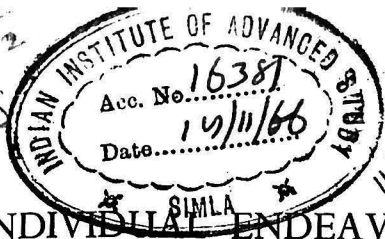


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SOME INDIVIDUAL ENDEAVOURS TO HELP ARAB REFUGEES

By G. E. KIRK

IT has been the aim of United Nations planning for the Palestine Arab refugees that the development of works schemes for their employment and resettlement should make possible the progressive scaling-down of the sums allotted merely to relieving the destitute. In fact, however, this shift of emphasis from Relief to "Works" has not yet been realized. One cause of this is that the areas most heavily burdened with the refugees—namely, the kingdom of the Jordan and the Gaza strip administered by Egypt—are the very areas which offer the fewest potentialities for ready development. Conversely, areas which offer the greatest attractions to the planner, such as the Jazira of N.E. Syria, are remote from the present locations of the refugees. It is one of the most intractable features of the problem that the refugees' spokesmen have been unwilling to abandon the aspiration of returning to their original homes and to admit the principle of resettlement; and the governments of the Arab States, whether of policy or political necessity, have seemed to encourage this attitude rather than seek to persuade the refugees of its unreality, which grows ever greater as time passes.

The Jordan kingdom, which contains some 450,000 refugees, or about half the total number (including those not displaced but deprived of their lands), conferred citizenship on them when it incorporated the remaining hill-country of Arab Palestine into its territory. From a purely juridical point of view, therefore, the refugees are better off in Jordan than in other Arab countries, in which they are stateless persons. But Jordan's extremely limited natural resources provided only a marginal living for her original inhabitants. Hopes are entertained that the conclusion of an agreement between Jordan and Syria for the development of their frontier river, the Yarmuq, for irrigation and the making of hydro-electricity may, if the necessary finances are available from foreign sources, make possible an expansion of Jordan's economy which would absorb perhaps one-third of the refugees; but this and other projects are still in the future. Meanwhile, the refugees in their camps of tents and huts continue to exist, and even to multiply, on the United Nations rations of 1,500 calories daily; but it is an existence without occupation or incentive, and qualified observers testify to the increasing apathy and deepening demoralization which must soon become irreversible.

In this human desert of distress voluntary agencies with their limited funds have created a number of small oases of activity and hope, in the belief that the examples thus set may attract interest and support, and provoke imitation and emulation. For example, the C.M.S. Refugee Relief Centre at Zerqa, directed by Miss Winifred Coate and now in its fifth year, quite early extended its activities beyond the supplementing of United Nations relief to the neediest cases, and began to create and assist occupa-

tional enterprise among the 12,000 refugees added to the population of Zerqa, originally a small satellite-town of the adjacent military camp. The traditional embroidery designing of the womenfolk of the Palestine hill-villages offered a means by which those already skilled could be rescued from inertia, while younger girls could be trained in this craft or in lace-making; the Centre provides materials and undertakes the sale of the attractive finished articles to tourists and others. In 1949 a blind man who was a skilled basket-maker was set to work; he is now well established and has repaid the capital expended on him. A skilled potter was set up in a factory on land purchased through a loan from the Near East Christian Council; the potter himself did much of the building work and the erection of new furnaces, and a new outlet for his activities has been provided by the expansion of the Jordan cement works at Fuhais, with its steady demand for high-quality fire-bricks. This demand is now being met by the "Jordan Ceramic and Brick Factory" at Zerqa, although the writer understood, in February, that the good potter was distressed to find that utilitarian bricks were more saleable than his own more artistic creations. Near by was an animal farm and market-garden, a new venture in 1952. It was hoped to find a ready sale in Zerqa and Amman for turkeys, rabbits, hens, and pigeons, and to begin sheep rearing in the spring of this year; gardens were being laid out for soft fruit and vegetables. This undertaking would become the farmer's property when the initial capital outlay and loans had been repaid. Other projects contemplated, as funds to cover the small capital outlay became available, were the making of reed mats, candles, gloves, and simple local glassware, the materials for which were readily obtainable. Another undertaking at Zerqa, originating in the inquiry of an American benefactress, is the building of small houses of sun-dried brick for persons in regular employment, who could afford to pay a small rental which would eventually defray the capital cost, free of interest, and leave them owners of the property. Four houses had been completed by the beginning of 1953 at a cost of £320 each, including the land, and a proposed fifth house, to be built this spring, had drawn applications from sixty-two persons.

More immediately spectacular, however, is the transformation which has been effected at one locality in what is now commonly called the "west bank" of the Jordan—i.e., Arab Palestine. Twenty-one Arab families, belonging to one village from which they had been displaced by the Palestine war of 1948, had since been living in five caves on a hillside to the east of Bethany and the Mount of Olives amid filth and lice, their misery increased by the flooding of the caves after each rainstorm. There they were discovered by Mrs. Stewart, the wife of the Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem, in the summer of 1952; and the bishop conceived the plan of re-establishing them as householders. An adjacent plot of undeveloped hillside was acquired from the village of at-Tur on the Mount of Olives, and from the stone quarried on the site a one-roomed house was built for each of the families from the caves. The lay-out was planned to avoid the regimentation of a barracks, the houses being given slightly differing orientations, and a wide street was left through the middle. Local quarrymen, master builders and a carpenter were engaged, thus providing employment in the

neighbourhood, and the unskilled work was done by the refugees themselves. The building was completed in about eight weeks at a cost of about £30 per house, including the land; the Iraq Petroleum Company gave the sheet-iron for roofing. A cistern holding 100 cubic metres was dug for water, and a communal bake-oven built to save fuel. The work has been supervised for the bishop by Mr. Stewart Perowne, late of the Colonial Service, who took the writer over the village in February. Mr. Perowne made it clear that he was ready to work patiently through the newly established villagers and their headman, and that he would not set a pace too fast for them. Thus the allocation of houses to families had been left to the villagers themselves, not imposed by "higher authority"; and the headman's rough-and-ready way with two gateposts that were too tall for the gate in the wall surrounding the village evoked only a sigh of expostulation! The villagers had laid out and planted small terraced garden-plots among the houses and the outcropping rocks of the shelving hillside, and it was hoped to establish trees. The site was too small for more extensive cultivation, but Mr. Perowne hoped that the men would find employment in improving the adjacent fields, which were too remote from at-Tur village to have received close attention. Meanwhile, the new villagers were still subsisting on United Nations rations; but their renewed vitality and purposefulness were in striking contrast to the dejection of the inmates of most camps. The house interiors were bare but clean, and the children, who had been plagued with running sores during their cave existence, were clean and lively. One thing was still lacking to this all-Muslim village—a mosque; and during our visit an informal *majlis* discussed the details of a small mosque which they were planning to build on the crest of the hillside, immediately above the village. Within two months of the completion of this village of Rafat at-Tur two other groups of villagers, living in caves and totalling about seventy families, had asked the bishop to do something for them. The bishop had acquired a new building site, and Mr. Perowne had visited Kuwait (where a substantial number of Palestinians have found employment with the oil company) to appeal for donations towards a minimum sum of £750, which would build a second village of twenty houses complete with cistern and other essentials.

Achievements like those just described may seem very small when compared with the great mass of destitute Arab refugees; but the merit of these schemes is precisely that, being small and personal, they do not arouse the political opposition which larger and more official projects have hitherto encountered. Not only do they provide new hope and purpose for the immediate beneficiaries among the refugees, but they furnish experience and example from which other organizations dealing with the refugee problem may well profit. They are thus eminently deserving of the support of all who are conscious of past connections and sympathy with, or obligation towards, the Palestine Arabs in the plight for which others besides themselves must bear so much of the responsibility.

