

Love Thine Enemy

The wave of idealism that brought Labour to power in 1945 was not limited to domestic affairs. Everyone was anxious to avoid repeating the mistakes of 1918 and the Treaty of Versailles, which was seen by many as having been directly responsible for the rise of Nazism in Germany; and there was great concern about how best to rebuild the shattered countries of Europe.

A host of organisations were set up to bring aid and relief, particularly to children, whom no-one could hold responsible for their plight; and in Reading, Phoebe was their most vociferous champion. 'With tremendous zeal and effort', she re-established the local branch of the Save the Children Fund, and in September 1945, doubtless remembering Reading's efforts for the South Wales miners' children after the General Strike, she wrote to the *Spectator* with a proposal for a scheme of 'enemy child adoption':

We believe that many people in this country, if they were made aware of the facts, would gladly offer to receive children into their homes until arrangements for their welfare could be made in their own countries... we are not indifferent to human misery – even the misery of ex-enemies, if children can be so called.

After the war, Mayor Langston had initiated exchange visits with the Dutch town of Zaandam. His successor used her inaugural speech to praise his efforts, and hoped that

it may be possible to extend these exchange visits with other countries, e.g. France, Belgium, Russia and with the ex-enemy countries. The greatest need in the world today is the need to achieve reconciliation, and to break down suspicion and hatred; and a willingness to share the rigours of the aftermath of war. Let us make no mistake. The only answer to the atom bomb is love and understanding, so let us continue and extend the work so well begun by Councillor Langston.

Phoebe's desire to include the Germans in her programme of reconcilia-

tion was well ahead of her own government at that time.

In the autumn of 1946 Victor Gollancz, Jewish writer, publisher, left-wing polemicist and founder of the 'Save Europe Now!' organisation, toured the British-occupied parts of Germany, and found abundant evidence of near-starvation everywhere he went. In Düsseldorf, 100,000 people were said to be suffering from hunger oedema. Even more disturbing was the revelation that the British forces were doing very little to alleviate the situation; according to Gollancz, many were clearly enjoying their role as conquerors.

Gollancz's views were hotly challenged on his return to Britain, but in November the Government finally lifted its ban on sending food parcels to Germany. His appeal was sent to newspapers across the country (including the *Citizen*), and the offices of Save Europe Now! were deluged with parcels and offers of help.

Meanwhile, those who could went out to Germany to see conditions for themselves. Among them was General Collins, Colonel of the Royal Berkshire Regiment, who found that the distressing condition of the population got so much 'under his skin' that on his return he approached the various Berkshire Mayors to see how they could help.

He visited Phoebe very soon after she took office, and her response was immediate. There and then she launched a Mayor's Christmas Appeal for gifts and clothing.

The average British family will, I know, sit down to their own Christmas dinner with a lighter heart if they have helped to alleviate the tragic plight of these unfortunate children, who cannot be held responsible in any way for the guilt of the Nazi Party.

The Cusdens' own sympathies for the German people were already well known. Under the aegis of the International Friendship League, of which Albert was local President, they had taken an active part in social activities provided for prisoners-of-war at the camps at Basildon, Spencer's Wood and elsewhere. After the War, Phoebe did what she could to help them find work, especially for those who had no desire to return to Russian-occupied areas: 'There is a lot of men here and already in Germany who appreciate your kindness', one wrote to her, 'and will therefore not think of their captivity only as an incident to be forgotten'.

Phoebe booked the Town Hall for a meeting in early December, at which both Victor Gollancz and General Collins spoke to a packed audience. Collins told them that during his visit 'he never saw an adult laugh and rarely did they smile...adults starve themselves to keep their children going.' 'The children's position, he said, was 'extremely harrowing. They live in the midst of desolation'. He presented Phoebe with a sack full of boots and shoes that

he had collected among his friends, and lent his active support to her campaign.

On the face of it, Collins was an unlikely ally for a life-long pacifist: a professional soldier, biographer of Field-Marshal Wavell, a big-game hunter whose boast it was that he had once bagged three tigers in as many minutes. But he had considerable local influence; during the War he had been Deputy Regional Commissioner for the area, and had done much to integrate the county regiment with the local Home Guard. His impassioned support helped to quell the critics – one was concerned that food parcels might be interpreted by the Germans as a sign of ‘sentimental weakness’ – and enabled Phoebe’s campaign to reach the hearts (and pockets) of people who might otherwise have dismissed the ‘Red Woman’s’ appeal out of hand.

The donations came trickling in: guineas, pounds, shillings; sweet rations, clothes and food. The squire of Calcot Place sent a fiver ‘for your Help the Children Fund or whatever it is called’, and in January Phoebe mercilessly listed all the donors in the *Standard* to encourage further contributions. By then £80 in cash, 1,000lbs of food and eleven sacks of clothing had been collected.

Mrs Kemp, wife of the headmaster of Reading School, gave up a room in her house for the collection and disposal of the goods and spent many hours in sorting and despatching the parcels. ‘When you have finished saving Europe will you sew a button on my coat?’, her husband asked her on one occasion – a tale that Phoebe liked to retell: ‘Of course, if he had been properly brought up he would have sewn the button on himself!’

There was certainly opposition. Even Phoebe’s own Reading SCF passed a request for £60 to head office (‘I feel that Reading Branch might be accused of too much interest in German children solely’, the secretary explained), and volunteers decided against house-to-house collections. ‘It was all very difficult – you were afraid to knock on a door and ask’, remembers one. But generally, the town responded admirably.

Only a few hard-hearted people wish to see the Germans ignored and their children made to suffer, but I believe the majority...are sane enough to understand that if another conflict is to be avoided a common-sense attitude towards the Germans must be taken,

wrote Phoebe in the *Citizen*. ‘There can be no excuse for bitterness on the part of the people of Reading who hardly knew what war was like’.

Phoebe’s Appeal was a splendid gesture, but already she had much more far-reaching ideas. ‘I now want to explore the possibility of some of our schools ‘adopting’ schools in Germany so that gifts may be sent direct and friendly correspondence initiated between the children’, she wrote to Collins

straight after his Town Hall address, and this was just the first step. By March 1947, she had made 'a tentative promise' to 'adopt' a whole city: Düsseldorf.

Gollancz made many converts, including the present Lord Longford, then Frank Pakenham and a very junior Minister in the Government. Pakenham had had to defend Government policy in Germany, which he did with an increasingly uneasy conscience, until in April 1947 Prime Minister Clem Attlee gave him ministerial responsibility for all the British-occupied territories in Germany and Austria.

One of his first visits was to Düsseldorf, where attitudes, if not conditions, took him back to his Dublin childhood: here was 'a people suffering from British rule'; but this time he was in a position to change things.

'I was filled with a passionate Christian desire to see justice done to this broken people', he wrote in his autobiography, *Avowed Interest*. 'I told the children of Düsseldorf, desperately hungry, some of them fainting in class, 'never believe that the whole world is against you; you're absolutely right to be proud of being German'.'

It was not a view that won him much support with his colleagues in Government, but his 'tender conscience' found instant support with people like Phoebe, who had been to see him in London shortly before his promotion to expound upon her plan.

The idea of 'twinning' towns was not a new one. Keighley and Blackburn had both been twinned in the early 1920s with French towns devastated by the First World War. Coventry, in 1944, bravely formed a link with a town in the Soviet Union, and there was a flurry of other twinings with towns in neutral or allied countries during 1945 and 1946.

But no town, so far, had chosen to form a link with 'the enemy'. William Asbury, the head of the British civil service in North Rhine Westphalia, had tried to persuade the authorities in Sheffield to twin with Düsseldorf (he had been a Sheffield councillor before the war), but he found little support for the idea.

Both he and Pakenham therefore 'warmly welcomed' Phoebe's proposals, (although she was asked not to use the term 'adoption'), and arranged for the Mayor of Reading to make an official visit to Düsseldorf itself.

Not everyone in Reading was delighted. The British Legion expressed 'dismay' at the Mayor's initiative, recalling the suffering that its members had endured at the hands of 'these people', and suggested that charity should begin at home.

Phoebe's response was forthright. 'The condition of the poorest family in Reading is many times better than the average family in Germany...it would surely be disastrous to any hope of rebuilding Europe on right lines if we allowed the German people to believe (as they are already beginning to

believe) that we are deliberately starving them'. She even suggested that the Legion might choose 'to establish contact with an ex-Service men's organisation in Germany'.

The surprising thing is that opposition was so muted. Loving thine enemy has never been particularly easy, and the full extent of Nazi atrocity was still emerging. But, as Phoebe said,

responsibility for the recovery of Germany rests very largely upon the Allies, and any failure on our part to help that unhappy country on to her feet will bring discredit upon the democratic system and open the door to a fresh outburst of totalitarianism.

Her arguments were unanswerable, however uncomfortable people may have felt. The cynical might also argue that by now Britain already had a new enemy – the Soviet Union – to draw the sting of vengeance. It is also true that Reading had also escaped the blitz: a twinning between a German city and, for instance, London, would then have been unthinkable. But full credit is due to the town of Reading, this ordinary, average, unloved town, and its long, quiet tradition of mutual help, tolerance and Co-operation, with a big C and without.

On the whole, the town greeted Phoebe's latest venture with approval and curiosity, and when she left for Düsseldorf on August 6, the Mayor was accompanied not only by the Mayoress (her daughter) and the Interpreter (her husband), but by the Man from the Press, Mr Hobson from the *Chronicle*. 'I realise it will be far from a pleasure trip', she said before they left, and indeed their stay was action-packed. They met soldiers, politicians, officials from councils and trades unions, and the families of POWs at Basildon. They visited public installations and private companies, and Phoebe saw for herself the appalling conditions that people were living in. Her concern for the plight of the city's children took her to visit school feeding centres, the Save the Children Fund home (Goebbels' former residence), and the Duisburg Youth Camp. 'Even then she provided help for the needy as far as it was within her power, especially for the children', the local Düsseldorf paper reported some months later.

Phoebe also sat in on a meeting of the City Council (whose deliberations were dominated by a huge Union Jack). Her notebook recalls an 'interesting conversation' with British Army officers: 'General agreement that responsibility for German affairs had been handed over to Germans before they were ready – 'twelve months too soon' – 'should have had longer period of preparation' – 'will not accept responsibility' – 'Denazification carried too far – removed experienced administrators'.

Her own instincts, however, led her to trust the fledgling democrats. 'The

basis of co-operation is honourable friendship between peoples', she told the City Council,

and in reply to my expressed hope that a spirit of reconciliation might eventually heal the wounds of war, the Oberbürgermeister said that we had opened a window onto the world after they had been in prison for fourteen years, and he hoped that soon doors would be opened.

It was here that they met Dr Walther Hensel, the Town Clerk, whose admiration for Phoebe and enthusiasm for her project was essential to its success. 'A man of high character and undoubted integrity, one of those who opposed the Nazi regime from the beginning', Hensel had been arrested in 1937 for high treason, and spent much of the War in prison. He was appointed to his post by the British forces soon after Hitler's defeat, and, as Phoebe put it, was now 'one of those who are doing their utmost to re-organise German local government upon sound lines'.

The problems facing Düsseldorf were enormous. 40% of buildings had been totally destroyed; a population of 430,000 was housed in 210,000 'rooms'; 56,000 people were living in bunkers, cellars and ruins; ten million cubic metres of rubble had to be cleared before rebuilding work could start.

Food rations were barely adequate (all four bridges over the Rhine had been destroyed, thus involving a thirty-mile detour for the food convoys). Theft was commonplace, and the black market was rife. When the food arrived, according to Major Lee, the British officer responsible, 'the difficulty was to get it unpacked'; twenty men had tried to break in to the store just before the Cusdens had arrived. Yet, Lee reported, 'in spite of the almost untenable conditions of housing and hygiene, the greater proportion of this populace retains its courage and self-respect. The cleanliness of persons and clothing, particularly in the case of the children, is almost miraculous'.

Phoebe, unlike Victor Gollancz, was favourably impressed by the efforts of the occupying forces. School feeding – which she had for years been advocating in Britain – had saved the children from the worst effects of malnutrition: 'the children have stood up to the bad conditions much better than one would have expected'.

Her most inspiring moment was the visit to the Youth Camp at Duisburg. Here she met Catholic scouts who, though stunted by malnutrition, were keen to meet her and to ask for her assistance. 'We want peace but we need advice and direction', said one. 'We would like to get into contact with the youth of the world and...to help bring love and peace to the world'. 'I was much moved by their firm, long handclasp and a long steady gaze into my eyes', Phoebe confided to her notebook. 'It seemed that everyone was pledg-

ing himself to uphold the ideal of human brotherhood and peace’.

The Cusdens returned to Reading in September 1947. Hobson’s verdict in the *Chronicle* on the Mayor’s trip was favourable: ‘In the midst of so much misery, it is hard to be objective and sympathetic at the same time. She has held the balance well’. Phoebe’s own verdict was more equivocal. ‘It was just tragic’, she told the press; ‘it made me physically ill’. But it was not long before she recovered her mien, and very soon Phoebe was looking for practical ways to develop links between Reading and Germany.

During her visit to Düsseldorf, Phoebe had suggested to the British military command that Reading Save the Children Fund might be willing to maintain a nursery school for a year. ‘It would make a splendid liaison’, agreed Colonel Barker, the officer-in-charge; but the authorities subsequently diverted her efforts from Düsseldorf to Aachen, on the grounds that the people of Düsseldorf were ‘too Catholic’.

A nursery school was duly set up in Aachen, but soon ran into the same problems. ‘Apparently the ‘free methods’ of the English Nursery have aroused adverse criticism and restrictive German methods are still preferred’, the Fund reported disapprovingly, and the English, Froebel-trained teacher was recalled and replaced by a native. If Phoebe had misgivings about ‘restrictive German methods’, she kept them to herself. The local SCF continued to fund the Aachen kindergarten until 1950. Phoebe visited it twice, and made a few young friends. ‘“Tante Phoebe’s” visit was by far the happiest day of the month,” the teacher reported. ‘They all remembered her so well’.

Soon after the Cusdens’ return to Reading, Dr Hensel came to Britain, at the invitation of the Government, to find out more about how the British local government system worked. He stayed with the Cusdens in Reading for one of his four weeks, visited the Basildon PoW camp and the Friends’ Meeting House (where prisoners-of-war met weekly for tea and cakes), and through the *Citizen* asked for the assistance of Reading: ‘We need all the help possible to the reconstruction of our country’.

When Hensel met Phoebe in Düsseldorf, he had suggested ‘that it might be possible to select a few of their best scholars from their schools for exchange visits’. It seems that they discussed the idea further during his stay in Reading, for soon after he left she wrote to the German Refugee Department and told them that Reading residents were willing to receive German children ‘in order to rescue them from the rigours of winter in their own country’.

By December, she was hoping to bring six children over to stay for three months. ‘I realise that it would be a great responsibility to bring the children so far from home,’ she wrote to Hensel, ‘but I think the good food and better conditions here would be of great benefit to them.’

The logistics of the situation delayed her plans for several months, how-

ever. Meanwhile conditions in Düsseldorf were still deteriorating. 'The food situation is grim', Colonel Barker told Phoebe in January, 'in fact worse than last year, and such chance for recuperation given to these children may mean a new lease of life to the individual concerned'.

Hensel organised the selection of suitable children from his city's schools. 'Every precaution has been taken to keep the parents of these children in ignorance of our plans so as to avoid disappointment in case of its coming to naught', he wrote to Phoebe. 'I hail with joy the implementation of this venture, for the psychological effects upon the people of Düsseldorf are bound to be most beneficial'.

On 23 April 1948, the children arrived in Reading, their travel expenses paid by the Save the Children Fund: three boys and three girls, aged between 12 and 14. They were met off the train at Liverpool Street by Mrs Asbury, wife of the German Commissioner, who took them to Reading.

On the way from the station to the Town Hall we passed a fruit barrow piled with various fruits...the children stared at the barrow with wide-open eyes and let forth a great sigh – a great 'oh!'. Mrs Asbury thereupon bought a box of dates for each child, to their great joy.

The children stayed with six generous families (it was no small thing to act as host to a hungry and traumatised child, as Phoebe doubtless remembered from her distressing experience with the miners' children twenty years before.) They went to local schools, with the children of their hosts ('they couldn't understand that we started so late in the morning!'), and took part in a variety of activities. Wing-Commander Pooley took them to the Zoo, the newly-formed Progress Theatre organised events for them, and Harold King of the Woodcraft Folk took them to the Whitsun Camp at Stoke Row.

It was the start of a lifetime's connection between Harold, his wife Phyllis and the Reading-Düsseldorf Association, which Phoebe had set up in March, 'when the correspondence between Düsseldorf and Reading became too heavy for me to deal with', as she put it. Phoebe had been deluged with letters once her intentions became known: pleas for help from people whose houses had been requisitioned, people looking for work in England, for pen-friends, food, help and favours of all kinds, but the Association was not created just to make her own life easier.

'I am most anxious to make the relationship between Reading and Düsseldorf a very real thing', Phoebe wrote next month, 'and more important even than food and clothing...will be the intellectual and spiritual contact which we are establishing.'

The first meeting was held in the Town Hall on March 8, with representatives from various Christian groups, and organisations with which the

Cusdens were involved. Albert, the linguist, took responsibility for 'liaison' and 'hospitality'; and when the time came he took the children back to Düsseldorf, where he found 'a feeling of hopefulness coming in'.

The Association's plans to repeat the exercise in 1949 were at first hampered by lack of funds. 'Donor fatigue' was setting in, and in November Phoebe complained that fundraising was proving difficult: 'It is uphill work, since there is much indifference and some antipathy to it'.

Supporters redoubled their efforts. Various benefit events were held. Mrs Coleman, one of the first hostesses, held dance demonstrations at Palmer Hall; Progress Theatre organised a fund-raising tea party. Trade Union branches made generous donations, and several events were organised by the members of the Tilehurst Congregational Church ('there is a keen body of supporters of our work here', wrote Phoebe).

Plans to repeat the exercise in 1949 were temporarily shelved in October 'owing to lack of hospitality', but the situation soon changed once the RDA had decided to follow the Düsseldorf example and approach potential host families through schools. One school alone (Alfred Sutton) had 23 offers from its students and their families.

In April 1949, 31 children arrived from Germany (25 from Düsseldorf, 6 from other towns). They were met on the Town Hall steps by Phoebe, where they sang her 'a German folk song with a gay, lilting refrain'.

That year saw the first return trip to Düsseldorf. A party of seventy English children went to stay at the International Youth Hostel: the programme included rambling and camping, visits to Rhineland beauty spots. 'YOU MUST BRING YOUR OWN SOAP', participants were told.

On 29 July a further group of sixty went to Germany, including the entire Reading Youth Orchestra, who had a rapturous reception in Düsseldorf (on one occasion an audience of 2000 applauded for half-an-hour). Thirty more young Germans came back with them to take part in Reading's International Fortnight in September. The Düsseldorf link had become a roaring success. As Hensel wrote to Phoebe, 'one is apt to commiserate oneself for not being ten years old and entrusted to go to Reading...we could abolish all diplomacy if a large number of people like you would join to clear away the international problems with the methods chosen by you'.

The exchange visits soon became an annual fixture. In 1951 one member resigned because he was concerned that people were abusing the Association 'as a way of obtaining cheap holidays' – which, if it says little for his generosity of spirit, was a telling tribute to the remarkable speed of the German recovery, and the part that links like that between Reading and Düsseldorf had played in rehabilitating the country's reputation.

German admiration – not to say astonishment – at Phoebe's generosity of

