

AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE

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REFUGEE SERVICES PROGRAM

"PLEASE GET US OUT...WE'LL ROT IF WE HAVE TO STAY HERE..."

"I wrote in my first report on Landshut DP camp that there was nothing here to offer hope. On my second and third visits, when we penetrated beyond the comparative wholesomeness of the Administrative Block into the very dungeons of despair and filth themselves, I realized I had made a terrible understatement when I wrote that. Let me define it more clearly now: In my three years of camp and Bunker visiting in Germany I have never seen anything more desolate, more degrading, more utterly without faith or human dignity, not even in sub-terranean Bunkers, for these are usually clean and orderly in comparison with this. 'I do not know in how many weeks I also should take to drinking, but that I should have to, that I know. No one with any sensitivity could live there for long without resorting to some method to drug the senses, to make one oblivious to the surroundings. And drinking is one of the quickest and most effective ways known.' That was the opinion of the head of one of the international welfare organizations."

To all who visit Germany today, it is immediately obvious that during the past ten years this war-devastated country has made a remarkable economic recovery. Millions of dollars have gone into bringing about this recovery and in healing the physical scars of war. Why then should an agency such as the American Friends Service Committee continue to work in Germany? Has not it done all it should in the way of relief?

Hidden away, out of sight and consciousness of most Germans and visitors to Germany, are many camps, where refugees have been living for eight to ten years, unable to return to their homelands, unable to get jobs. The years of unemployment and crowded, dirty living have taken their toll of the energies and ambitions of these people. The degeneration that has taken place is only the very logical result that one must expect from wars which uproot people and move them to places where they are not welcome. Along with the healing of its own wounds, Germany has had to absorb thousands of refugees. The present government is doing its best to help these thousands adjust and fit into German life, but individual help such as can be given by a private organization like the A.F.S.C. is still needed.

The AFSC program of finding jobs for refugees has been going on for several years. Helped mostly have been the "expellees", refugees of ethnic German origin, who descended upon Germany in 1945, partially as a result of the Potsdam agreements. Those who also are in great need of help and for whom it is harder to find jobs are the DPs, the foreign refugees, some of whom came to Germany as enforced labor during the war and are unable now to return to their homes in the East. Most of the DPs now left in camps in Germany are ineligible for emigration. The physically fit and politically "clear" have already emigrated. Those left must find an answer and for many of them the only answer has been to turn to crime and to drink.

The camp which Gwen Gardner, AFSC worker in Germany, describes in the above quotation is one such camp where DPs, many of them single men, are living without hope for the future. It is from such a camp as this that AFSC workers are placing men in jobs and finding them housing -- beginning the process of their integration into the German economy.

In the same report, Gwen described her visit to the camp in detail:

"I was glad on the first visit, very glad, that I had Herr Merton with me, a Hungarian exile student who works each Saturday now helping me to document likely candidates for employment in Landshut, for the first shock nearly removes all one's courage. One feels a fool, for trying in this sub-human warren, to find anyone that can work.

"We entered the massive Block I which constitutes the main living quarters, immediately after lunch on a Saturday afternoon, and were immediately aware that we were out of place, foreign beings who were going to arouse a lot of curiosity. The ground floor consisted of an endless dark concrete corridor, with stone arches, and on the inner side iron doors, locked and surely not concealing human habitation. At one end an even darker stone stairway wound upwards. In silence and some consternation we penetrated the gloom, dismayed by the drunken, seedy and, on two occasions, deformed beings who passed us by. On the next floor, wooden doorways bore black numbers in a series, but beneath the arches it was too dark to read them. By counting from rooms opposite windows we were able to locate a room which bore the number we were looking for. We picked our way along the wet, muddy corridor -- not because it was open air was it wet, but because the washing-taps are situated at intervals in the corridor above tiny inadequate bowls, and every time a man washes, the corridor flows with water. At a tap opposite this room, a dark little man in a yellow silk shirt and neat trousers was putting his head and arms under the tap and looked so much cleaner than anyone I had previously seen that I mentally wished this could be our man. We knocked, entered, and stood appalled. I have never seen anything more neglected than that room with its ten untidy beds. The blankets were rumpled, the one table had a nauseating mixture of food, cooking utensils, clothing -- but how could it be otherwise? The table was not a yard square, ten men shared it and there was no other object of furniture on which they could put anything except their beds or the stools on which they sat. No one spoke or moved. They just stared at our intrusion. One man lay dead asleep on his bed, others, in various phases of stupor, simply sat on beds or stools, drunken or stupid, it was impossible to say which. Someone told us Herr Tarasewitsch was not there. We turned to go out, and the dark little man from the tap butted into us. "Here he is," cried out one of his room-mates, and I was aware that the one man in the room who looked human and alive was our man and breathed freely again.

"As we documented the facts about his life we were aware of a willingness to work and yet a reluctance to talk. He told us eventually that it could not be immediately. 'I'm sick; I'm just going to the hospital.' We asked what for and how long. He answered that it would take two or three weeks and was not serious. 'I got to have treatment,' he said, his head hung down with shame. 'I got drunk and upset my stomach.' I looked around his room, his only living quarters, and was aware of no disgust or condemnation, even though I guessed he had probably been drinking fuel alcohol.

"In the midst of all this human waste and despair, there are yet a few who have girded their courage and held their heads high, but these are mostly the few who have work or came recently. In the filthy corridors one met men and women -- with brisk step, squared shoulders, with immaculate clothes and washed faces, men with shaven cheeks.

One such was Herr Suchecki, a twenty-seven year old Pole, big, blond, with blue, well-pressed shirt, knife-edged trousers, just putting on a smart jacket as though going to town to meet a lady friend. But he was not. This was his way of keeping up his morale on a Saturday afternoon. 'Go to town?' 'No, what for, without money?' he queried, when we asked if he was going out. He was cautious on the defensive when we first approached him, but when at last he understood what our purpose was, his reserve melted completely: 'Work? what kind of work?... Work did you say? Do I want to?... My God, do you think I want to stay here for the rest of my life?' and with a gesture of mingled courtesy and eagerness, he placed two stools for us to sit on, and drew up the table so that we could write. 'Yes, ma'am,' he said with a sudden smile, 'I can speak English, too. I've been working with a Wach Kompanie attached to the U.S. Army for 8 years. Now they've gone to France, and I'm left here.'"

"Those of you who are cudgelling your consciences because you wonder if we ought to move DPs who prefer to stay where they are, come with us and visit Landshut. We'll show you things that will tear your heart and put your doubts to rest. Perhaps, as on my second visit with Doris Borrusch, the men will mob us in the dark corridor. They've got wind of our purpose. There is a man with an amputated arm. 'Aren't you the American Quakers finding jobs for people? Look, I'm a painter, too. Can't you get me a job?' and the tall thin man with pleading brown eyes: 'I'm a cook. I've worked with the Americans...' and the burly man with the working overalls: 'I'm a metal worker... you said you wanted metal workers. I'm fifty-three, but I'm healthy. I can work.' But the whole camp is coming. There are rows of men advancing down the corridor. It's the same in the rooms. This grey haired, square-built, honest looking man, follows us. 'I've got a trade. I'm a carpenter. I want work, too. I'm strong. I'm 55. But I'm stronger than that young man. He's sick. Don't help the young ones... They can get work. The employers take them. It's we older men who need your help. We'd work if they'd let us. Look at that chap. He's a welder. He's strong. He's fit. He doesn't drink. He wants to work. But he's nearly sixty. Help him to get out of here.'"

"Two young men, both too slightly built to be suitable for the iron foundry that Doris Borrusch has come to offer, pursue us out of the room after we've filled in the questionnaire and seen their papers. 'Please get us out of here. Please help us. Don't leave us. We'll rot if we have to stay here,' says the one who has had a two months' prison sentence for fighting....

"We have three jobs to offer among four hundred men. Which shall we choose? Whom must we reject? The ones who need our help most are the ones with handicaps, the ones who are sliding down... but the employers don't see it that way.

"Herr Marton, who has been filling in forms and interrogating since 7 a.m. looks tired and drawn, but he looks at me with a smile as we pack up our day's work as it gets dark, and says, 'I'm glad you've given me this to do. It's very worth-while work. I don't think we shall do it in vain. We've got to get these people out of here... Some of them can be saved.'"

What can we do for such men? Slowly our workers are finding jobs, are supporting housing projects and finding individual housing, and are even beginning a loan program whereby shoemakers, photographers, etc., can get up their own businesses. Small loans are also being given to men who need supplementary vocational training in order to get work. Most of the jobs have been found in large factories and there has been good cooperation on the part of many of the employers. The job of the AFSC

worker is mainly an individual one, encouraging each DP to seek a new and better life, searching out employers willing to give a foreigner a job.

Writing in another report, about two young men whom she was helping, Gwen ended by saying, "We believe that these two changed their outlook on life during these two weeks, when they found there was someone who stood behind every step and failure, ready to help."

Now is the time when such people need support, not later, when they have stopped caring about becoming responsible members of society.

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