

Eleanor Roosevelt Papers
102 Refugee Letters
1941 US Comm for Care of European Children

THE EVERLASTING MERCY

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It is a singular privilege to appear on this platform of the United States Committee for the Care of European Children together with such distinguished fellow-Americans as Bishop Sheil, Mr. MacLeish and Mr. Field. Yet, in my mind's eye, I see a great many other people crowded on the platform beside me. Most of them are not notables in the ordinary sense of the word, but they are people I have known, people I have lived with, people who are never out of my consciousness. They are the people of Europe, the homeless and the orphaned, the starving and the ragged and the great multitude who are hunted from place to place and who can call no place their own. I can almost feel their eyes fixed on me, their hands outstretched, their voices whispering: "Tell them our story. Today we are mute, but our outcry, could it but be heard, would wing across the Atlantic and penetrate the walls of every home in free America. You must be our spokesman. Tell them, for our sake, and for the sake of our children. We may have to live out our own days here but tell those who have children in America, boys and girls of their own, about our children, our children who may still be saved."

There was a time, when I first went to Europe on a mission of relief in 1920, when I thought I had witnessed the most tragic depths of human suffering. Nothing, I was convinced, paralleled the evacuation of Warsaw after the last war with its tens of thousands of homeless refugees, with sickness and disease; with the sight of ragged and almost unclothed men, women and children huddled together for warmth in the bitter snows, or pregnant women living in underground caves like beasts of the field - when all these things were commonplace.

Indelibly impressed on my memory are scenes and incidents of that tragedy, some that have for years inspired me with courage. I can recall a woman seated on the snowy ground, impervious to everything, holding in her arms a dead child. She was rocking back and forth with an occasional audible sob, clutching the child to her bosom. Then there came another child of the many thousands who had lost their parents and who were looking about fearfully and in terror. The little one pulled timorously at the sleeve of this woman who held the dead one. She looked up at the living child and with a great cry that welled from her innermost being she laid down her dead baby on the ground and she gathered up the stranger into her arms, and repeated a paraphrase of the old prayer: "The Lord has taken but the Lord has given. Blessed be the name of the Lord!" For two decades those memories and others remained with me, and seemed to me to represent the ultimate in misery, but now fresh horrors have crowded out the old ones.

I was a refugee on the roads of France a year ago last June, in common with eleven million other people. I saw dead and mutilated bodies, victims of dive bombers and machine guns, lying in the fields and by the roadside with traces of their last moments of terror still plain on the dead faces. I saw brokenhearted women stumbling along,

calling again and again the names of their children, stopping every passerby to ask: "Have you seen Jacques? He's a little boy, seven years of age, with brown hair and blue eyes and he looks like me. Haven't you seen him? He's only a little fellow. Please help me. Haven't you seen my little boy?" And, too, I have seen youngsters, just like yours and mine, sitting helplessly at the same roadside, crying bitterly with the deep, gulping sobs of terror. And yet, again, I have seen boys of twelve, their own cheeks still wet with tears, compose themselves and become the little fathers of their younger sisters and brothers with the calm purposefulness born of tragedy. It wasn't merely that I saw fright and terror and tears, but I saw character and grit and strength of mind, and a sense of high duty which must not be permitted to perish from this earth.

You will forgive these personal reminiscences. And yet I feel I must tell them to you, because it is so difficult - thousands of miles away in this atmosphere of peace and tranquillity - even to begin to understand what is going on over there. I saw a railroad station in Bordeaux bombed. One moment the station had been a milling throng of thousands of women and children, eager to board an outgoing train which might carry them to safety. The next minute, it was a shambles filled with flying debris and the shrieks of the dying. A little girl standing not far from me had been clutching her mother's skirt so as not to get lost. After the explosion, she was still standing there, dazed, holding on to a piece of woolen skirt, but her mother - she had been blown to bits.

Yes, these were not uncommon sights a year ago. Today's sights are perhaps less melodramatic, but every whit as poignant. The thousands of children who wandered down the highways and byways looking for father and mother, have finally, through the efforts of relief agencies, in many cases been brought to centers, to some place of refuge and asylum, where the attempt has been made to give them a little respite from the terror under which they had lived. The children of France have had a year in which to accept their losses. Happily, many of them have been reunited with their parents. I can assure you that all of the heartache and misery that many of us have lived through is compensated for, when one sees the joy of mother and child brought together again. Some of these children have even been fortunate enough to return to their homes and to pick up the threads of their former lives. But, unfortunately, there are still thousands of others who, through no fault of their own, suffer imprisonment and the pangs of hunger and disease, and who know what it means to be hunted creatures, because they are the unwanted children of Europe. Some of them have even come to regard as normal, conditions whose very existence no child should ever be permitted to suspect. You and I know what is the most attractive quality of every child - the magic force that endears it to the mother and to everyone - its native trustfulness and happiness. That is what we in our work have been trying to restore to these children, who frequently have lost more than home - they have lost the spirit of childhood.

There was the case of Elsie B. She was born in Frankfurt-am-Main seven years ago, an only child of well-to-do parents who had to flee from Germany in 1935. The family tried to rebuild their lives in France, but when the war broke out, Elsie's father volunteered for the army. After the fall of France, the whole family was picked up and placed in an internment camp in the unoccupied area. The father was sent to the men's barracks, Elsie and her mother went to the women's quarters.

There they found themselves in a long, narrow room with some sixty other women and children, no beds, only straw mattresses closely crowded together and crawling with vermin. No hooks for clothes, but that didn't matter because they had not been permitted to take more than a small suitcase with them. There was a single faucet at one end of the room, but that didn't work. For water, the women had to plow their way through ankle deep mud to reach a well. Sanitary facilities were of the most

primitive. Small window-holes were cut out into the walls at intervals, but these had no glass. If they were covered with paper, the barracks were dark; if they were left open, the wind and the rain came in.

As winter came, cold was the bitterest enemy. Women and children had only a thin blanket, far from sufficient in the unheated wooden shack. The stove in the barrack had no wood, the thin gruel and coarse bread of their daily repast scarcely offered any nourishment. One after another fell ill, but there were no medicines. Night after night Elsie lay wide awake, shivering and listening to the constant moaning and coughing and groaning of the desperately sick.

Only one thing gave Elsie and her mother the will to live. From time to time they were permitted to see Elsie's father. During those few, short moments allowed for the family reunion, mother and father and daughter embraced hungrily, their tears mingling as they attempted to console one another. Finally, a new ray of hope dawned for the distraught parents. A social worker visiting the camp spoke of the possibility of taking Elsie to a nearby children's home. From then on the parents' thoughts and prayers were turned in a single direction: that at least their child, if not they themselves, might be rescued from the hell on earth and given a chance, before it was too late, to live a normal life.

In due time Elsie was taken from the camp and sent to a home filled with boys and girls in similar circumstances. She had forgotten how to play, how to laugh, how to be carefree. She could not bring herself to believe that the sunshine was hers to enjoy, that she might eat some of the things she liked, that she might speak above a whisper. Fortunately, love and care wrought a change gradually so that Elsie and the hundreds of other children who have been evacuated from the internment camps have blossomed gloriously. Their pale cheeks have become rosy again, their thin little bodies have filled out.

True, they bear the psychological scars of their experience, but with the adaptability of children they have thrown off many of the ill effects, they have regained their birthright of childhood. I wish I could share with you some of the letters these children have written to their parents and relatives left behind in the camps. Their terms of endearment and affection, the expression of their happiness that they are free to go on long walks with other children, that they even go to school with other children. It saddened and embarrassed me to find these expressions of gratitude from little children whose normal right it is to live a decent, human life, and yet who are so grateful and appreciative for what has been done. It is equally pathetic to read the letters which the parents of these children addressed to the child care organizations which have taken their children out of the camps. One man wrote from the Gurs camp:

"Let me send you my heartiest thanks for having taken my little Lotte to your home. In the dreadful circumstances in which we have found ourselves, our only consolation is the certainty that our child lives in good and healthful conditions and receives those necessaries which we unfortunately are unable to give her. The letters we get from her are so enthusiastic that we can scarcely believe in the wonder of having her at such a place.

"In the name of all my friends who share internment with me, I express the hope that your organization will be able to take more and more children out of here and thus save them from the peril of physical and moral decay. Thank you again and again for having rescued my daughter."

Imagine, if you can, the depth of sacrifice and heartbreak entailed when a father must say to a child-care committee: "Here, take my little ones and do what you can

for them. I cannot fulfill the duties of parenthood. I cannot earn enough to feed my children. Take care of them for me and some day, when Europe is once again free and a man may earn his bread by the sweat of his brow, I will take them back."

What a responsibility that imposes on all those humanitarian agencies which seek in the first instance to save the children in France - the American Friends Service Committee, which has done such valuable and inspiring work, the local committees of the Joint Distribution Committee, and others, all of which have been working together in a spirit of comradeship and goodwill, and which have learned to cooperate in a most exemplary way. What a responsibility lies on all these agencies which today, in the face of increasing need and growing financial requirements, find themselves desperately put to it, to meet even the minimal standards they have set themselves for the care of the children in all these centers and homes. It isn't merely the financial need itself that aggravates the problem. The growing food shortage in the country, of which the children are the chief victims, is a major factor. Milk has become increasingly scarce, meat is often unobtainable, nourishing cereals can be had only occasionally, bread is already so poor in quality as to have little nutritional value. Small wonder that school teachers complain of the listlessness and poor memories of their pupils. Children lack the vigor to romp or to play. Rickets and other deficiencies are beginning to make their appearance more and more frequently. If we are to save any of the children in France from their disastrous plight, we must act and act quickly.

Those of us who deal with overseas relief during these troubled times, have grown so accustomed to sights of misery and hopelessness that any joyous experience comes almost as a bit of a shock. One of the pleasantest shocks of that nature came early in June when word was received that the United States Committee for the Care of European Children was ready to take over the first contingent of youngsters from France, and it was intensified when, sponsored by this great Committee, the children finally got through to Lisbon to await the sailing of the SS MOUZINHO.

They arrived completely exhausted after a gruelling trip from Marseille, that took four days and five nights. Through the kindness of a Lisbon newspaper, a seaside children's colony had been placed at our disposal to house the children until the boat sailed. There in those quiet, restful, pleasant surroundings, they spent a week, and the change wrought in them was miraculous. When they came to Lisbon, they looked tired, wan, broken little old men and women. Their clothes were in tatters, some clumped around in wooden soled shoes. Others had improvised sandals and pitifully worn slippers with paper and cardboard stuffed in, to serve as soles. It was pathetic to see these children trying to learn to play again. They didn't know how to relax. They played grimly and with many a backward glance as though they feared that at any moment the sun, the beach, the food and this unaccustomed liberty would be snatched from them. When, after a few days, they smiled, it was apprehensively - as though they might be punished for it. Although they recognized me as their friend, I nevertheless hesitated to call any child over and speak to him or her individually. A look of utter panic swept their faces when they were singled out.

The memories these children had! They had been permitted to say farewell to their families - those still having relatives. The train on which they travelled from Marseille stopped at the station of Oloron, and fathers and mothers interned at the Gurs camp were brought to the train under police escort and given a last three minutes with their children. Most of the children had foregone their breakfasts on the train that morning, and had wrapped up bread and rolls and bits of sugar to hand to their parents when they met. One little girl of seven had been separated from her mother for over two years. When they met at Oloron they were unable to converse, for the child had forgotten her native German in the effort to learn French and English.

They had no common language except tears.

Another girl of thirteen had become the "little mother" of her four younger brothers and sisters. Her father had died three years earlier in the Buchenwald concentration camp. Her mother died of pneumonia in Gurs only a few weeks before. But this child was dauntless. When I saw her she was busy writing a letter to a strange woman at Gurs, sending her words of encouragement because, she said: "She held my mother's hand when she died." The spirit and courage of these youngsters hold a lesson for all of us who give way to despair when the world picture grows too black.

Ladies and gentlemen, ours is the inestimable privilege of making an investment in the world of the future. The child, Wordsworth said, is the father of the man. When the present holocaust has subsided and the time comes to begin rebuilding a Europe now in ruins, the calibre of Europe's leadership will spell the difference between success and failure. Within our grasp is the opportunity to teach a group of European boys and girls the ideals and the ethical values of the democratic way of life. If the dictators could build a generation of Nazi youth in eight short years, we can build a phalanx of freedom-loving youth in even less time. Large numbers of anti-Fascists have been wiped out by the Nazis. Others are hunted and driven, unable to take root anywhere. There will be a great need for free spirits once totalitarianism has been vanquished. In our own small way we can buy insurance at a small premium against the eventuality that Europe may emerge from the war stripped of liberty-loving potential leadership.

We are privileged tonight to speak in the name of Europe's children of today, Europe's men and women of the future. I implore you to rescue as many as you can. By so doing you not only save lives but you raise a banner of hope and courage aloft for all of Europe's persecuted peoples to see. It was Stefan Zweig who almost eight years ago, in speaking on the plight of the children in Europe, before a similar group in London, spoke these words:

"The voluntary assumption of the role of mother and foster-parent to these children is the fulfilment of the noblest duty of any woman, the bestowal and the nurturing of love. The children....to whom you are extending your kindness do not yet know for how much they will have to thank you. But from the books of the sages we have learned that no good deed is ever lost in obscurity and free and happy European men and women will one day, with bright and shining eyes, thank you for having saved their youth for them and thus retained in them the capacity of loving with unbroken soul this world that is common to us all."

And in closing may I quote these brief lines from the poem "The Everlasting Mercy" by John Masefield:

"And he who gives a child a treat
Makes joy-bells ring in Heaven's street
And he who gives a child a home
Builds palaces in Kingdom come."