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R E P O R T
on the Children's Village
at
the Detention Camp for Jewish Refugees
in
C Y P R U S

by
Maurice Pearlman

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Xylotimbou (Cyprus), May 1947:- I am writing this in the world's strangest village. Above, the sun burns from a sky of cloudless blue with the unseasonable intensity of a sub-tropical summer. To the immediate east the calm tideless waters kiss the sands in a ceaseless gentle lapping. To the west the changing rays give tonal variety to the russet on the range of low hills. For this village is set in one of the most beautiful of the Mediterranean isles - Cyprus.

Yet it is not beauty that gives uniqueness to this village. The strangeness comes from the population. For this community is made up of two thousand youngsters ranging in age from five to seventeen, forming one of the most heterogeneous groups in the world. These young boys and girls come from more than a dozen countries: Poland, Russia, Rumania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Austria, Lithuania, Latvia, Sweden, Belgium, France and Holland. They come from different classes, different social groups, different backgrounds. Each has a different story, each a different experience. Each has a case history. Each speaks at least two of a dozen different languages. One thing alone they share in common: all are European Jews - with all that that implies in this post-second-war-world. It means for one thing that most of them are orphans. It means, for another, that all have an experience of suffering and travel - the hard way - across a half dozen underground frontiers. These youngsters are survivors of the death camps of war-torn Europe - often the sole survivors of their families. After journeying the 'Pimpernel' route of Europe, they have made the clandestine trip across the Mediterranean in one of the Haganah ships, reached Palestine, been refused entry, and transported to Cyprus. Here in Cyprus they have become citizens of Kfar Hanoar, the Children's Village, living in a community of youth, preparing their shattered lives for intelligent and constructive citizenship in Palestine.

Their heterogeneous composition is not the sole feature that makes their community the strangest in the world. Their village does not shade off into garden suburbs that lead to the freedom of woods or sea. The limits of their home are carefully circumscribed and sharply defined. They are demarcated by

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a barbed wire fence. At each corner of their compound is a watchtower guarded by armed British sentries. Powerful projectors from the towers shine all night long over the high fences to light up would-be escapees. By day, the barbed perimeter is the boundary for their ball games, the 'turn back' sign for their strolls, the grim reminder of their origin.

Nor do these features exhaust the qualities of strangeness. For despite the barbed wire and despite the varying backgrounds of each constituent member of this group, an educational system has been introduced on the progressive school pattern. To achieve any kind of instruction under such conditions is creditable, for difficulties are great, facilities meagre, and even preliminary basic requirements of living unsatisfactory. The educational system that has in fact emerged is indeed a triumph of ingenuity. Each day in the Children's Village, for teachers and pupils alike, is an adventure in improvisation.

The Village is run jointly by the Youth Aliyah (Youth Immigration) Department of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, and the American Joint Distribution Committee. It represents a type of educational pioneering unparalleled in the world. Even in Palestine, where there is a similar problem of heterogeneity, no such large numbers have been concentrated in a single unit; there is no barbed wire; no internment camp restriction; no lack of basic educational materials such as chairs, tables, classrooms, books, paper, pencils or blackboards.

The experiment is succeeding. And its success is largely due to imaginative administrative and educational direction. This is in the hands of Hanoeh Reinhold of the Education Department of Youth Aliyah, with a wealth of experience in teaching and directing the instruction of youth immigrants from Europe to Palestine since 1933; Akiba Vanchozger, for the last twenty years one of the pillars of Ben Shemen, the highly successful children's village in Palestine; Moni Langerman, one time teacher in the progressive school at Mishmar Haemek; Mindel of the Communal Settlement Alonim; Miriam of the religious youth movement; and Mosheh, graduate of Ben Shemen, who is in charge of sports. The "Joint" director

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for Cyprus is Morris Laub, a warm-hearted man of initiative and courage with a long experience of social welfare work in the United States of America, Greece and Italy.

The purpose of the Children's Village is to educate the child not so much by cramming a stock of knowledge into his head, as by awakening, stimulating and encouraging his interests; to instil in the child a sense of independence, confidence and responsibility; to develop individual initiative; to make him fit for responsible citizenship in a democratic society; to prepare him for a life of pioneering in Palestine; to root out the memories of the unpleasant past and turn the child's attention to a fruitful, productive and happy future; to neutralise the abnormalities of immediate past experience, or rather to bend that experience to constructive purposes.

Such aims would be ambitious even with a normal homogeneous group living in normal conditions. With this community these aims seem fantastic. And yet they are being achieved in some measure against all the odds. And those odds are formidable. Let me list the primary difficulties.

British authorities refuse these child refugees entry into Palestine. They brought them to Cyprus. They are therefore responsible for their upkeep, though the costs are borne not by the British taxpayer but by the Palestine Government. The army upkeep is minimal. The children sleep in Nissen huts or tents. They receive in theory 2,500 calories of food a day, - in fact, less - supplemented by some 600 calories by the American Joint Distribution Committee. This may be more than that received by refugees in Europe, but it is still insufficient. And calory figure gives a poor clue to vitamin content and quality. Neither is seriously adequate. The children always have the feeling that they could eat another meal. Most are inadequately clothed. Few of the huts or tents have any lighting. The few that have enjoy the luxury of a hurricane lamp. There is a grim shortage of water. There are no classrooms. A few Nissen huts have been set aside for the purpose. But this has been at the expense of normal

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housing. And these cover only a minute fraction of needs. Even these improvised classrooms are without adequate furniture. Some are without tables and chairs. Only seven have blackboards. Notebooks are scarce. So are pencils. And textbooks have to be shared by more than a reasonable number. In some cases, one textbook has to suffice for a class of twenty. I spent a few days this week with a group who were using a wash-house as a classroom. The children sat on the dried-up floor; the teacher stood leaning against one of the taps. That, for me, was as good a summing up as anything I had come across all the time I was in the camps, of the water shortage, the teaching facilities and the talent for improvisation among the refugees in Cyprus.

Nor is the population static. Departures are comparatively infrequent. Some children are included in the meagre monthly quota of immigrants to Palestine. This has so far been at the rate of 750 a month. But this is uncertain; it is dependent upon the number of immigrants who successfully run the British blockade off Palestine. This month, for example, the quota was cut to 375. The arrivals, too, are irregular. A shipload of refugees may arrive any day. The Haganah ship on which I travelled - the Theodor Herzl - carried nearly 800 youngsters who have joined the Children's Village. Sudden absorption of such numbers, of whose arrival clearly no ample warning can be given, yet who have to be received and settled in at a moment's notice, is a formidable tax on ingenuity and organising skill. Add to all this the barbed wire around the compound and you may get some slight impression of the Herculean tasks that face the heads of the village.

Yet the results after the few brief months since the Children's Village was started are remarkable. Already the signs are bold that the community is becoming a homogeneous unit; that the children are losing their immediate past memories in an eager and fruitful present; that they are learning to speak a common tongue - Hebrew - which they seem to pick up with amazing rapidity; that they are beginning to express their individual personalities for the first time in their lives; that, also for the first time, they feel themselves real live persons in their own right.

They run much of the village themselves. They participate, within the limitations of camp life, in most of the arrangements covering their lives. The curriculum alone is out of their hands. This follows the programme laid down by the Youth Aliyah Education Department and adapted by the Palestinian delegation of experts to suit local conditions. They live in groups belonging to one or other of the pioneer youth movements of which usually they have been members in Europe either before or during the war, or in the post-war D.P. camps. These movements are affiliated to the Communal Settlement Organisations in Palestine. Each group has its own representative at general meetings of the village. And each group has its guide, usually older than the rest, who helps on the administrative side of the group's life - shelter and food - and who often also acts as teacher and tutor during leisure hours, both for curricular and extra-curricular subjects.

The bulk of the children fall into the age group of fourteen to seventeen. Some two hundred and fifty are between the ages of eight and fourteen. The five to eight year olds number about fifty. There are an average of twenty pupils to a class.

The general pattern of education is formal instruction in school subjects for half the day and work the other half. The children attend classes four hours each morning five days in the week with a two hour session on Fridays. Classes are held in the early mornings before the sun becomes too hot. The curriculum covers Hebrew grammar and literature; Palestino-graphy - Palestine history, geography and the life of the people; mathematics; music and physical culture.

The educational plan is that the second half of the day should be given over to work in the fields, the smithy, the joinery, the workshop, in addition to domestic work. But barbed wire encroaches upon theoretic planning to restrict the area of land available for agricultural instruction. And so in practice there is room for only thirty pupils at a time. Inadequate means prevent more than twenty or thirty from receiving instruction in the workshops. "Inadequate means" include insufficient tools, materials, workshop space, instructors. Arrangements

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are under way to enlarge the scope of vocational instruction within the coming weeks; but even this may not do more than scratch the surface. The pupils have to take periodic turns in manual training. These periodic intervals are too long.

For the vast majority, therefore, "work" covers domestic labour alone. The children make their own beds, clean their own rooms or tents, take turns in cleaning wash-rooms and latrines, help in the kitchen as aids to the cook, lay the table, wash dishes. They launder their own clothes. This helps to make the children self-reliant and to give them a sense of personal responsibility. The children also help make their own clothes. The army supplies an insufficient amount of underwear and no ready-made clothing. Instead it provides a certain quantity of cloth which the children make up themselves. There are, in addition, occasional labours on which the children may be engaged from time to time. The current fashion for example is to build light, trellis-supported canopies between the Nissen huts to serve as shaded classrooms in the hot weather. Working assignments are arranged by the tutors' committee in conjunction with the children's representatives.

When I reached the camps in Cyprus, many of the young boys and girls in the Children's Village were constructing an open-air amphitheatre in part of the fenced-in area outside their tents. There was a natural bowl which they were terracing in semi-circular tiers. They completed the job by the First of May, and at night there was a climactic celebration with a torchlit dramatic show staged by the children themselves. This might have been an open-air amphitheatre performance in any one of the Palestinian Communal Settlements. Only the projector from a nearby watch-tower, which played over the barbed fencing in which we were enclosed, reminded us that we were still in Cyprus.

Leisure hours are given over partly to informal talks, discussions and tutorials. The children play games within the limited space and with the very limited sports equipment available. Matches are arranged, both inter-group and inter-camp fixtures, in which the Children's Village fields teams. Musical

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recitals are frequent. Some semblance of an 'orchestra' has been formed consisting of a dozen children all playing the recorda. They have their own Children's Village choir. They learn Palestinian folk dances and spend much free time practising to music provided by a single harmonica. They take part in dramatic presentations written usually by one or more of the teachers. They read. And they have a library and a reading room, named after Henrietta Szold, "mother" of Youth Aliyah. But they cannot claim to have a sufficiency of books.

In normal schools in most countries expulsion is the ultimate sanction if the child is refractory. Here in Cyprus the system of discipline and punishment must be based on quite other premises. Expulsion is clearly impossible. For what will the orphan do, where will he go, who will take care of him? Discipline is maintained through public opinion. "What will my comrades say, and what will other groups think?" Since each group and each youth movement in the village likes to be exemplary, the feeling "I must not let down my group" acts as an effective restraint.

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Perhaps the major problem in the Children's Village is that of teachers. These are drawn from among the refugees themselves, and they are doing a magnificent job, at the cost of much energy and personal leisure. But, only comparatively few have professional qualifications. The majority are usually young men and women with a secondary school education at most, and reasonable powers of command, whose principal asset is experience of group leadership - often with the very group of whom they have charge in the Children's Village. Most of the children on the Haganah ship on which I came were being looked after by group leaders-cum-teachers with whom they had already travelled, by underground, across half the frontiers of Europe. Most teachers are in fact combination instructors, group leaders, guides.

Instruction follows the tutorship pattern. Each guide - Madrich as he is called - is responsible for carrying out the curriculum during the formal hours of school, and holding informal seminars during leisure periods on some non-academic topic. All

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teachers speak Hebrew. They live with their group and are the child's principal guide and source of influence.

It is clear though that since the majority are without pedagogic qualifications, the standard of instruction varies from group to group. Some of the tutors are first class. Others are very poor. Where, in the opinion of the Palestinian experts, a teacher is far below the standard one should reasonably expect of a person in charge of children, they will approach the representative of the youth movement to which the tutor belongs and request his substitution by a more suitable person. If this fails, representation is made to the Vaad Hamadrichim, the tutors' committee, and a change requested.

In the main the tutor of a group teaches all subjects. A few of the teachers are specialists, and arrangements are made for them to circulate among the classes, instructing in their subjects. There are not enough such specialists. At the time of writing six are expected from Palestine who will teach all groups. Their visas seem to be held up for the moment.

The discerning will recognise that teachers are as much a problem as pupils. Indeed, in the preliminary months, the Palestinian directors of the village spent most of their time instructing the instructors and directing the guides. For pedagogic limitation is not always the only inadequacy. These tutors are after all themselves refugees, themselves 'Maapilim', people who have lost homes and possessions, ex-concentration camp inmates; they are themselves survivors of Nazi horror. They too are not 'normal' people with a calm and untroubled past history. Their lives too need mending. They too need physical and spiritual rehabilitation. And so to guide and help the group leader was the principal task of the Palestinian directors when they set up the Children's Village. And it still figures prominently in their list of major functions.

As for the children, you have to live with them before you can touch even the surface of that vast hinterland of strange experience they have already crowded into their young lives. Some youngsters have lived in half a dozen countries, slip easily from

Polish into Russian, from Russian into Hungarian, ~~Hungarian into Yiddish.~~ Some cannot recall that they ever had a mother. Some spent the war years in the neighbourhood of crematoria where their relatives were burnt. Some saw their fathers disappear into the gas chamber. Some witnessed mass shootings of Jews in their village. Some lived with Partisans. Some spent the war years hiding in the forests. Some spent long months in underground caverns never seeing the sun from one season to the next. Some were taken care of by Christian peasants, brought up as non-Jews, and bought back by Jewish relief committees after the war. Some fled from Poland to Russia, spent the war years in Siberia and Uzbekistan before their repatriation. Some were mascots of Red Army units and travelled with the soldiers. Every single concentration camp in Europe has at least one survivor among the children of this youth village. There is hardly a forest in Europe or the Balkans where one of the children has not wandered for part of his life.

Eleven year old Yisrolek with the blue eyes and the quick laugh is already a tough wanderer over the hard roads of Europe. We crossed the Mediterranean in the same Haganah ship. He has had no formal schooling, for he was four when his home life in Poland was shattered and he had to begin his wanderings. His parents and two older brothers were killed in 1941. He fled to the forests. There he lived with the Partisans, and later with a gang of highwaymen. He learned the art of scrounging, broke bread with skilled thieves, shared a blanket with fearless brigands. Yet he is curiously free of most anti-social taints. He knows somehow that it is wrong to steal, but that it was part of the "live or die" order under which he then existed. He knows now that in civilised society where life is properly ordered stealing should have no place. And despite the absence of formal schooling he has a live intelligence that is not wild and a degree of knowledge that seems cultivated. He talks with the maturity of a grown-up man of experience. That is in fact what he is. Yet he seems to have lost none of the infectious eagerness and talent for mischief one meets in a clever school child. We have sat together on the boat deck and I have listened to him singing

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Red Army songs, Polish folk songs, Yiddish Partisan songs. And he is one of the contributors to the excitement of many of my hours on the good ship Theodor Herzl. Here in the Children's Village he has taken his place with his young friends who are being taught to get used to civilised society.

Fourteen year old Baruch is more of a problem than Yisrolek. He is a Polish boy who was holidaying with his pious grandfather in the country when Poland was overrun and he was cut off from his home in Warsaw. His parents were killed in the first month of the war. His grandfather, too old to leave his village, sent Baruch off to Russia with friends. In the Soviet capital he was sent to a Suborov school, the orphanage where children receive a military education. He was ten when he broke out of school and joined a strange group of Lubovici chassidim who had set up a refugee headquarters in Samarkand. Here young Baruch recaptured something of the atmosphere in his grandfather's home. His clipped hair, Suborov style, grew once again and he even wore the curled sidelocks affected by the pious chassid. After the war he returned to Poland, found no trace of his family, joined the thousands who were tramping westwards. Traced by an uncle in America who arranged for him to emigrate to the United States, Baruch would have none of it. "Aratz" was where he wanted to go - Palestine. And so he too found himself on a Haganah ship, reached the Palestine coast, and was shipped to Cyprus by the Royal Navy. He has only been here a few weeks. And he does not find it easy to settle down to ordered life, with his superimposed montage of Lubovic, grandpa's home, Suborov drill, chassidic dances, frontier crossings, a British boarding party and tear gas bombs. His case is not untypical.

Thirteen year old Haim already knows something of Poland, Russia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Austria at first hand. He knows their forests and he knows their frontiers. He knows little of his family, for he lost sight of them after a pogrom in his Polish village six years ago. With a few Jewish male survivors he pushed off into the woods. From there he went to Russia; from there, in the wake of a Red Army unit, to Hungary; and after the

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liberation, back to Poland, through to Czechoslovakia and a D.P. camp. His capacity for "organisation" seems limitless. "Organisation" is the euphemism for securing the means of life - a tent flap for a pair of trousers; a measure of rope for sandals; a sack for a shirt; a tent peg for firewood; a stray tin of bully beef for lunch.....

Here in the Children's Village he has to be re-educated to a new type of life, in which the means of existence are secured by ways other than 'scrounging' and 'organising'; and trained for the life of pioneering which he will live in Palestine. The task of the teachers is to develop the talents boys like Haim and Baruch and Yisrolek possess to constructive purpose, to canalise them along a productive line, to bend them to civilised pursuits, without destroying initiative. The task is not easy. For basic need in food, clothing and shelter is not always satisfied in the Cyprus camps. Moreover, children in their early teens do not quickly lose habits and ideas acquired with limpetlike firmness during the formative years. The teachers cannot start with a tabula rasa. They have to root out memory and anti-social practice, and then prepare the child and adolescent for life in normal society. That is the most the Children's Village can hope to do. It is a kind of emergency educational service, a combined pre- and re-education. If they can succeed it is much. The final part of the job will be done in Palestine under the auspices of the Youth Aliyah in an atmosphere of freedom and normalcy.

Here in Cyprus, as we have seen, conditions are about as abnormal as they can be. And despite their administrative segregation as a community of youth, the children are still camp inmates, in daily touch with grownups in adjoining camps. Their life is still the life of prisoners in a stiffly guarded compound. And they are touched by the prevailing atmosphere of refugees anxiously awaiting the moment when they can proceed to Palestine. The frustrations and bitterness of their elders are part of their mood too. And conflicts between the camp inmates and the authorities on the free side of the barbed wire have their impact on the Children's Village. When refugees are shot by guards - there were two

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grave shooting incidents within the last two months, one of them while I was in the camps - the effects are felt by the youth. The tension that followed was all-embracing. When the refugees went on a four day hunger strike, the Children's Village, though officially excluded, also fasted part of that time.

They cannot and do not live in a vacuum. They are, and they feel, part of the great problem of Jews who have suffered, have braved much to reach Palestine, and then been diverted to spend useless months and possibly years marking bitter time until 'arithmetic justice' permits them to be useful members of Palestine society. These youngsters were not allowed to escape history during the war years under Nazidom. They are not allowed to escape it now. To the authorities they are not innocent young folk in desperate need of rebuilding their lives in an atmosphere of liberty. They are Jews, criminals who sought to safeguard their future by running the blockade to Palestine. Babe and grandfather, youngster and grownup, all must share a common penalty behind the barbed wire of a Cyprus camp. And if this sets back their education, too bad. If this retards their development, if their health suffers, if their psychological stability is affected, it is just unfortunate.

This then is the mood in which teachers and Palestine directors of the Children's Village have to guide their young community. The task is almost superhuman. The wonder is that there are volunteers prepared to tackle it at all. That they succeed in no mean measure verges on the miraculous. To an outside visitor like me, living with them, seeing them at work, spending weeks with the children in this strange village of youth-orphans behind barbed wire - , is an adventure in faith revival. It rejuvenates one's faith not only in the future of Jewry but also in human nature.