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FOREIGN SERVICE SECTION

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REFUGEE SERVICES

A Report of the

AFSC EMPLOYMENT AND RESETTLEMENT PROGRAM IN GERMANY

In our last News Letter (Number 30) we reported on the efforts which our staff in Germany were making to place in employment foreign refugees from the Lands-hut DP Camp in Bavaria, thus restoring them to a normal existence and their rightful place in the community. Since then the AFSC team has extended its activities to Camp Valka, and the following extracts from Gwen Gardner's reports tell the tragic story of many of the refugees in the camps and how it has been possible to help some of them. (Gwen Gardner is the Director of the AFSC Employment and Resettlement Project in South Germany.)

"In the northern part of Bavaria near the City of Nuremberg lies the ill-famed reception camp for foreign refugees, known as Valka, a camp of so unsavory reputation that to have lived in it is a barrier to getting work even in the far corners of Germany. It is nevertheless compulsory for all refugees who are not of German nationality and have newly arrived in the Federal Republic to proceed there for interrogation to decide whether the newcomer shall receive the status of refugee and permission to stay in Germany or not. Although most of these refugees come from iron curtain countries, either directly or at some previous point of time, and cannot reasonably be expected to return, a high proportion is nevertheless refused asylum. As they cannot be sent back where they come from, however, they sit in Valka unable to work, for without a residence permit permission to work is refused, and with no hope of a future settlement. Small wonder that 50 Czechs have recently returned to Czechoslovakia to face a possibly limited penalty rather than to wait indefinitely in a camp they may never leave.

"The communal feeding, facilities, and general order have, in fact, recently improved. It is the degenerating effect of being refused the right to work and having to find 'black' underpaid employment with punishment by imprisonment if caught, or of rotting in idleness, that is the worst. Qualified men are forgetting their skills, industrious artisans learning laziness and drinking habits. What else is there to do?

"In the midst of the generally shabby wooden hutments is a special group behind a concrete and barbed wire fence, a compound which bears an unpleasant resemblance to a concentration camp, where those refugees whose cases were pending, or who had been refused acceptance, were to be

segregated behind closed gates. Fortunately, thanks to international representation, this gate has never been closed, so local freedom of movement is still possible.

"As soon as the screening process is completed, those refugees whose status has been recognized are distributed percentage-wise to the various Laender according to employment possibilities, and have a fair chance of settling down to a new and satisfactory existence. But a high proportion are refused, and with it the right to leave the camp or to work, except on leave of absence, usually granted for four weeks, in special cases. Since the number refused daily grows, and two or three new ones daily enter the camp, it is clear that some solution must be found, but so far the German Government itself has not found it, though it recognizes the seriousness of the problem. To accept and recognize all refugees is not the answer, they claim; for then a growing and unending stream would inundate them. Particularly those refugees who were recognized in neighboring countries must be held back from illegal border-crossing by refusal. This applies, for instance, to refugees from France, Austria, and Belgium.

"Into this complex situation we naively entered with a simple question: If we find a job for a man who has been refused, and a roof over his head, and offer to take care of him for the initial period, will you really continue to refuse to permit him this obvious right to existence? We arrived at a highly favorable moment in the economic development of Germany. During the last three to four months the employment picture has suddenly changed from pessimistic stagnation to a feverish activity, which means that in certain industrial areas, notably the Rhineland, Ruhr and Baden-Wuerttemberg, the formerly frigid employers are now anxiously wooing the labor market, with one eye on worse things to come when conscription comes into force. Representations are being made from all sides to release some of the rich potential in Valka. But how? The refusals deny all rights except to emigration. How is the decision to be officially circumvented?

"Our first step was to visit the representative of the Screening Commission of the Federal Government to get legal advice on what we could do, and permission to work with individual refugees. We were received with warm cordiality, and accorded as much time as we needed to get the complex legal situation clear, and to get advice on each of about 30 cases we had registered for employment. We found that only in the last week or so greater flexibility has been given to allow a refugee who has been refused refugee status nevertheless to leave the camp, providing he leaves the camp area and Bavaria, which is already terribly overcrowded, and gets the promise of a police permit for residence in another Land (State) where the Employment Office will also guarantee him a job. These are conditions which as a private person he is practically unable to carry out, and this is where we, with nine months' experience and connection with employment offices and employers, found a real opening where we could help and where both refugee and the Government Screening Commission received us with gratitude. If we can offer a refugee a real job, a roof over his head, and a friendly police headquarters, his problem can be forever solved. No further formalities will be required of him. We have already opened negotiations in two different towns in

Baden-Wuerttemberg and received ready official cooperation for our scheme, and found employers who say, 'All we ask is that the men really want to work. We ask no other question.' A colleague in the Rhineland is putting out feelers for us there. All that remains is the selection of the men, fitting them to the right job, and getting named invitations for them to leave to go to their respective jobs. The Commission will then issue a permit to leave and recommendation to the appropriate police.

"In the spring of this year we made contact with two young Yugoslavs who had newly arrived in the country and just left a camp in Bavaria, having had enough of camp idleness in a very short time. These two enjoy working. They told us that a group of five had fled their country, but taken a wrong direction and ended in a Communist territory instead of the West. They were interned in a concentration camp for five years, and then managed to escape, posing as German prisoners of war in a returning transport. Both were metal workers, and it was easy to find a job for them, for they made a very good impression. The police agreed to this, provisionally. Later the employer told them and us that if they had any friends like themselves, we should send them, too, for employment. One of them told me his paypacket was often twice as fat as his neighbor's because he is such a quick, accurate worker. A few days ago this young man turned up in our office, rather downcast, to say goodbye. He had received an order to proceed to Camp Valka for screening. He had to leave his job. The employer had promised to write a letter urgently requesting his speedy release as an essential worker in his factory. As it happened, I was leaving for Valka the next day, and I promised also to intercede on his behalf. It was hard to think of this man with his proud record of good achievement languishing in the inactivity of the camp. The Commission, as in the other cases, was willing to do everything possible. It might be arranged to do most of the screening by correspondence."

"But not all is as easy as this. We wanted urgently ten carpenters to help build film studios in Wuerttemberg. We found five in Zirndorf, a daughter camp of Valka nearby, but one of the best - except that he spoke no German - we had reluctantly to tell that his papers were not yet at a stage where in foreseeable time he might be permitted to leave.

"The program in Valka presents formidable difficulties, but gives rewards. It has an advantage in that for each man we may try to place we have an assurance from the Commission that he is steady, honest, and has no crime record, and we can therefore promise employers a hope of satisfaction that will probably not be disappointed. We know, too, if he has weaknesses, for he has been under observation for a year or more and we are advised what to expect, and can help him. He is likely also to try to stick to his job when he has been placed, for he will certainly not want to come back to Valka."

After these initial efforts our staff continued to interview the men in the camp to register them for employment, in addition to maintaining contact with the Labor Offices, employers, and camp authorities. Then in November Gwen Gardner reported on the first big placement in Stuttgart of 25 men from Camp Valka:

"The whole camp turned out to see the first transport depart, staff, restless fortunate refugees, and Government officials furiously waving farewell as though it were a concert group going on tour. For, after months or even years of waiting without hope, without passports, or any kind of protection or citizenship, the first busload of these unhappy, rootless, outcast refugees were being allowed to leave to take up employment and the normal activities of a free life.

"It had not been an easy and uneventful achievement. Our camp worker, himself risen from the ranks of refugees, had toiled ceaselessly to make contacts, to register the right applicants, to obtain permits. On the last evening the Screening Commission had suddenly rescinded the permits of eleven of the chosen ones, and he had to work late into the night to replace them. From the very bus itself they removed another, just on the point of its departure, five hours late. A black spot, some criminal record, had been discovered in the man's past, and the bright future was snatched away again. At last the rest were permitted to get under way, and with a sigh of relief the 25 fortunates settled down to a four hour journey and a new life.

"This was the story we heard when we met the transport at the Stuttgart Employment Office in the late afternoon of the same day. We had waited there with growing anxiety while we battled with local officials on problems of accommodation and placement. Suddenly the cry went up that they had arrived, and we rushed out to count the number and congratulate them. Even so, the official detailed by the Employment Office to meet them and place them with the firms who had signified willingness to accept them was there before us with his lists and had boarded the bus and told the driver to be quick off the mark to get them all out before firms closed for the night.

"Since only builders and contractors could offer sleeping quarters, all were being taken on as laborers, with the hope that skilled workers would later be able to find rooms for themselves and jobs in their own professions - and there were several with much sought-after skills, including a radio-mechanic, an electrician, and three metal-turners. But the happy escapees accepted these conditions and indifferent accommodation cheerfully. It was worth more than that to be free!

"At the first halt we found a tiny wooden hut partitioned into two, with six bunk beds in each room, and washing facilities. It was narrow, untidy, and uncomfortable, but six Czechs accepted their lot with approval that all could be together. We had grouped them together in language units to make understanding easier and to try to avoid racial clashes. The next day this group would be sent to dig drains, let out to other firms. To me it looked little like the promised land, but the men had achieved what they had dreamed of for years. Just as we were leaving again, the house-mother ran after us to say that some of the men were without any money at all, and the agreement with the firms was that only after 8 hours' work could they be given an advance. This was an item for which we had allowed, so we left DM 40 behind and moved on.

"By the time we had deposited the last group of 10 Hungarians, it was dark and only one man, the foreman of the building site, was waiting.

He showed them their quarters, clean and new this time, and made arrangements for a lorry to pick them up in the morning to take them to the Employment Office to fill in various forms. He also made a special arrangement to pay each man DM 5 before he left in the morning. Then he invited us to have supper with him. We were surprised and a little flattered - but the explanation was soon out. He had heard that we had skilled workers and there were certain skills that he needed badly and would pay any price to get. We promised to remember him in the next transport, and left to find our hotel.

"One of the best events of the day had been the reception we got at the building site of the Villa Berg television studios. The foreman climbed down from some scaffolding and welcomed us with a broad smile. 'Take four men? Yes, I'll take five. Out of your other groups - see, you brought me 25 in all from various camps -- 22 are still with me. Of these, 12 - or no 14 - are really first class workmen. I don't want to lose them.'

"The next morning at 7:45 we were called to the telephone. Could we come around to the Employment Office at once? There the problem was explained. A junior official had accompanied us on our rounds and had promised working boots or clothes to all who needed them. But no regulation could be found which permitted this, even as a loan, to refugees without passports. It could not be done. A conference was called with the Director of the men's department himself in the chair, and the adamant refusal to cut the red tape put us in a deadlock. I had not money enough in my pocket to pay for boots, but the cheap suede shoes many of the men were wearing were impossible for digging drains. The conference was stormy. They could have made a loan, one admitted, but were not compelled to; another department chief said, 'Flatly, I am against it.' The trouble was that it would add up to over DM 800 and it hurt. We pointed out that we were willing but unable to help, unless they could arrange a credit for us with a firm in the town. This took a long time, but at last, someone decided to take the risk, and soon the men were setting off to the shop in groups with typed slips promising payment, hurrying so as to be able to get to work in the afternoon. The Employment Office had promised to take care of registration formalities with the police.

"As the last group were shaking hands with me, eyes shining with eagerness and gratitude, one of them said to me, 'You've had a lot of trouble with us, and for us. We'll try to see that you never have cause to regret it.'"

This is just the story of the first placements from Valka. Since the above report was written, the placement work has continued and the latest figures available show that 96 men have been moved out of the camp in two months.