

Camp leader report from first workcamp, Esnes, France, November, 1920

Our visit to the Prefet of the Meuse at Bar le Duc confirmed the information we had received at Paris as to the practicability of our scheme provided that only a limited number of Germans were included in the group, and that their records as regards Bolshevism, etc. were impeccable, we therefore proceeded once more to Clermont and made a definite offer of service to M.Cruchant, Chef de la Sub-Division de Varennes. He arranged for us to visit Esnes where he proposed to make use of our help. The village in question was obviously badly in need. of the old village, not one repairable house remains. The valley is simply a scatter of stones and rubbish with the ruined church tower as a solitary landmark at the bottom. A very few wooden barracks have been erected (two or three by the Mission des Amis at the very end of their work last winter) and very, many families - from twenty to forty at least - have demanded, and are awaiting the erection of others before they can return to their village and their farms.

M.Legay, the Mayor, to whom we explained our whole plan, is prepared to accept our German friends, having regard to the spirit in which their help is offered, though he was inclined to expect possible trouble from frequenters of the Cafés when they became aware of the composition of our group. We agreed to try and be ready to commence work in the village within a fortnight of our visit (Wednesday November 3rd).

The following day was lost, owing to to passport delay at Bar le Duc and on the 5th we left for Switzerland and Germany respectively - Pierre Ceresole to visit some possible supporters in his homeland, and Hubert Parris to receive and decide upon applications of German friends, visiting applicants where possible.

Of names under consideration, five German and one Hungarian were eventually accepted, two were deferred on health grounds; three are not yet free to come but may apply in the spring, two are still under consideration. Visits were made from Frankfurt to Dortmund, Plauen and Halle and some useful conversations on the scheme took place in trams, etc.

Returning to Frankfurt on Saturday, November 13th, Hubert Parris rejoined Pierre Ceresole, and proceeded on Monday to discuss with the Friends Commissioners for international Service the possibility of the loan of a light car for our work, purchase of some articles of equipment and of a set of tools completed the preparatory work in Germany, but on the last evening of our stay, yet another promising young candidate called to see us. Our first equipé had already more prospective members than we had proposed, so we were compelled to ask him to wait a while.

On Tuesday evening, the 16th, we left Frankfurt, arriving at Clermont the following noon, arranged for the transport to Esnes of our furniture, etc. a considerable portion of which is the gift of the Friends' Mission from oddments left behind at Clermont.

During the whole of our preparatory work at Clermont, we enjoyed the very cordial and helpful co-operation of Ralph Whitely, who after the Friends Mission left this area, remained as an isolated missionary, living by his work as a carpenter, and rendering valuable service, especially to the school children of the town, and the neighbouring villages.

Two hours before the time fixed for our departure on Thursday, we were rejoiced to be found by our friend Chris Rison from Bilthoven, who was thus able to accompany us to Esnes and share with us the very initial difficulties of arrival at night with a load of furniture, at a village where no house was available, for our reception. Eventually we found shelter in a half finished house without floor, ceiling, windows or a catch on the door, and after stowing therein our belongings, we spread our camp beds and slept, not seriously troubled by the abundance of fresh air.

We have now succeeded in making the the place a bit habitable, and on Saturday, November 20th, laid the corner stone of our first building and made good progress with the foundations and floor.

We still await the arrival of our first German comrade, but trust it may not be now much longer delayed.

Groupe de Service International, Hubert Parris (Chef de Construction)