

Bad Aibling

An account of the part played by AFSC in the Children's Village at Bad Aibling will be a portrayal of the work of the sincerely concerned individuals who made up the Quaker team there. Here, in a constantly changing and difficult situation, a small team of men and women---some trained in children's work, some with no formal training but a boundless affection and concern for the children's welfare---worked for four years ~~with children~~ ^{help} to ~~try~~ to create a happy environment for hundreds of children.

The Children's Village came into being in November, 1948, to provide a central institution for the children in the U.S. zone of Germany under the care of the International Refugee Organization, the United Nations agency succeeding UNRRA to care for and resettle or repatriate the displaced persons of the war and post-war years. Previously, the children had lived in several widely-scattered camps.

The children in these camps and others later who made up the population of Bad Aibling were those whose parents were killed or missing during the war and its aftermath, those who had been brought to Germany during the war for upbringing by German families, and those whose parents were temporarily unable to care for them as a result of illness or other reasons.

Bad Aibling is a small town in southern Bavaria in the foothills of the Alps. The town as its name indicates is a health resort where mud-baths as well as water baths are offered to "Kurgäste." About 3 kilometers from the ~~the~~ town is a large collection of stone buildings formerly used by the German Luftwaffe. The buildings are of uniform pattern---

two stories high, long corridors with rooms opening off to each side, room for perhaps 50 people in each block, and communal washrooms on each floor. Several smaller buildings were built to provide apartments for officers and even include a large ballroom with parquet floor. Nearby are the hangars and garages of the former airforce installation.

The camp is built upon a slight rise of ground with a view toward the mountains. At its foot near one of the smaller houses is a small, stagnant body of water known during the children's tenure as Lake Michigan. The buildings are of sturdy construction but isolated from the town and, during the first half of its use^{as} a children's village, of a depressing camouflage color which emphasized the bleak desolation of the village particularly on gray, rainy days.

Into this setting the children were moved late in 1948. Despite planning and preparation for the move, it was carried out before the buildings were ready for occupancy. The Quaker team which moved from the former camps by arrangement with IRO found that their first weeks were spent in frantic attempts to make the buildings habitable. Such fundamentals as light bulbs, curtains, beds unmade when the children arrived had to be contended with. Gradually, the combined efforts of IRO staff and AFSC workers brought order out of chaos.

Since the type and arrangement of buildings precluded family groups of children, they were divided in the blocks by age and sex. I.e., one entire building housing perhaps 200 was given over to the older boys, another to the older girls, still another for younger boys, and so on~~s~~. Children under six were kept together in several buildings set aside for this age group. This group eventually became the largest in the camp and,

because of the needs of small children, the one with the largest staff. Another house was labelled Reception House where incoming children spent three weeks in isolation from the main camp to prevent spreading of contagious disease and ~~provide~~ their initial orientation to the village. After this period, they were assigned rooms in the buildings of their age groups. Another building served as hospital and areas were allocated for school, vocational training, and recreational purposes. The children except for the under-six group ate communally in several dining-rooms where the service was cafeteria-style.

The children ranged in age from -1 to teen-agers; their nationalities covered almost the same span of numbers. The common language was usually German, a tongue foreign both to the children and the staff. The population of the village at times was over 500. This decreased gradually as children emigrated to new countries, returned to their home countries, were reunited with parents, or entered German children's homes for further care.

To care for them and provide the necessary administrative services was the job of the IRO staff made up of international employees (those not of DP or German nationalities), displaced persons, Germans, and workers of various countries assigned by the voluntary agencies to the village. The IRO staff included administrators, program director, case-workers, teachers, supply, nutrition, and medical officers, and many others. The staff alone totaled over 200 when the camp was full to capacity.

The World's YMCA was represented by workers who planned the free-time recreational program; vocational training was given older children by the Organization for Rehabilitation through Training (ORT); members of agencies assisting in the children's

emigration kept in close touch with the village.

In an artificial community of this size and composition where physical facilities discourage any attempt at a normal ~~arrangement~~ of family life, there are many and varied problems among adults and children. Many of these children had passed through a tragic period during which they were uprooted, their families destroyed or dispersed, and their own lives, if not in actual danger, at least terribly insecure. Many of them could vividly remember these experiences. ~~In almost all of them,~~ Traces could be found of personality problems evidenced in inability to adjust to a new situation, resentment of their position, craving for overt affection, behaviour difficulties, etc.. It was in the attempt to meet these problems and to provide some measure of stable affection that the Quaker team remained in Bad Aibling. The team numbered at one time as many as six members; only in the last days of the village did it shrink to as few as two.

By agreement with IRO, AFSC was given the task of "home life" in the village; in other words, they were to create as far as possible in that situation a semblance of normal family life with its sharing of responsibility and love. In carrying out this program, the team found itself supervising and hiring the large staff of houseparents of DP and German nationalities. Houseparents, in most cases married couples, were assigned to a small group of children. They lived in the blocks, helped them plan their daily program, listened to their problems, and were there as much of the time as possible. Since many of these adults had serious problems of insecurity of their own, the AFSC ~~xx~~ worker spent a great deal of time counseling grown-ups as well as children. In many cases this meant nothing more than

the arduous task of being a good listener. The team also lived in the blocks with the children, each with the age group for which he was primarily responsible. They were the only "international" staff to live in the camp and found it invaluable in building warm, friendly relationships with the children and houseparents who watched most of the staff depart at 5:30 when the working day was finished.

Thanks to contributions from friends and Gifts-in-Kind the team set up living-rooms for each block where the children gathered in the evenings to sew, chat, play games, or read. These rooms seemed oases of light and cheer with their bright curtains, comfortable sofas, radios. The children did much themselves to brighten their rooms, but with three or four to a room in a large, barrack-like building the opportunities for creation were rather limited. The living-rooms became the center of group activities within each small unit. Monthly birthday parties were given in these rooms unless good weather allowed a marshmallow roast outside; special visitors were received here; and occasional talks by staff and Quaker workers were given here.

The team also cooperated with other agencies and IRO staff in the program of general activities. This planning involved attendance at numerous meetings each week to discuss matters ranging from the Saturday night dance and mid-week movie showings to behaviour problems and methods of dealing with them. One team member was especially active in coordinating the religious activities and services in camp so that each group could worship in its own way; for a time an interdenominational service was held in response to requests from the children. For the most part, however, the services were given by priests and pastors of the various faiths.

The team provided an invaluable link between the children and

their houseparents on the one hand and the IRO administration on the other. The case-workers whose job it was to plan each child's future worked ^{with} groups too large to permit a close, personal relationship with each youngster. Here, the Quakers could give information on each child's abilities and problems by means of talks with the case-worker and regular written reports. In many cases, the attention of the staff could be drawn to certain needs or lacks in the camp. In fact, in the ~~last~~ months when the staff was cut and changed rapidly, when various factors slowed emigration for the children, when the houseparents were faced with acute personal problems, the team found itself spending almost more time in conferences and meetings than with the children. However, they adjusted their schedules to meet these new demands and spent as much of their extra time as possible with the children, the result often being an 18 to 20 hour day.

To counteract the comparative isolation of the camp from the outside world, excursions to nearby Bad Aibling and Munich were arranged in good weather by AFSC with IRO transportation. These trips to the zoo, the technical museum, and concerts were high points in the children's lives as were the occasional circuses, puppet shows, and home-talent shows in the village.

Special work done with the kindergarten and nursery groups by a Quaker worker deserves mention here. One member of the team, a girl trained in an American college in child development, was largely instrumental in setting up and training the staff for this area. Although she encountered frequent opposition and lethargy from DP and German workers whose theories often were at odds with more modern ones she was able to make amazing progress. She not

not only supervised the large staff which worked most directly with the small children but also helped to plan their daily programs of rest, meals, sleep, and play. She was able to assemble a very creditable amount of equipment and play material and remained constantly alert to necessary adaptation in the program to meet the ever-increasing numbers of small children. When her term of service with AFSC expired, her work was continued by another American who worked closely with the team.

In addition to their work within the village, the team considered part of their role to remain very closely in touch with the AFSC offices in Munich and Kranichstein. Often, concerns to high IRO officials could be voiced at these levels of Quaker work. Some met with success in terms of results. Some did not, but the team felt it could not conscientiously perform its difficult task in Aibling without the expression of its concerns ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ quarters most able to effect action.

In some cases, the concern met with agreement (occasionally, surprise when the situation was not familiar to the IRO official) but could not be remedied. In such cases, whenever possible without dissipating their energies into too many directions, the team attempted to fill the need. E.g., at a time when IRO was forced by time and budget to reduce its staff, there was great need for a case-worker to do a particular job. Although ^{the view} not the ~~generally accepted line~~ ^{AFSC's conception of its work there,} ~~of AFSC work there,~~ it was considered essential to put in an AFSC appointee for several months to accomplish the task before taking up her regular work in another project. She did the work well, filled a pressing need, and her work greatly helped the IRO staff to complete its mission.

In October, 1951, after almost four years, the children's village ~~was~~ closed. The number of children had dwindled to 80.

The installation was too large to be run economically for such a small group, pressure had been applied by the American Army for the buildings, and IRO sought to find a German agency with the experience and desire to care for the children until plans for their future ~~had~~ could be finalized. Several buildings on a nearby lake were reconditioned by IRO and turned over to the German welfare agency which undertook to maintain the installation and provide staff (from among its own workers as well as the staff of Aibling) to care for the children for 3-4 months. Two of the AFSC team remained throughout the period of moving to see that the buildings were ready to receive the children and to help the German agency with the many problems which had become familiar to them through the previous years. They stayed with the new camp until early this year when they reported that only 20 children were left and these would soon be settled in new homes. They, therefore, felt that by the 1st of February this phase of AFSC's work with displaced children could logically come to a close.

x x x

ND: Because of changing circumstances
AFSC workers are still in Feldafing
as of April 1952.

- by JANE BENNETT