'The mountain of misery' from the Süddeutsche Zeitung (19 November 1946)

Caption: On 19 November 1946, the Bavarian daily newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung paints a catastrophic picture of the humanitarian situation in devastated Germany and launches an appeal for Christian charity.

Source: Süddeutsche Zeitung. Münchner Neueste Nachrichten aus Politik, Kultur, Wirtschaft und Sport. Hrsg. Friedmann, Werner; Goldschagg, Edmund; Schöningh, Dr. Franz Joseph; Schwingenstein, August. 19.11.1946, Nr. 95; 2. Jg. München: Süddeutscher Verlag. "Der Berg des Elends", auteur:Friedmann, Werner , p. 1.

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The mountain of misery

by Werner Friedmann

When the very first victims of the bombings crawled out of the cellars of their devastated homes they were met with a wave of sympathy and a readiness to help. They were, after all, people with a certain novelty value, the first fascinating representatives of a new species, which this century, so rich in negative coinings, has termed ‘bombed-out persons’. Then, however, their numbers began to escalate dramatically and the hearts of their fellow men to harden, following a law of nature according to which sympathy decreases proportionally to the rise in poverty, because the power of compassion simply founders on numbers beyond our ken. Ten people in the grip of poverty — well and good! People are prepared to open their pockets and their wardrobes. But millions in poverty — this is where the imagination of your average citizen reaches its limits. He will close his eyes and prefer, as long as he is lucky enough not to be affected himself, to see nothing and pray to St Florian to let other houses be burnt down as long as his own remains unharmed.

It is certain that if the sufferings of a refugee family are described in detail, many worthy readers will be touched and write to the editors, offering the family their support. But what would happen if we were to publish a list currently to be found on the desk of the Bavarian State Commissioner for Refugees, bearing the laconic title ‘Urgent requirements for refugees’? In a few bald figures we learn that in Bavaria in 1946 470 000 people driven from their country do not possess a mattress and that 850 000 people are without woollen blankets. 500 000 refugees have neither bed nor straw sack, while 700 000 do not own wearable shoes. One million people are without a single plate to their name and one and a half million do not have a single coffee cup to call their own. 20 000 families need an oven, 150 000 men and 480 000 women and girls have no underwear. 285 000 children lack the most basic items of clothing.

What the statistics fail to say is that these children are unable to go to school, that thousands of people who are farmers by profession and who love working cannot help on the land because they have no shoes on their feet. They don’t say for example that there is an air-raid shelter in Nuremberg where hundreds of men, women and children have been living for over a year, many of whom can only go out into the light of day when the weather is warm and dry. At the present time nearly all of them are having to live in overcrowded shelter compartments which, according to the Commissioner for Refugees, are dark for days on end owing to power supply problems and whose walls are dripping with damp.

As stated above, faced with such a mountain of misery, both compassion and the imagination fail just as they do when confronted with the figures, running into millions, of those murdered in Hitler’s concentration camps. These are quantities of misery that simply cannot be comprehended with the normal power of the imagination. The State Commissioner, Dr Jänicke, who in a recent tour of Bavaria’s five administrative districts spoke of these things in addresses to chief administrative officers and mayors, believed he was dealing with an issue that was very well known to all. But lo! — the halls were as quiet as a church. The astonishment at such enormous distress petrified even people who had hitherto seen themselves as experts on the subject, pushing them to the edge of disbelief.

What good here are appeals and fine words? Those whose homes and belongings were spared by St Florian prefer at best to buy themselves free of the quiet murmurings of conscience and otherwise to feel unaffected by the matter. What fault is it of theirs that chance or the ‘Providence’ so frequently cited in the Third Reich wished them well? Left to themselves, they cannot find the *bridge* that links the two worlds of rich and poor. ‘We are good Christians,’ they say, ‘but every Christian approves of *private property* as a prerequisite for a healthy family life.’ And there are many who look askance at socialism, seeing in it no more than an ideology, which in some way threatens private property.

This is as facile as it is *wrong*. For one thing because the Christian understanding of property has nothing to do with the bourgeois-capitalist concept, and again because it has never been as important as it is today for socialism and Christianity to join hands. This process, which in itself is natural and has, down the centuries, received unambiguous backing in the form of innumerable pronouncements by popes and doctors of the Church (see Fedor Stepun’s essay ‘The duty to acquire property and the right to dispossess’ in the first issue

of the *Hochland* review now back in publication), is opposed only by the prejudices of those property-owners who *call* themselves Christians out of love for their possessions.

Practically speaking: the day may come when the state is obliged, in the general interest, to involve itself in some way in property relations. What the state must do today if it wishes to solve the most difficult problem of our time is the following: what it must seize is not the precious rugs and oil paintings, the diamond rings and objets d'art rescued by individuals but rather the plates and coffee cups, the woollen blankets and the kitchen stools, the bedsteads and saucepans, the work shoes and warm underwear. If in a time of such unimaginable need those who own three sets of tableware, four blankets, five pairs of shoes, six suits and seven sets of underwear are required to relinquish some small part of their surplus, even the worst part, even with compensation for all I care, this is no violation of the constitutionally guaranteed recognition of private property, but rather *positive Christianity*! Striking a more or less fair balance between well-stocked kitchen cupboards and wardrobes and pitifully empty refugees' bags does not constitute interference in bourgeois family life, to be opposed as an 'undemocratic constraint', but rather, for anyone who walks our world with open eyes, a necessity, whose denial must inevitably have serious consequences, particularly for the owners themselves.