

## SOME ASPECTS OF JEWISH SOCIAL WORK IN EUROPE

aspects of the struggle of the Jewish people for existence. Just before the writer left Europe, he was told by several members of a people's committee that it was too bad he had to leave at that time, that when he first came he was just another American, but now he had learned to be a Jew. The writer prefers to paraphrase that comment with the thought that when he first came to Europe he was just another social worker. Is there any finer reward for those who have chosen Jewish social work as their profession?

It should be clear then that there is an important place for skilled, experienced Jewish social workers in overseas work which is not being filled today. The specialist and the administrator are needed and needed badly. The job they have to do is surely of great enough urgency so that some proportion of the *best qualified and most experienced* people, those who have important responsibilities in America and have thus far been least interested, can be spared for the assignment. The writer would be the last to suggest that Jewish social work in America be stripped of all of its best personnel for the overseas job. But just as surely as it was necessary for the Army to send a high proportion of its most able men to the battlefields of Europe while maintaining a good supply organization at home, it is also im-

perative for Jewish social workers to regard European needs as at least on a par with needs in America. The experience is certainly closely related to Jewish social work in America, except that the tempo is faster, the urgency greater, the setting different. But the knowledge that one is participating in an historic attempt to alleviate distress and build for the future of one's own people, the warmly expressed appreciation of those whom one is able to help, and the discovery of skills and talents that were never previously used—all of this offers tremendous satisfactions.

To fail to meet this kind of challenge, as the profession has thus far failed, leaves unanswered the often repeated accusation that we are careerists, interested more in narrow personal accomplishments than in genuine professional service, that we have lost claim to any real identification with the problems of world Jewry. Perhaps it will be necessary for our national agencies to take the responsibility for making certain that the need for qualified personnel for the overseas job is met adequately, instead of leaving the matter to chance, to those who just happen to be interested in overseas work. This is a question which ought to be considered at the earliest possible date by both lay and professional leaders.

## THE LETTERS OF EUROPEAN JEWISH CHILDREN

By CATHERINE VARCHAVER

*Child Care Division, World Jewish Congress*

THE Child Care Division of the World Jewish Congress, which is now about one year old, has been working out two projects, both of them based upon consideration of the deepest needs of war damaged Jewish children. These two projects are the Foster Parents Plan and the Correspondents' Service.

The Foster Parents Plan aims to provide for complete maintenance and education of Jewish children in Europe through pledges of \$300 per year made by individuals in this country. Our "Foster Parents" are not only money givers, but become foster parents in a very real sense, keeping in constant touch with the child through letters and personal gifts.

The second project is the Correspondents' Service for each Jewish child in Europe without any distinction as to where the child is living—with a member of his family, in foster care, or in a home supported by an organization other than the World Jewish Congress. In fact, we were deeply convinced that the first need of these children, after the war and occupation ceased, would be the need of "belonging", the need of love and affection which these children could not experience during the long years of their ordeal. If, before the end of the war, our projects were founded on a guess, the first letters of children which reached us directly or through the American correspondents early in

the Fall and Winter of 1945-46, proved that we have not been mistaken.

We planned the Correspondents' Service as an emergency project which should provide both material and moral support to the child. We have stressed that the moral support of the letters was even more important than the receiving of packages. Numerous letters from children have confirmed this.

"We thank you not so much for the new clothes but we are glad to know that there are people in the world who are thinking of us."

This general theme runs through hundreds of letters.

We have stated that the deepest need of the children was that of love and affection. Translated into action, this means finding some member of their families, or at least someone in the world who will think about them. We will return to this need later on but now we would like to emphasize that the letters from American friends also had a special meaning for the children and helped them to regain some assurance and self-respect. When they returned to "normal living" they very often did not find any members of their immediate families or relatives. They did not find the Jewish community which could take care of them. Often, they simply did not find any source of help at all.

At a time like that, a letter from America, which is the personification of

the strength and wealth of the world, a letter and a package from an American Jew who is willing to become the friend of a Jewish child in Europe, provides the psychological stimulus so necessary for the return of a child to normal life.

Let us mention, also, that at the time when we started our work (and we started it by organizing the Chanukah campaign in September-October, 1945), the need of receiving help in Europe aroused a correspondingly great need in American adults and children to provide this help. This was the most encouraging experience which we had during the three or four weeks in which we gathered the 7,420 packages and shipped them to different European countries. The money and packages came not only from those who could easily spare them but modest donations came from people in New York City and all over the country and from people of all walks of life.

This really gave us the opportunity to immediately convert this Chanukah package project into a permanent project of Correspondents' Service for European Jewish Children which developed very successfully through the last eight months.

There are now more than 6,000 children and adults in this country and in Latin America who correspond with a similar number of children in various European countries. The children on both sides are more and more enthusiastic and the results of this correspondence exceed all our expectations.

We would like to point out a few items which are touched upon in children's letters and which really constitute the most important problems of their lives. The first letter is always difficult to write. As we have already mentioned, the children generally tell

how overjoyed they are to receive a letter from an unknown friend in America and how encouraged they are to feel that someone in America is thinking about them. They tell their new friends about the deportation of their parents, about the deep sorrow they endure now that they are alone and no longer have any families. In different ways, they all tell the same story.

"During the war the Germans hunted the Jews. Since I was a Jew I had to hide during the entire war. My whole family has been killed; my mother is dead, my father deported, my aunts and uncles have disappeared. After all this misery I am now alone with a brother who is nineteen. It is very good to have a mother. I have lost mine and now that I have no mother I feel how much I miss her in everything."

This was the story told by 13 year old Charles R. of Belgium.

A Polish boy of 15, Itzhak W., writes:

"My mother and a brother of mine died in the mass graves of Rastapal. Three months before liberation by the Soviet Army, my father was killed by Polish-Ukrainian bands who served under the Germans. I remained alone."

Another Polish boy writes:

"The Red Army liberated the area where I lived but this happiness for which I waited so long did not bring me any real satisfaction. I went to Warsaw with the thought of finding my family but alas, instead of my family all I found was the ruins of what used to be my home. Then I realized the extent of my tragedy."

This is the real tragedy of the Jewish child—the tragedy of being without a family. Our task is to do whatever we can to rebuild this family or a part of a family, if it is possible to do so. We have taken it as our responsibility to find a new family for a child, a private family who will accept him as a member in a real way or at a distance, or to build a children's home which will try to substitute for the child's family.

This is what the World Jewish Congress is trying to do through the Foster Parents Plan. At the present time, the World Jewish Congress, through the Foster Parents Plan, is subsidizing about 1,500 Jewish children in various European countries.

These children live in homes opened or subsidized by the World Jewish Congress, or in families. We sincerely hope to be able to mobilize additional foster parents in this country and to support more children in Czechoslovakia, France, Hungary, Poland, etc. as, more than ever before, the Jewish children in Europe are in need of our help.

Another point which we wish to be frank about and which is not always mentioned in the letters, but is another tragedy of the Jewish child, is: having forgotten that he is a Jew—being ashamed and afraid to admit that he is a Jew. Having been told that the Christian God is better than the Jewish God and not forgetting easily the years which were spent among Christians, has had its effect.

This is indeed a very complicated situation which requires delicate handling. As great as our desire is to bring these children back to Judaism as soon as possible, we must first return them to physical and emotional health, reinforce their feeling of human dignity and then progressively bring them back to Judaism. In this Jews all over the world can help enormously by aiding the children themselves to come back to the faith and life of their people by organizing for them the best possible services for their general, professional and Jewish education.

Needless to say, Jewish teachers, educators and social workers are the most responsible persons building the future of Jewish children. It is our opinion,

however, that not enough emphasis is put on the training of this category of personnel who take care of the children. Jewish institutional workers, especially, are lacking all through Europe, and no serious efforts are made by any Jewish organization, according to our knowledge, to supply these institutions with new and highly qualified workers.

Nowhere could one find a better statement of this problem than in excerpts of two letters which we would like to quote to you.

In October, 1945, we got in touch with a Polish children's home in Otwock near Warsaw and children from this country started to write letters to children there. One American boy received a letter signed by a group of children in which the children explained to him that the boy to whom his letter was addressed was no longer with them because he found an aunt and went over to the American Zone of occupation in Germany.

"Do you know, Ori, (Ori is the name of the American correspondent) Peter (this is the name of the Polish boy who left the orphanage) wanted to be the leader of the Arabs. Don't laugh, Ori, but there was a time when Peter prayed to the Arab God Allah. Maybe really his wish will happen some day. Some of the boys on purpose made an organization called "Peter's Allies". What happened you can imagine. Our only luck was that our caretaker reigned over both parties."

Ori, a very orthodox Jewish boy, in answering this letter, probably asked the children why did Peter pray to the Arab God Allah. Did he think that the Jewish God was weaker than the Arab one? And then came the answer:

"You see, many of us were taught to hate the Jewish God. When we came to our house we changed right away, but some of us took a little longer in changing to Judaism."

It should not be forgotten that some children must take more time to come

back to Judaism and that indoctrination and any propaganda will not help them, only very profound respect for children's personalities. Only a careful approach to this complicated psychological problem and contact with people who have to guide the child, providing it with a religious, national or humanitarian idealism will help.

In each home where the children feel real love for the educational personnel, where they feel that they are guided to reach a definite higher aim, the children feel relieved and secure. Such is the children's home in Otwock. Such are many *Kibbutzim* in Poland and in other countries.

"I returned to Poland but I did not find any one of my very numerous family (always the same leit motive). I have remained alone, alone with my sorrow. Gradually others like me arrive. Lonely, orphaned, we assemble and we begin to be ourselves again. I was accepted into a group of children of the Mizrahi Kibbutz in Lodz. Here I found some relief, some healing for my wounds. I know now, together with my chaverim, I will realize the ideal that binds us all together, to build our Holy Land in the spirit of our Torah. My way is clear and I will not deviate for if I, one of millions like me, remained alive it is for the purpose of building the future of my people and the coming generation. This is the way I will go. I will never draw back."

This is how a boy of sixteen writes. All children certainly are not so determined as he is. All of them do not see so clearly the way to take but all of them can be guided in this or other similar ways by proper care, education and instruction.

Instruction—this is one of the points which we find so often touched upon in children's letters—Jewish striving for instruction which survived for thousands of years and still is as strong as it always was. A girl who describes her great joy in finding her aunt after the liberation

tells that one ordinary summer day, something happened which she will never forget. It was when her older sister unexpectedly came back from Germany—both of their parents having been killed by the Germans—

"We lived for some time together before I realized that I was not learning anything. Because of anti-semitism I could not attend public school and the only alternative I had was to enter a Jewish children's home."

In all European countries most of the children, during the last summer vacation, studied very hard to combine two terms in one. In their letters they proudly speak about having good grades in school and are very disturbed if they are not amongst the first pupils of their class.

The category of children which is now in the worst situation are the adolescent and young men and girls from 15 to 22. There are people who are astonished to learn that boys and girls of 18 to 20 still are living in some children's homes, and that we are looking for foster parents for these children. It is difficult to realize the tragic situation of these youngsters who not only had to spend three to four and even up to six years in hiding or working hard in camps or with private families, who lived in indescribable moral conditions. They did not learn anything for years. They are physically and emotionally broken. They have no support, no provision. They feel that the world around them would expect them at their age to earn a living and even to help their sick parents sometimes, and occasionally their younger brothers and sisters. But they are not equipped, neither physically, emotionally, nor vocationally, to go out into life. Special efforts must be made by all Jewish organizations to take care of these adolescents and to give

them the opportunity of becoming responsible members of adult society.

There is one more point which we would like to stress and which, as it seems to us, gives us a warning and invites us to be extremely careful in handling Jewish children. It is the contrast between the emotional instability which the children experience now compared with the extraordinary intellectual maturity of these children. In reading children's letters we can often not believe that such a letter comes from a child and not from an adult. This fact is even more striking when we are going over their autobiographies.

The childhood of a girl of fifteen and her sister who was four years old when the ordeal began, is described from the moment when her mother left both of them with a Gentile woman in Warsaw and went away.

"After mother left, I felt orphaned and it was very hard for me to get used to the new conditions of life. (She was then 12 years old.) As time passed I had to get used. My little sister was then only 4 years old and felt the absence of our parents very strongly. We were treated like servants and I had to get used to the caprices of our mistress in order to survive the war. Sometimes I was even beaten for not carrying out my duties perfectly. My little sister, too, began to feel it dangerous to admit that she was Jewish because such an admission could bring death and she also understood how to be especially careful not to anger our mistress. In spite of the fact that she was only a small child she already understood what a tragedy had befallen us and accepted our fate. After having been with this woman for a short period, we learned that we had become orphans. I felt then that every ray of hope had disappeared from my heart for I realized then that we are orphans with nobody to think of us and with nobody here to defend us with protecting wings against the knives of the murderers. Although I was young, I realized that we have to face life with courage and also understand all dangers."

The teacher in the Kibbutz where the children are now living describes the younger sister who is now seven years old.

"This child thinks like an adult. When she is asked a question, 'Tell me something about yourself', she answers: 'I cannot. I experienced too much and I cannot explain all that in words. The lashings which I received from my guardians in the Aryan section of the city hurt me too much.' Very often you can see her in the closet crying. It is a habit which remains from the time of German occupation when she had to hide there from the Gestapo for the greater part of the day. Often she sits thinking and then she says: 'I want to go into the world and look for my mother. She is very old and cannot find me.'"

The children, younger and older ones, want their mothers, and sometimes this desire is strong enough to lead the child to serious emotional disturbances. Many of these children should be given proper psychiatric treatment.

Here is a case described by a social worker in France:

"A young man repatriated several months ago and physically overhauled, is asked what he wants to do now. 'I don't care. I want the apartment of my parents. I want at least the furniture, the photos, because I'll never have them again.' He is told that unfortunately the Germans have taken it but we shall try to find him a room and furniture. He replies, 'I don't care'.

"We ask him, 'Do you want to study, to learn a trade?' He replies, 'No, I don't care. I am 19 but I want my mother, I want my mother. Why did I come back if I couldn't find my mother and not even her photo, nothing, nothing—never again'. A few weeks later, despite the efforts of a friendly environment, we had to take him to a psychiatric clinic."

A Belgian social worker who recently came to this country, told us that all the boys and girls who returned from concentration camps can roughly be divided into three groups. The first group simply do not care for anything. They learn through experience that life is not

## THE LETTERS OF EUROPEAN JEWISH CHILDREN

much, "it hangs by a hair and as long as you have it, you had better enjoy it". They look for happiness, joy, and nothing more.

"What would give you pleasure, Mademoiselle?"

"Since I now have the right to live again, I would like to get some lipstick and powder."

They want to enjoy life, to be like others, to forget everything. A physician in this country tells about a young person released from a concentration camp who came to see him and asked for a diet to lose weight. He examined her and found that her entire system was in need of rebuilding. When he very carefully tried to speak to her and to persuade her to improve her condition, she insisted that the only thing she wanted was to lose weight and she never returned to see him.

The youngsters of the second group won't do anything but live from the black market and even worse. There can be no doubt that many do this as revenge.

A visit in a prison: Joseph is imprisoned for stealing and for three escapes. He is eighteen. His parents were deported. "Why did you do it?" Answer: "Why did they kill my parents?"

A boy of 17: "You say that the black market is bad. Is it better to take away from a boy of 13 his mother and his sisters, to have them gassed hundreds of kilometers away? They have done a bad thing to me, a thing so bad that it will never be blotted out. All right! I want to

do something bad, too, something bad, bad. I will use my whole life to try to get even."

Fortunately, there is a third group, those who still feel the beauty of nature, the beauty of decent, human relationship, the beauty of life. Such is a sick girl to whom a social worker brought a bunch of roses.

"It is so long since I have seen flowers and these are so beautiful". Tears welled up in her eyes.

Such is this little girl of five who has lived in a concentration camp for four years and who when she was brought to Paris was astonished by everything—that one sits at a table for breakfast, that one has such a complicated bed with mattresses, sheets, blankets, cushions, bed covers; that there are streets with stores; that one meets people who are decently dressed. This little girl of five starts to laugh and to cry when we bring her a flower and repeats incessantly, "It is too beautiful, it is too beautiful, I want more".

These are children for whom we have made ourselves responsible. We must give them all the love which they deserve. We must help them to grow up as strong, balanced, proud, human beings who will be capable of carrying along the heritage of Jewish people and of building a new form of life for those to come.

## THE AGRICULTURAL COUNSELLOR

By GABRIEL DAVIDSON

*The Jewish Agricultural Society*

EVERY war in which the United States has been engaged was followed by a trend to the farm. There are strong indications that World War II will be no exception. Since VE Day and VJ Day, and even before, veterans, former war workers, displaced white collar folk, including refugees, have been coming to The Jewish Agricultural Society to discuss the advisability of taking up farming as a means of livelihood. Only a few have had a farm background. Most know no more about farming than what they read in bulletins and real estate prospectuses, if that much. How should the latter be advised?

It cannot be gainsaid that the trained man has a decided advantage over the man without training or background. But it does not follow that the untrained man is doomed to failure. Were training and background so absolutely essential many Jewish farmers would have been turned aside and Jewish farm communities would be without some of their most progressive members. Nor would there now be rooted in the soil several thousand refugees who came to their farms untrained, soft-handed, some middle-aged and over.

Schooling is not to be disparaged. But how can the man who is no longer a youngster, the veteran, for instance, who emerges from the army at the age of thirty or more, who is either married or contemplates marriage, who cannot

afford the time for the education generously offered by the GI Bill of Rights—how can this man gain access to the land? Or how can the displaced non-veteran afford the time and the money? Through sheer necessity, the Society was forced to find an answer in reversing the process of teaching and settlement, settling the man first and bringing the teaching to him afterwards—right on his own farm.

Forty or fifty years ago, governmental educational aids were still in their infancy and where available, were designed largely for the already established farmer, not for the raw recruit. Furthermore, there was the language barrier. The Jewish farmer needed something more than government bureaus could be expected to accord. To meet the need, the Society inaugurated a system of services which in time came to take in virtually every phase of farming and every aspect of farm life. The chief educational instrument is the individual visit, possible only in the more populous Jewish farm districts, whereby instruction is carried direct to the man on the farm by travelling teachers picked for their scientific training, their pedagogic ability, their temperamental fitness and their Jewish background. Incidentally, the Society's itinerant instruction antedated by several years the systematic agricultural county agent work made possible by congressional enactment in