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IN TRANSIT

Reminiscences of Kitchener Camp

A few years ago I saw again the Kitchener Camp in Richborough. Built during the First World War as one of the embarkation points for the British Expeditionary Force, it fell into decay in the ensuing years until, in 1939, it was reshaped by the Jewish Refugees Committee. Now the huts are dilapidated, the roads so diligently laid by its erstwhile inmates sunk, and only a small part of the installation is used by some industrial enterprise. The undulating and gentle scenery of Kent evoked many memories. Sandwich, that dreamy little township, separated from the camp by a romantic and picturesque "toll bridge," has returned to its tranquility from which it was stirred fifteen years ago.

1939 was a summer without rain, as brilliant and sunbathed as the summer of 1914 (which does not mean that fine weather must lead to war). The arrival in Richborough was somewhat overwhelming. We came by a special train via Aachen, Ostend, Dover, and from Sandwich's tiny railway station buses were taking us straight to the camp. At the gates, hundreds were crowding round to look for familiar faces. There were heartrending scenes of welcome, of finding friends long believed lost. It was at the beginning of June, 1939, and some 1,700 had come before me. Until September 3rd, the commencement of war, another 1,500 were to follow, mostly men between 18 and 35 years of age.

The idea of Richborough Camp was bold in its conception. In Germany and Austria, after the November pogroms, thousands of Jewish men were allowed to leave the concentration camps on one condition only—if they left Germany. As many of them could not settle their emigration in a matter of weeks, the British Home Office consented to give them temporary shelter, as long as they could prove that their final settlement in another country was well under way. The visa in the passport said "For transit only, Richborough Camp, pending emigration," and the Jewish Refugees Committee guaranteed for their upkeep. Also included in the selection for Richborough were all men whose lives or liberty were endangered. I am writing from memory with no documents before me, but two names deserve to be singled out for having saved the lives of thousands by means of the camp—the late Otto M. Schiff and Prof. Norman Bentwich.

An advance guard had come to the camp in January, 1939, and by March building started in earnest. Each hut was divided into two compartments, with bunks one above the other, and each compartment, holding 35 to 40 people, had a hut leader. Like in all military installations, there were common washrooms, half-open lavatories, and a common dining hall. In addition Richborough camp had classrooms where languages and other subjects were taught. The weekly pocket money was 6d., plus a 2½d. postage stamp. To leave camp outside the off-hours required a permit; to go to London, even more

than that—a reason. The walks—on the one side to Sandwich and on the other to Ramsgate—brought us into contact for the first time with the English, who were a little bewildered at our accent, our outlandish dress and our loudness, but gave us lifts in their cars and, here and there, a free drink in one of the nearby country pubs.

The camp was run by a staff consisting mainly of refugees with a few Britishers. The camp commander was Captain May. To belong to the staff carried quite a number of privileges: they had their own cubicles for sleeping; their own dining room and special food; and, last but not least, greater facilities for leaving camp. Each of the staff members, aided by an assistant, was in charge of one of the many departments, such as engineering, road building, electricity, education, recreation, legal advice, police (the camp had a " police " drawn from its own members for guard duties and keeping order), etc. Each camp member had to join one of these departments according to his interests and abilities, for a daily work schedule.

In spite of a smoothly running camp organisation, there were at least as many problems as there were people. Not a few of the former inmates of concentration camps had a camp complex. The sight of closed gates, of barbed wire, of barracks, of restrictions of freedom strained their nerves and they wanted to get away from camp life, no matter what the cost. Other luckier ones, who had never experienced camp life before, found the lack of privacy the hardest obstacle to their acclimatisation. Some others resented living on charity; used to providing for their livelihood and that of their families, they felt the denial of earning their own upkeep degrading and humiliating.

Their main problem was, without doubt, the fact that they were in England " in transit." The conversations did not always vary greatly from those in the communities which they had just left—What next? Where to? When? The stay in Richborough was a waiting period, and some of them were approaching the age where they could not afford too many waiting periods before settling down to a new existence in another country. They all knew that they had to start all over again, and they were eager to start as soon as possible. Moreover, the majority had wives and families still in Germany and Austria. A few women had come to Britain on domestic permits, many other applications were pending, and with the storm clouds gathering on Europe's skies, the tension in the camp grew steadily.

Work and recreation were two salutary tools at the disposal of the camp management whose application, however, was made difficult through a wide diversity of cultural backgrounds and educational standards. The building, enlargement, and maintenance of the camp, though in itself important enough, was, at the same time, a therapeutical measure.

Education and recreation served the same goal. An important part of the Education Department's work were the language classes, among which English was given priority. Each camp member had to attend two English lessons daily, one by an English teacher and the

other under the tutelage of a qualified fellow refugee. Lectures, conversation, a library with English books, newspapers and periodicals, and a monthly mimeographed "Camp Journal" supplemented the lessons. Prospective immigrants to Palestine also received a daily Hebrew lesson. There were also courses in Spanish, Portuguese and French. Attached to the Education Department was a Camp University, fashioned on the customary lines of Jewish Adult Education.

The camp orchestra was perhaps the finest achievement in the field of recreation, and the first messenger to go on a goodwill mission to the neighbouring towns of Sandwich, Ramsgate and Margate. Next to the orchestra, sports played a part in gaining understanding and contact outside the gates. Camp teams met English teams, from football and tennis to chess and ping-pong. With the help of the late Oscar Deutsch a camp cinema, holding over 1,000 seats, was opened in the presence of many illustrious guests from London. The hall also served for theatrical performances and concerts. (On one of the lighter entertainment evenings the name "Porridge-borough" was born, in honour of the English breakfast.)

Towards the end of August, when war seemed inevitable, transports to Richborough were stepped up frantically, as a last attempt to save who could be saved, and the camp, originally planned to accommodate 2,500, held more than 3,000; even the classrooms and the cinema were filled with bunks and people. The normal work schedule stopped and we were enlisted for National Service, filling sandbags on the beach and putting them round public buildings in towns all over Kent. On September 3rd, when we were working on the beach, the air-raid siren sounded. Trucks brought us back to camp, just in time to hear Chamberlain's historic address. The impact was terrific. For many the last hope of reunion with their families was cut. For others the threat of mass internment loomed. The camp gates were closed and all leave passes withdrawn. We were enemy aliens. A number of wives who had lived in the little town of Sandwich were also taken to the camp. This emergency measure was executed with brilliant speed and efficiency. Within a day a separate camp was ready for hundreds of women and children who stayed there until the middle of October, when they were transferred to hostels in London.

Alien tribunals came to Richborough within a few weeks to pronounce their verdicts, and almost all inmates were classified "C." With the beginning of winter life became rough, and some camp members were declared medically unfit for camp and sent to London; others found employment in essential war work and were released. The bulk stayed on until Febrary, 1940, when they formed the first companies of the then "Auxiliary Pioneer Corps" and became part of the British Army, the forerunners of 9,000 other refugees.

The war changed not only the legislature but also the plans of the Richborough men—aliens turned soldiers, transmigrants at last became citizens, for many of them after the war made Britain their final home. Among all the attempts made to rescue those in distress, the Kitchener Camp will always have a place of honour.