstand urban crowding and rush.

By intense personal work the Quakers have managed to coordinate the work and housing problems. In the Rutiger family, the fact that the son had an apprenticeship entitled the whole family to consideration in a housing development. Through thorough personal search and with the accumulated knowledge of such searching a housing development was located where the waiting list was not hopelessly long. (In one instance a Quaker worker was told the waiting list was 24,000 families.) Then came the task of lifting the spirit and hope of the Rutigers.

For a man without dependents, the search is different but the hazards about equal. Karl Horn, a middle-aged man, was matched to a job with a building contractor. He went to work the very afternoon he arrived from Duisburg and spent that night in a public shelter. Two Quaker workers searched and found an acceptable room in a small rooming house. Next day the landlady was taken ill and sent to a hospital. She did not want to leave her house occupied and unsupervised so she dismissed her three roomers. Herr Horn kept at his job and the Quaker worker spent the afternoon on the telephone, finally locating a room in a home for unaccompanied men run by a Protestant church group where Herr Horn could stay until May. By then the combined search by Herr Horn and the Quaker workers will probably have located him a room with a family.

One of the largest groups in the camps are the young men who came as boys eight years ago, whose schooling was interrupted and whose normal course would have been learning a trade through apprenticeship. The need now is to find apprentice openings for them, and to retrain or complete the training of those a little older.

For these the housing problem also is acute. The Quaker workers placed four young refugees in a brass foundry near Duisburg and through tireless and time-consuming search (which a refugee boy based 225 miles away can't do) found rooms for them a 40-minute walk from the factory. The factory manager, pleased with the lads and the Quaker interest in them, said he would gladly hire more if housing can be found for them. One of the four, living in a small room, making his own breakfast, lonely when his shift goes off at three in the afternoon, begged the Quaker worker to remind his wife to write oftener. One of the small side-functions of the Quaker staff members is to serve as go-between for workers and those remaining in camps.

Frau Rutiger summed it all up: "We were taken by the hand and led to hope."

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The above report was written by Corrinne Hardesty, AFSC Director of Foreign Service Publicity, presently on leave in Europe and the Middle East.