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REPORT ON ALIEN INTERNEE CAMPS

Seagoville - Kenedy - Crystal City

My visit to the three Alien Internment Camps under the administration of the Department of Justice fell within the period of June 27 to July 5, 1943. During this period we were for the most part inside the "Barbed Wire World". It gives one pause to consider how many of our fellow citizens are living today behind barbed wire or detained, by force, probably 5 million. In Texas the civilian alien deteree population is divided between the three camps, Seagoville, Kenedy, and Crystal City.

Seagoville: This Camp lies about 15 miles from Dallas, Texas and is reached by a bus to the town of Seagoville. The bus stops at the gate of the Camp. Actually this Camp is not really a Camp, in the usual sense, as the property was constructed by the Federal Government recently, for Female Felons. It was used for them for 20 months when they were moved and the whole plant with staff has been converted to the care of the Alien Internees and detainees. There is hardly a human need that the Federal Government did not pre-consider: a large auditorium with an electric organ is available, although not air-conditioned. A well-managed library, an ultra modern hospital with almost every medical device that a layman, at least, could think of, including a very thoroughly equipped dental division etc. etc. The families are housed in the cottages and the meals and food is prepared in the cottage kitchen. The Japanese are housed quite apart in much simpler cabins.

Mr. O'Kourke is in charge. He, however, shares his time, for the present, between Seagoville and Crystal City, some 400 miles away. Mrs. Fox was very attentive to our interests and had charge of us during our two visits on Monday the 28th and Tuesday the 29th of June.

Assistance outside the camp: Dr. Rudolph Fischer interviewed the Japanese first. His task was to inquire whether they had enough materials for their educational programs and sports use. He then asked whether there was any need for the assistance of families outside the camp. The answer was that most of the Japanese families were together there awaiting repatriation so there was no evident need. (Ichino Ryunosuki - spokesman.)

Similarly, Dr. Fischer asked the German group whether any families there had need of assistance outside the camp. Again most of the members of the German families are together in Seagoville. Some families are headed for Crystal City especially where children are involved. There was no request from the German group for such help although Dr. Anna M. Marx, as correspondent, may correspond further in this regard.

For further comment in regard to Seagoville see supplement "A".

Kenedy: Kenedy is a very different sort of camp, indeed. The enclosure is glaringly fenced by barbed wire. The camp has no permanent buildings, using as nucleus structures abandoned C.C.C. buildings. The camp houses men only--German and Japanese --and the whole place is heavily guarded.

After the usual coverage of educational and sports and religious interests, the business of the Int. Y.M.C.A. to aid with accessory materials and equipment, it became very clear that in both the German and the Japanese groups, there is great need: partly, for the peace of mind of the internees and partly for the aid that may reach the families in Central America left behind without any means of support. This camp contains men who were taken from the West Indies and Central American States as well as Peru who are, for the most part, awaiting repatriation. The camp is greatly divided.

The Japanese occupy one half the lower half and the Germans the upper half. Each group is divided between those who want to be joined by their wives and children and go to Crystal City and those who have no dependents. Further, there are those who hunger for repatriation and those who have no interest in reaching Germany and/or Japan again. The atmosphere of the camp was far from happy. For details of Kenedy and the assistance desperately needed in some cases see supplement "B".

Mr. Williams is commandant. As previously remarked the camp is very closely guarded. Mr. Williams was generous to Dr. Fischer and Luis Hortal and myself and gave us great freedom within the camp and also was very helpful in fetching us from the town where we stayed at Hotel Goff. Kenedy lies about 50 miles southeast of San Antonio on the bus route to Corpus Christi.

Crystal City: This camp lies approximately 100 miles southwest of San Antonio on the bus route to Laredo. One changes buses at Uvalde, the home of Jack Garner, the late Vice President of the United States. The countryside is exceedingly same, endless plains covered with mesquite trees - like small honey locusts thorny and thin leafed; clusters of cactus hug the shade; occasional farms show attempts at cotton, sorgum corn and a special maize. The days are cloudless in summer, with very slight exception. The sun "comes up out of the grass" as the Japanese say, and goes to bed "in the grass". The one redeeming feature is the breeze that stirs about 2.00 p.m. growing in intensity till by night it is frequently a real wind. This brings in the cool air from the Gulf so that the land cools - a bit; the nights allow sleep and the early mornings are very fine. The sun again climbs so that the heat lingers pretty constantly between 95° F. and 105° F.

The greatest danger in this climate is not the sun alone nor the shade alone but the change from one to another which can attack a person not used to it so that sunstroke and general debility result. The constant perspiration reduces the salt content of the body so that one can go "light-headed" very easily. Salt tablets are said to restore the saline equilibrium of the body. To provide adequate medical attention a hospital was opened on July the first. By the 5th, I think, there were five patients.

This camp is very much behind BARBED WIRE too. The enclosure is just one square mile. Cabins of three sizes have been built a) for a man and his wife and small baby called "Shelters" b) Duplex cabins for two families, -which have the best reputation and c) Triplex houses built for three families which seem very difficult for everybody. The Camp is expanding its living quarters and new houses are going up as the Dept. trends toward moving all families to this camp.

There are sundry facilities in this camp. There is a school building with class rooms; as a matter of fact one for the Germans and one for the Japanese. There is a recreation hall. There is a shocking absence of shade. Each family struggles to provide a little shelter by the door. Some of the designs are very interesting and ingenious. Thrifty and energetic persons make gardens grow and vines struggle up. Zinnias fetch a little color and the towering sunflowers appear cheerful but one has to watch for the red-ants which bite viciously. The occasional rattlesnake inside the compound is no toy for children.

Assistance on the outside: As at the other two camps Dr. Fischer asked both the Japanese and the Germans whether there were any cases of families that need such assistance. There was one Japanese whom Fuji-San, spokesman, thought might need aid but the man's wife was living with the internee's father and all was well.

In the German group there were four persons who had been taken hastily from their families in San José, Costa Rica. The families were not strictly in need but a word of cheer from Alice Shaffer will go a long way toward tone-aid.

For further detail in regard to Crystal City cases see supplement "C" attached.

General: There are several observations that should be made and very clearly understood by anyone undertaking the visiting of persons in these camps.

A) These camps are under very close guard and discipline. Men of the Border Patrol are charged with the custody of the internees. One must recognize this and ALWAYS go to the office, usually outside the camp, and present identification papers. The routine is to be followed closely. Naturally, if one is with someone who has been to the camp before, such as HWE with Dr. Fischer, the introduction is very helpful. One's usefulness will turn largely on the confidence the commandant has in you, as a person; a confidence that leaves him content that you will not meddle into things outside the fairly strictly defined limits of your interest.

B) Always go directly to the job - if for the Y.M.C.A. attention to school, religion and sport material, arrange for the SPOKESMAN of each group to meet you in the Japanese headquarters or the German headquarters as the case may require. If it is a representative of the AFSC follow the same procedure. To wander vaguely around the camp is not relished until COMPLETE CONFIDENCE has been established in the commandant's office.

When that confidence is had then there are, naturally, many generous concessions but one must remember they are concessions and generousities and not the practice of the camp. Rudolph Fischer has achieved this confidence to a very high degree. He is amiable, business-like and wise. It was a great stroke of good fortune that I was with him.

On the contrary Herbert Nicholson reached Crystal City. He identified himself with the American Friends - naturally the second man in charge was not very clear about the intricacies of Quakerism - at all events Herbert got access to the camp. Shortly thereafter some ministers wanted to visit the internees and were refused. They were deeply grieved. The episode forced the direction to stiffen up and require DEFINITE PAPERS OF IDENTITY - which should define the exact interest of the organization represented and the representative should be scrupulous to stay within those bounds of interest. I nearly had an awkward situation because I had been furnished with nothing definite in writing. If it had not been for Rudolph Fischer's sponsoring introduction the long journey to Crystal City would have been of no avail. The gates to the camps are very closely held!

Whether we can draw on CPS for aid in such visiting is not clear to me. So much turns on ones ATTITUDE toward authority. If that attitude is hostile there will be no service. If that attitude is wise doors will fly open. The job requires an able handling of English and German and also Spanish and preferably Japanese although our little brown cousins do not expect us to be civilized to the point that we can speak their language.

C) Finally, there is a decorum, almost a ritual, on leaving a camp. One must say farewell to the spokesmen of each group; one must leave the guard at the gate with a friendly smile and, above all, one must say goodbye in the "front office" beginning at the top. It is no easy matter to back out of a camp office so that you will be welcome again.

Recommendations: It seems apparent that the group at Kenedy are in the greatest need. The man who have married natives, Nicaraguans, Peruvians, Costa Ricans etc. etc. where the wife and family are left behind penniless and where the wife has no interest whatsoever in coming in Crystal City nor any interest at all in being repatriated-- there is great distress. Possibly Alice Shaffer could digress to make a survey journey around Central Americas and Panama. It may be better for the AFSC to secure a social worker who could help by finding these destitute families - and this is no easy task - and also to secure some help from local sources. It seems like a big field but the concern and grief on the faces of these men at Kenedy was very great.

Further, I thoroughly recommend that my visit be followed up; preferably with Luis Hortal if he is to travel for the Y.M.C.A. in Dr. Fischer's place. If our next trip cannot be together then I should get around again in not less than two months. Then the next trip, my third, I should take a helper so that we can spread the service. There is a service in merely calling at a camp and inquiring. To let this opening drag would be a mistake. It can be that we could supplement the Y.M.C.A. or the Y.W.C.A. if they should move into the much needed area of sewing and knitting and embroidery for sale which the women need much as a means for income. We should also publicize the sales now available through the Y.M.C.A. Sales rooms in New York. A friendly interest and income are nice links in the chain of good-will even in a detention camp in Texas.

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