

THE SAVE THE CHILDREN FUND
20 Gordon Square, London, W.C.1. England.

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON SMUGGLING CHILDREN IN AACHEN AND GENERAL CONDITIONS
OF THEIR HOME LIFE AND BACKGROUND. DECEMBER, 1947.

As intimated, we had no set plan to work to when we arrived in Aachen on 1st November. We were prepared to build our endeavours for these children upon the result of our findings in the light of experience, leaving the organisation elastic. We did plan a central organisation in the shape of two Nissen huts which are still in the course of erection adjoining the Kaiser Platz - the Black Market centre of Aachen. Here, two specially trained young women were to occupy the spare time of these school age children with useful occupational games and handicrafts. It was, and still is, visualised that we must have the closest co-operation of the German Education Authorities in directing persistent cases of smuggling children to these huts. Obviously, some kind of meal must be provided, probably consisting of a fairly nourishing soup, and this will place a severe strain on our dwindling monthly supplies, so much so, that if our incoming stores do not increase we shall be unable to maintain any consistent feeding.

Smuggling is by no means a new thing in Aachen, and is not the aftermath effect of war. Situated as it is between the two frontiers of Belgium and Holland, it has always been to the daring and unscrupulous a source of remuneration. Admittedly, the situation is now severely aggravated by the food shortage in Germany, which makes the illegal crossing of the border - if not caught - an extremely profitable excursion.

The law does not allow a child to be imprisoned - hence child smugglers. The parents of the children caught are threatened with court proceedings, and in some flagrant cases, punished, but when one considers the astronomical figure of 1600 a month, (child cases) it is quickly realised that no normal measures would suffice; indeed, the local gaol has been so full that no more persons could be taken. There are 20,000 children under fourteen years of age in Aachen town alone, and one shudders at this potential.

Our first enquiries led us to Frontier Control, and let me say at the outset that every help and consideration has been given us by this harassed and overworked department. At the Frontier Post we witnessed the interrogation of the apprehended children, and the search of clothing, by a Frontier Control Officer for any illicit goods. The amount of lying and evasion engaged in by these sometimes tiny children aged six years is pitiful, and the cunning measures adopted to conceal the goods is amazing. One small boy, aged six, had a padded vest filled with coffee beans, and another, the lining of his coat collar stuffed with the same thing.

Not all the children cross the border at the instigation of their elders; some go independently and alone; others conversant with the woods and country of the Forbidden Zone lead gangs of men across. In many instances they visit relatives in Belgium, particularly in the Eupen area. Naturally, in the past, intermarriage has taken place between these border dwellers, and now on one side there is hunger, and on the other food enough and to spare. The greatest problem is the Belgium Border. The Dutch frontier is fairly free from smugglers, perhaps owing to its greater distance from Aachen - on this point we are not yet clear.

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From our journies to the Frontier we have brought back as many first offenders and small children as we can cram into a 15 cwt truck. The inveterate and hardened crossers we ignore at the moment, as they need more specialised treatment which we hope will soon be possible. In the homes to which we have taken the children, we have interviewed the parents and pointed the moral. Some families we have found in desperate want. To give just one instance - a family of six - father, mother and four young children living in such squalor that on entering the unplastered and damp room in which they lived, one held ones breath from a feeling of despair. The mother has cancer, the father, heart disease. Naturally we are doing what we can for this family.

Such is the plight of many hundreds of children in Aachen to-day. Their school hours are unavoidably short and for the rest of the day they must play in the rubble-filled streets or in their slum rooms. The adventure and remuneration of smuggling is the choice they make. Meanwhile they are leaning on no other trade. What of their future?

At the end of our first month here, we feel more than ever convinced that no half measures will suffice, if any real impression is to be made on this problem. The utmost co-operation between the team, German and British Education and Frontier Control will have to be maintained and to our minds, a joint campaign planned. A large barracks, possibly for use as a detention and training home has been suggested by C.C.G. Education Branch, with whom, naturally we have already made contact. There has hitherto existed a very awkward situation for Frontier Control when they have been forced to commit parents of children to prison, awaiting trial. The problem of where to place the children meanwhile, proved insoluble owing to the present overcrowding of the existing children's homes. We have now arranged accommodation in one of the Old Peoples Homes for this purpose.

(Signed) SIDNEY BEAN.
Section Leader.