

Social service at the channel ports

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SOCIAL SERVICE AT THE CHANNEL PORTS

A Swiss Lady's Devoted Efforts

It is no exaggeration to say that from the kindness of a Swiss woman's heart, her practical sense and devotion to what she recognised as an humanitarian need calling for action, a social service of considerable importance has come into existence and continues being carried mainly by her personal efforts at the main ports of entry to the U.K. from the Continent. It is the provision of human help and guidance mainly to young foreign girls in trouble on their arrival at Dover and Folkestone, who are refused entry for one reason or another but lack the means or the will to make their way back home again.

The number of such improvident travellers arriving without permits or even as much as their return fare may be relatively small amongst some 3,000 refusals of entry a year, but their plight is great and pitiable especially when it concerns inexperienced girls often still in their teens who in such desperate situations could so easily lose all their moral stamina and fall a prey to the white slave traffic with its hidden tentacles watching and waiting everywhere. A little kindly help and sympathy at the crucial moment, a gently guiding voice and some practical action can make all the difference for the whole future of these mere children bumping up against the harsh realities of the laws and officialdom of a foreign country.

It needed a warm-hearted woman on the spot to perceive the urgent need of such help and to determine to provide it with what little resources she could muster for this self-chosen task, a woman of high intelligence as well, capable of dealing effectively with authorities and difficult parents all over the Continent. And we are doubly proud that it was a Swiss woman, herself a happy mother of grown-up daughters, who thus found this exacting vocation to which she is still devoting herself unstintingly and most competently. It is Mrs. M. H. Ellis, M.B.E., President of the Swiss Welfare Office in London and Honorary Organiser of the Committee for the Welfare of Migrants (Kent Council of Social Service) — married to an Englishman, but still retaining her Swiss nationality. How it all came about and how her work grew from an almost casual start to its present international and humanitarian significance, Mrs. Ellis told a recent Open Meeting of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique in all modesty as if it was something anyone else could and would have done equally well in her place, living nearby in Folkestone.

It started after the War when several thousand Swiss au-pair girls began coming here every year. Mrs. Ellis was asked by the Association des Amies de la Jeune Fille in Switzerland to interest herself in them in her area and soon got acquainted with the difficulties arising in some cases at the ports especially in the wake of the Aliens' Order of 1953 when the possession of a valid passport was no longer sufficient to enter Britain. We continue the narrative in her own inimitably sincere and factual words.

"I heard of girls put in cattle trucks by the French Railways to the Swiss border — of some who slept on the beach in Calais before hitch-hiking home. Girls were solicited on the cross channel boats — with British or French Police helpless — as this is no man's land.

"More and more I was called to the Harbour to assist girls when they were refused. An Immigration Officer said to me: Calais is no place for a stranded girl — in France prostitution is big business — boats go out to North Africa and South America — in Lille 50 Cafés

and small boarding houses are owned or managed by men with criminal records or by prostitutes — the French Police is tough.

"Obviously a short and a long term policy was needed, I searched for a Hostel in Calais, and a little later one was opened for French girls and the warden agreed to take "my girls" as well. The Freundinnen Junger Mädchen" and "Pro Filia" of Switzerland gave 300 Swiss francs each a year towards the cost for a number of years, the Swiss Consul in France agreed to guarantee bed and breakfast and the evening meal for any girl in need and arranged with French Railways to carry them to Lille, his place of Office, he then helped with repatriation. Other Consulates followed suit and I made similar Hostel arrangements in Boulogne and Ostend. Some girls stay at the Hostel until I can make the necessary arrangements for them to come to England. Later the Hostel in Calais received a large grant from a French Government Fund. It's Secretary was very anxious to help me. The only hitch occurred when the Mayor of Calais complained that the Fund was for tramps and prostitutes and we refused to accept either at the Hostel!! But it turned out to be simply a matter of adjusting the terms of reference. Some school mistresses and students from a Training College in Switzerland have in the past years given a hand or even replaced the warden for a few weeks during their summer holidays.

"Our then Ambassador, Monsieur Daeniker, suggested that BIGA prepare an information leaflet on entry conditions to be made available to employment agencies in Switzerland, which arrange jobs in England. This brought the number of refusals of entry down drastically within two years — and the idea was taken up by the Social Advisory Group in London. Together with the Foreign Office and Central Office of Information they published the booklet "The Au Pair and Young Foreign Worker" which is available not only in England but at all British Embassies throughout Europe.

"We also had to find ways and means of helping those who were afraid to go back home. "The "Seraphisches Liebeswerk" in Solothurn came to our rescue. They have pleasant accommodation and a resident welfare worker . . . But not only girls were in need of assistance. Sometimes whole families had to be cared for.

"When the Immigration Authorities found the Swiss well provided for, they asked if something could be done for others. . . Impossible to refuse when there was no one else to help. In Folkestone and Dover where 5½ million travellers come through the ports, 3,000 a year are refused entry, which is half the number of all the refusals at any ports and airports in the U.K. In addition to the usual flow are those who come from trouble spots anywhere in the world — earthquake refugees from Sicily — unemployed from Coruna — from Cyprus, Nigeria during the Civil war and from Greece in the coup last spring — Israelis and Arabs during hostilities. Many I help to be repatriated when they are unable to enter Britain.

"As I tried to get someone employment in Folkestone, whilst waiting for his travel documents, an Alderman heard about this case and became aware of the Welfare work at the harbour. He decided that I must be given official backing and this is how KCSS became my umbrella organisation. The only snag was that it had no money for this new service. Finance was a big problem when I made an application to the Gulbenkian Foundation, it helped with a grant made for three years which made a small hostel in Dover possible, as well as a full-

time secretary. This ensures a 24-hour service every day of the week — all the year round.

“Many people from behind the Iron Curtain now able to visit relatives in this country find themselves stranded at the Channel ports, as they lack the necessary visas to return home . . . The Home Office asked for help. We do the Embassy rounds in London for visas for these people and the British Railways gave me a travel pass last year. We also quite often are entrusted with people who are refused leave to land and must be kept overnight, and only alternative is a Police Detention Centre. They are mothers and babies — mentally disturbed people — or any cases on compassionate grounds.

“The Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962 caused frustration, bitterness and aggravated race relations. The Wilson Committee, which was set up to study the procedure at the ports, produced its report last summer. Appeals Tribunals at the ports of entry are recommended and with it an Advisory and Welfare Service paid for by public funds. I was jubilant and only gradually realised the new difficulties ahead. We are now meeting regularly at the Home Office discussing the setting up of this A.W.S. together with Representatives from the Commonwealth Immigration Organisations, who naturally feel that this is their particular problem, and yet the figures show that just over 75% of those refused at the ports of entry are aliens and not quite 25% C.W. Immigrants. Who should therefore control the central body of this new Welfare Service?”

“It will need infinite patience — adaptation to new situations and problems and much give and take before a national organisation for the welfare at all the ports, including the airports, becomes a fact. Meanwhile the work at Folkestone and Dover goes on, however uncertain its future development.”

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