

GUIDE INTERNATIONAL SERVICE

1947-1949

(An Australian GIS member)

How did I become involved in the first place?

Listening to a particular sermon in Church one Sunday evening before the end of the War, our Minister had words to say as to what would become of the thousands of people displaced because of the War, so that's when the G.I.S. was mooted, I looked around for the means of getting myself involved.

I avidly read all accounts of G.I.S. preparation which appeared in the Guider, and at the same time making enquiries of a former Division Commissioner who was, I think, on the G.I.S. Committee here in Melbourne. She eventually came up with the Self-Training

Scheme which had been put together for Volunteers. That scheme then led to the first of the G.I.S. Training Weeks held in Victoria either late in 1945 or early in 1946.

The Training Week was quite exhaustive, but stimulating, and eventually on 10th January 1947, in the company of Nancy Kemp, we set sail on the "Otranto" for a job which was quite foreign to both of us - Nancy and I both having worked in offices during the War.

We arrived in England in the very severe Winter of 1947 -couldn't understand what was wrong with the countryside until we realised, of course, that all the trees had shed their leaves.

Because of the wintry conditions, we were unable to head straight for Germany and we also had to get our Uniform issue and various inoculations. These had been started before we left home but had to be finished off at St. Thomas' Hospital.

To fill in some of our time, the G.I.S. Committee in London sent me to Scotland to work with the Trefoil School for Handicapped Guides and Scouts, -and Nancy to the Home-craft Training Centre which was the old Baden Powell Home, Pax Hill. Neither of these institutions exist today.

Having worked with the Extension Section here, I was interested in the Trefoil School and found it a most interesting experience, and, of course, it was all part of our being able to cope with various situations once we were in Germany.

In March, Nancy and I went off via Dover to Calais - a very rough crossing, and then by train through France and Belgium, and arrived at Bad Oeynhausen, which was the Headquarters for the British Army of Occupation. We travelled then to a town nearby, Vlotho, which was Headquarters for all the Voluntary Relief Societies. We were met there by "John" a member of RS/107, the team to which I was being sent, and believe it or not, he was an Australian, had lived in Belgrave, and knew people that I knew. Goodness knows what eventually came of him - he was really rather odd.

Our house was one of seven which stood in a semi-circle and belonged to the nearby Iron Ore Mine - I had occasion to go down this mine once - never again, it was not for me. The houses actually were built in a semi-detached manner, but our Team had the two houses that had a door put through downstairs to give us access to both sides.

At the time of my arrival I would think there would have been 16 Team Members comprising of women who had been members of the Guide Association and had either been in the A.T.S., W.R.E.N.S., or W.A.A.F., during the War and all seemed to have some skills and abilities (I couldn't even drive).

Then there were the men -these were a strange mixture, but had been mechanics, drive, office workers, and some not necessarily in our Team, but they were men who had joined because they wanted to get back into Germany for their own private reasons - there was, after all, a very big black market, and although we were under very strict orders and wouldn't have wanted to be involved, I'm sure some of these men had their own particular interests.

I worked at first with one of our Welfare people, going out to the camps, distributing Food and Clothing, trying to improve their living conditions. Most of the DPs were still living in

the huts where the Germans had them living during their slave labour days. There was just nowhere else for them to go. The havoc and colossal damage left behind after the War was dreadful, so that German families also had to find somewhere to live. The barbed wire had all been removed but their surroundings were still the same.

Early in 1947 there were no re-settlement schemes, except for those people who agreed to be repatriated back to Poland, and some of those were fearful for what may have been in store for them, because by that time Russia had simply taken over Poland, the Baltic Countries, etc.

Once the re-settlement programs started I got involved in making up the lists of people who wished to go to England and Canada, then the Argentine, U.S.A., and finally Australia came to the party. Most of these programs were only for single men and women who could work and it was some time before families were accepted.

Each day we made trips out to the various camps, each Team member having certain camps allocated to them. The common language had to be German, and we nearly all spoke what we called DPs German with a great deal of hand waving.

We measured children for shoes by just drawing round their feet on a piece of paper. We provided layettes for new babies, plus tinned powdered milk and other supplements for children.

Adults were entitled to rations which came through the German economy, according to the type of work they did - a labourer got more than someone who stayed in the camp.

We supplemented these rations from food issued to us by the British Red Cross or the Special Relief Organisations, and it was one of my jobs to take-truck and driver to pick up and deliver some of these supplies.

I also became the "Housekeeper" for our Mess and had to collect our own rations from the Army Depots. Will I ever forget "powdered potato", swedes, and white cabbage, and very peculiar meat. Once in a blue moon we got a leg of N.Z. Mutton. Our cook, Steffie, became very adept at making different meals from our rather odd rations. We got one egg each a week.

Gradually as DPs were dispersed, camps were closed down and other Relief Teams would be used to take over our area along with what was left of theirs. We worked alongside The Quakers, Salvation Army, Save the Children Fund, Catholic Relief Workers - I can't remember them all. We were moved away from Gebhardshagen, our Team members had also dropped in number and we were eventually moved to Bielefeld quite a change of scene for us from rural to industrial. Our camps would be well scattered and you would be out all day - not very inviting when snow was on the ground, and you ran the risk of your vehicle colliding or skidding off the road.

By this time many of the camps had themselves better organised, from having literary nothing, the DPs had acquired all sorts of possessions, either through the black market or other illegal means -it wasn't for us to question. Some had their own schools and we were asked to provide paper and pencils, etc., sewing materials, leather for boot manufacturers, books to learn English. Every day there would be requests for this, that, and the other and we did our best to keep up.

I had 2 years in the G.I.S. interspersed with Leave weekends, or weeks, which enabled us to either see other parts of Germany, or for me and a friend a visit to Switzerland to stay at "Our Chalet" -another experience which one doesn't forget.

I made some contacts with some of our DPs after I returned home. My own driver settled in Geelong and did quite well for himself and his family - he died a couple of years ago. One close G.I.S. friend has been out here several times from Sussex, and one friend came from Glasgow. We still keep in touch.

The years have gone by adding other dimensions to our lives but we will never forget the challenge that the G.I.S. presented to us and the fact that Guiding presented such a magnificent Good Turn, something which will go down in our History, and I hope, never be forgotten.