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of
"CHILDREN IN EUROPE"

McARDLE

Childcare

No.3 "LOST AND FOUND"

In one of the Swedish homes for children left destitute by the war there is a strange little boy. They call him "Franz Berlin". Just after the liberation he was picked up by a medical unit of the Allies, crying and lost, in the streets near Berlin, and although he seemed nearly five years old, he was unable to tell them even his name. He speaks German with a curious accent, yet everyone feels sure that he is not a German child. He can tell nothing about himself. They have tried speaking to him in various other languages, but he will reply in none of them. A Czech helper made friends with him, felt sure that he understood Czech words and told him in that language to walk across the room, stand in the corner and raise his right hand. The boy obeyed. He looks like a Slav. They have concluded that Franz is a Czechoslovak child who has become unable to speak his own language in consequence of fear or shock.

Where are his people? Where was his home? He will probably never know. The chances of anyone claiming him now are small.

Franz is one of the thousands of lost children scattered all over Europe. The greater number of them are Czechs and Poles but there are long lists also of missing French children, and Belgian and Dutch. Vast edifices of card indexes with photographs and descriptions have been assembled at the UNHRA Tracing Bureau near Frankfurt. The names of parents and friends who are looking for children are systematically collated with descriptions of unidentified children, and enquiries are circulated by radio and post. Teams of searchers with a knowledge of many languages and dialects are at work. It is probable that children who remember their names and where they come from, and who have relatives living, will be reunited to them in time, or that some friend will be found who will give them a home. Such children wait and hope.

I have seen lost children of all ages in many countries, being cared for in collective homes. Most of these houses were devoid of all material comfort; every sort of equipment was lacking; some children had army blankets on their beds; they were lucky. But the people who looked after the children gave them kindness, and patient, understanding care, and that is their greatest need. Some of the older ones seemed relaxed and contented; they had formed new interests and new bonds. I saw a big boy occupying himself alone in the workroom of a hostel near Prague. He smiled and ~~XXXXX~~ smiled, but was unwilling to talk.

"He is too happy", the director explained to me; "He has just heard that his sister is alive ... The worst of it is", he added, "that when the letters are brought the children become so tense, and when one child receives good news there is always crying among the rest."

There were dozens of babies in these homes: dark little Slovaks, small blondes, who were probably German, one whom everyone declared must be Dutch; they were mostly "of unknown origin". They seemed as happy as any babies could be. But the children of about four, and many of the older ones, have a heartbreaking way of fixing their eyes on the director or on a visitor, drawing near, and standing there, breathlessly quiet, as if hoping, and afraid to hope.

While some of them are painfully missing a father or mother, or both, remembered and loved, others are consumed with a drear,

and are longing for somebody, anybody at all, who will want them and love them and be their own. Most of them will probably go to foster-families when all hope of finding their own people has been given up.

There is not much chance of re-union for the little ones, who know nothing about where they came from and can tell only their pet names or given names, nor for those who have forgotten, like Franz. Many seem to have forgotten. Those Jewish children who lived for years in hiding or with false identity papers, had to be warned by their protectors that to tell their real names would be very, very dangerous. Such a child may end by forgetting his name; and so may a child in the hands of enemies who will punish him if he shows any sign of remembering his language or his name.

Many of the children were lost by accident - separated from their families during hasty evacuations and panic flights. These have a fair chance of being traced.

The Russians, when they arrived as liberators in Czechoslovakia, sometimes had babies in the wells of their jeeps. They were good to the babies and tried to comfort them with sips of vodka. They had found them in the ditches and margins of the roads.

These infants will never be claimed. They were probably the natural children or foster-children of German girls who lost or abandoned them when fleeing, in terror of vengeance, from the victorious Russians and Czechs. Many of these are among the happy little ones whom I saw in the homes near Prague.

Small children who knew nothing but their given names were found on the sites of burnt out villages in Poland and Yugoslavia and Greece; in the ruined streets of Warsaw and Belgrade and Rotterdam. In all the invaded countries they have been found. The armies of liberation found in the concentration camps children who did not know whether they had ever possessed names, they knew only the numbers tattooed on their arms.

In those camps were others who showed no end of character and persistence in seeking out relatives and friends or otherwise acquiring homes and friends for themselves.

In Fairy Hill, a children's convalescent home near Dublin, is one of the merriest and handsomest little lads I have ever seen - a spinal case, obliged always to lie down. He was found in Belsen, with a little girl whom he called his sister. They were orphans and spoke Slovak. "My father is dead: now the doctor is my father", Zoltan declared. Zoltan adopted the Irish doctor and by sheer force of character got himself transported to Ireland, stretcher and little sister and all, with his Slovak grandmother's written consent. The nurses in the convalescent home have to exert all their self-discipline to resist the temptation to make a favourite of this little boy, with his dancing eyes, bubbling vitality and gypsy charm. He is happy: he has people who belong to him now.

Among children for whom parents and friends are seeking with diminishing hope are thousands who were kidnapped by the Nazis in the middle and later years of the war. It is believed that many of these - the blue eyed and fair haired ones, who were intelligent and healthy, may be alive. What has become of the others can only be guessed.

The German object in most of these seizures was to replenish the reduced population from healthy stock. I am afraid no doubt now remains that surgical and medical experiment was the purpose of some. A pretext was a statement to the effect that Poles had stolen German children who were now being restored to their own race - a pretext which probably no one believed. Not only Polish children were stolen. Great numbers were seized from their own homes and from orphanages in Czechoslovakia and, in the labour camps of Germany, children of slave workers from many countries were stolen while their parents were at work, or disappeared when a parent died. There were also the children - ninety-seven in number, of the Czech village of Lidice.

Of what happened to the children of Lidice the first stage is known. They came under a German Order for the disposal of children which has now been found. The decree was dated from Berlin-Halensee on the 19th February 1942.

Children were to be taken to a clearing house in Lodz and kept under observation there. The first selection of those who appeared suitable for Germanisation was to be made. These were to be subjected to blood tests, X-ray, psychological examination and intelligence tests. Those between six and twelve years of age who passed these tests were to be sent first to a special school, and then, if satisfactory, to families in Germany. Those between two and six years of age were to be given birth certificates dated from Lebensborn.

Lebensborn was the Maternity Colony in which German girls had "State babies". For such children no parental enquiry would ever be made, since their mothers were expected to leave their upbringing to the Government and their fathers had no interest in them. To mix the stolen children with those of Lebensborn, whether in collective homes, or with foster families, was an excellent device for obscuring their origin.

All the kidnapped children were, of course, given new German names. The lists cannot be found.

Now, even when the searchers suspect that a child is one of those stolen, the Germans with whom the child is living frequently declare that it is their own. No routine work with card indexes and broadcasts is going to bring most of these children home. Searchers with an exceptional flair, with intimate knowledge of dialects, and of the songs, prayers, games of children, with ingenuity, devotion and infinite perseverance, are required.

The story of the search for Vaclav Hanfa is typical both of the sort of difficulty encountered and the persistence required.

Vaclav Hanfa was a child of the village of Lidice. He was about five years old when the massacre and dynamiting took place. His father was shot and he, with his brother and sister and mother, were taken to the neighbouring town of Kladno and shut up in the school there for the night. Next day, all the women were sent to concentration camps and the children were sent East. The Hanfas' mother died in the concentration camp, but an aunt living in Kladno survived. Soon after the liberation the elder girl, Anna, was restored to her aunt. She begged the authorities to try to find her brother and sister. - "I know the name that they gave Vaclav", she told them, "It is Wenzel Strauss."

A lady of Prague set out with a list of lost children, accompanied by a small team of her friends. She would

prefer me to call her Madame N.

They traced the Lidice children to Lodz, and then to a village where they had been kept in an old castle for a time, with children from Lebensborn. A girl who had worked there was found. She remembered a Wenzel - but he was a Wenzel Hantz. Rumour led the trail to the neighbourhood of Salzburg, where there were unclaimed children in many hostels and camps. Madame N. examined the lists. There was a Wenzel of Vaclac's age - nine, but he was registered as Hans Wenzel, not Wenzel Hantz. But that might be an accidental reversal of the name ... it might be a mistake.... Hans Wenzel might be Wenzel Hantz... Wenzel Strauss.. Madame N. asked to see the child.

He was, it seemed, a German boy. He did not appear to understand Czech. When questioned he became confused and nervous and could tell nothing about himself. She made friends with him and sang with him - German songs. When he had grown relaxed and unselfconscious she began to sing a nursery rhyme in Czech.

"I have horses: I have black horses..."

The boy's face lit up; he joined in, singing in Czech: "The black horses are mine."

Vaclav, and his little sister, too, were with their Aunt and Anna for Christmas. "That", Madame N. told me with tears in her eyes, "was the happiest Christmas of my life."

But there are thousands and thousands of lost children, and not much money with which to finance the search for them, and not many people like Madame N. It seems that most of those children will wait in vain for that message of which they dream, night and day, with ever-lessening hope.