

THE WAR RESISTER

BUCHENWALD AND DACHAU

When after the last war the French Government deported their War Resisters to French Guiana (Devil's Island) it took the W.R.I. seven years to trace and then bring some of them home. It was much more than seven years before we could tell that tragic story of Devil's Island.

Now it is twelve years since our German and Austrian comrades began to find their way into Buchenwald and Dachau Concentration Camps. At last the story can be told.



FRITZ KÜSTER

It was in 1933 that Fritz Küster, Secretary of the Deutsche Friedensgesellschaft (German Peace Society), was drinking coffee with Ingeborg Andreas, his fiancée, in a Berlin café. Suddenly the exits were covered by armed men. The Gestapo had come. Fritz was arrested and carried off. Ingeborg followed him and saw the doors of the Gestapo headquarters close behind him. For many months Ingeborg Andreas and Fritz Küster's office colleague, Lotte Leonhardt, fearlessly searched for news of Fritz. They made contact with S.A. men (Sturm-Abteilung) in their endeavour to get news. One day an S.A. man asked Ingeborg to go on a long train journey with him, hinting she might learn something. With a good deal of fear she went. At the end of the journey was a long, lonely tramp through desolate country. In the quiet of a lane they waited. Soon two other S.A. men appeared, and with them Fritz Küster. Two hours they had together—the S.A. men waiting at a little distance—and then they had to part, Fritz returning

to the camp, Ingeborg on her long journey back, thankful for those two hours but wondering when they would meet again and how she could make that possible.

Fritz Küster was shifted from prison to prison before being finally taken to Buchenwald. First of all he was taken to the Alexanderplatz Detention Prison, from there to Lehrtelstrasse Prison, then to Brandenburg Camp, next to Oranienburg, then to Lichtenburg and so finally to Buchenwald. Ingeborg Andreas came to England and stayed at Enfield. From there she visited many prominent people—always with the one end in view, Fritz's release.

Here was a new problem for the W.R.I. In the past years the International had gained the release of many War Resisters imprisoned in different countries in Europe. We, or friends on our behalf, had made representations to the respective Governments on the grounds of humanity, and had urged that the continued persecution of War Resisters was making an unfavourable impression in other and more enlightened countries. But we knew that with the Nazis such approaches would be quite ineffective. We took the advice of our friends in Europe and sought their help. At last we found the man who could help us, if indeed anyone could. We made our contact with him, but it was second hand, and that would not do. It became necessary for someone to go to Germany. Unhappily I was on the Nazi black list and would be shadowed, bringing into danger all those with whom I met. Grace Beaton offered to go, and together with her faithful medical friend, Dr. Brass, she went to Berlin. At the Quaker centre there she was introduced to the friend, Willem van Zuylenstein, who was to help us. But they were not alone. The conversation was strange, and when sifted had little meaning, the important question at issue not being touched upon. It was clear that our friend was not certain of us, and did not want to speak openly whilst others were present. Just when Grace was almost in despair as to getting any practical result, the telephone rang and the good friend who had arranged the introduction left the room. The doctor



INGEBORG KÜSTER

seized the opportunity and followed her. A short while Grace and van Zuylenstein were alone. Suddenly the attitude changed. The whole position became clear and in a short while plans were prepared. These plans may be outlined as follows: Henlein, the Nazi leader of the Sudeten Germans, was in trouble in Czechoslovakia. Some of his supporters had been arrested by the Czech Government. Van Zuylenstein had introductions to Henlein. He would go to him and offer to be his arbitrator with the Czech Government, urging clemency on behalf of those in prison, if Henlein would give him an introduction to Himmler. This plan was successful, and eventually van Zuylenstein found himself in the presence of Himmler, head of the Gestapo. He told Himmler that he was representing people whose one concern was that of humanity and that no person should be imprisoned and punished without fair trial. He offered to use the influence he had with the Czech Government to see that justice was done to the men whom they had arrested. But there was a price. The price was that Himmler should exercise similar justice towards German people who were being imprisoned without a trial. There were long negotiations, spreading over months and years. Ingeborg came again and again to England, and stayed on several occasions with Grace Beaton and her mother, bringing us as much detailed information as possible, and whilst here interviewing many prominent people in this country with a view to exerting pressure on the Nazi authorities.

By this time Fritz Küster had been in Buchenwald for nearly two years. No one had seen him and there were no letters. Visits were not allowed. Van Zuylenstein saw Himmler again, and was given a promise that Küster's fiancée should be granted a permit to go and see him. This was an unheard-of precedent. The permit duly arrived and Ingeborg—her joy mingled with foreboding—found herself making the long journey and the long tramp into a lonely country where the camp was situated. With a heart full of fear she presented herself and her permit at the gates of the dreaded Buchenwald Concentration Camp. The Commandant was surprised and stated that no single visitor had been to the camp for the last twelve months, but there was the permit, and Ingeborg, in the presence of S.S. (Sturm Staffel) men, met and talked with Fritz Küster.

Time went on, the weary weeks passed to months, and months to years. The S.A. men were replaced by S.S. men, whose sympathy it was far more difficult to obtain than from those of the old S.A. corps. The rare letters stopped, a fearful dread weighed heavily on us all—where was Fritz Küster? Was he still in the camp, or was he now one of those who had just "disappeared"? It became clear that if our efforts were to succeed and Fritz was to be released we must get information as to what was going on in Buchenwald. We must know that he was still there. Van Zuylenstein therefore made friends with certain S.S. men, one of whom took him privately and, of course, surreptitiously into Buchenwald. There he tramped through the camp, saw many of the inmates, but all the time his eyes were searching for a man with a certain number—Fritz's number. At last he saw him—helping to build the dread place that was to keep him prisoner for a long time to come. He did not make himself known to Fritz, but he left with all the information he required. It was clear at that time that there was no deliberate attempt to starve the men to death, although there were many mysterious deaths in the camp.

Soon after this Hitler occupied Austria. Our Austrian friends were in great trouble and the W.R.I. could not make effective contact. Grace Beaton decided to go to Vienna. Van Zuylenstein was already there, seeking to help those in trouble. He was convinced that he could particularly help Jewish people, for at that time the Nazi intention was not to exterminate the Jews or their political opponents. German and Austrian opponents were to be thrown into Concentration Camps and so roughly treated that when they came out they would never dare to attempt any opposition of the Nazi régime. The Jewish people were to be so brutally treated that news of this, leaking out into other countries, would arouse such humanitarian instincts as would result in the opening of many doors to the Jewish population of Germany and Austria. Van Zuylenstein had his plans to help both of these sets of persecuted people. So he had gone to Vienna. Grace Beaton arrived there, again with her faithful medical friend, Dr. Brass. They first went to the address of Van Zuylenstein. To Grace's astonishment—and to her consternation—it was the headquarters of the Gestapo! Seeing this they checked up the address very carefully—no mistake being made, they decided to go in. They passed through doors swung open by S.S. men, and every time they were met with a "Heil Hitler" and the outstretched arm bearing the symbol of the "crooked cross". They presented their cards and asked to see Mr. Willem van Zuylenstein. They waited in the public foyer. Yes, he was there and would be advised of their request.

The Gestapo men, all in uniform, were tramping up and down; some sitting at little tables drinking, some in small groups talking intently. There was an air of doom hanging over the place. Presently van Zuylenstein appeared, quite unperturbed—the only person, apart from themselves, in mufti. The three took their seats among these groups of S.S. men. For an hour or so they sat and talked about anything but the subject uppermost in the mind of each. Not a word was said about the object of their visit, then, feeling as if they had been in a dream, they prepared to go. Van Zuylenstein casually remarked, "I'll meet you at two o'clock to-morrow at —" (mentioning a certain well-known café). They left. The intervening time was spent in making cautious contact with many of our Viennese comrades. That in itself was difficult. Ferdinand Schwarz had been arrested. Grace and the doctor would go and see his wife. They reached the road in which she lived—but at the corner was an S.S. man, who followed them as they walked down the street; they arrived at the house they wanted and were about to go in when they noticed another S.S. man exactly opposite. He seemed interested in them, so they quickly decided to walk straight on. They walked round the square—again and again—always followed. Once they lost their "shadow", and thought that now they would get in at the house which was their destination, but no—the S.S. man was still opposite, still watching. Three hours were spent in this way before the attempt was given up—but made again the following day, this time with success. The same thing happened with the family of Rudolf Grossmann, who was a fugitive "somewhere in Austria", but again they succeeded and were eventually successful in seeing Rudolf Grossmann himself. Grace made friends with many others, some English, who were in Vienna on similar missions, and they co-operated.

At two o'clock the next day Grace Beaton and Dr. Brass arrived at the appointed café, and walked in under the notice "No Jews Admitted". Van Zuylenstein was there and they took their seats in the open window. The café was crowded with S.S. men and the streets outside were filled with them, passing up and down. Under these difficult conditions our business was conducted. In their midst our plans were made! Grace Beaton and Dr. Brass left that night for Berlin, on a train crowded to excess, but on which they had comfortable sleeping compartments put at their disposal by the possession of a "privilege slip" provided by the Gestapo office!

In Berlin they again met Ingeborg. It had become clear that at that time no release from Buchenwald Camp would be granted except on a special permit from Hitler himself. Our task seemed to be getting more and more difficult—at times we *almost* thought it impossible. But we had yet to learn the full value of the contact we had made. Van Zuylenstein played his game well. Hitler had a favourite nephew. Our friend made it his business to get to know that nephew, and it was finally arranged that the nephew should be asked to take a communication to Hitler himself. The nephew agreed—the communication was the request for Fritz's release. So away to Berchtesgaden went a strange emissary for the W.R.I. to use, but this was the final hope. Success was achieved and after five and a half years Fritz Küster was released. Ingeborg and Fritz were married and up to 1941 were living and working in Hannover.

The most remarkable thing is that Fritz Küster came out from five and a half years' sojourn, through all these concentration camps, a sound man. His health, doubtlessly, is impaired, but it is not shattered, while mentally and spiritually he appeared to his friends as the same steady, quiet and strong Fritz they had known so well before these trials.

One of the first things he did, upon hearing that his old colleague, Lotte Leonhardt (a Jewess), was in difficulties and leaving Germany, was to go himself, at great personal risk, to Berlin to bid her "Auf Wiedersehen".

[News has just been received that Fritz Küster and Ingeborg with their two children are safe and living near Hannover.]

Throughout this time the W.R.I. had paid all the expenses of van Zuylenstein's journeys. We had now established effective working arrangements with him. An increasing number of our comrades, mainly but not entirely Jewish, were being thrown into Dachau Concentration Camp. Van Zuylenstein had undertaken to use his influence to gain releases for our friends and permission to leave the country. But to make his work possible, we in turn had to provide the visas necessary to enter another country. We had already established good relationships with the British Home Office, and together with the late George Lansbury (then Chairman of the W.R.I.) I was able to meet the then Under Secretary for Home Affairs, Geoffrey Lloyd, and inform him that we, as an organisation, wished to arrange for numbers of refugees to be brought out of Germany and Austria into England; some for permanent residence, but the majority

in transit for other countries. We had already been able to bring a number of our friends out of Austria and Germany—those who were not in concentration camps. But the existing machinery was cumbersome and in every case a personal guarantee of definite financial support had to be obtained from a British subject. We now arranged that a scheme should be worked out with the Head of the Aliens Department of the British Home Office. This scheme was that the W.R.I. *itself* should guarantee the financial support of all those refugees whom it brought to this country; that the number in the country at any one time should be limited according to the amount of our guarantee; and that the International should in turn itself be guaranteed by a panel of guarantors, consisting of a number of people whose names would be acceptable to the Home Office. This scheme was duly presented to the Home Secretary. It was accepted and became known as "The War Resisters' International Pool Scheme". Under it, many of our friends were brought to England. Much negotiation with other Governments also had to be undertaken, as most of those coming to Great Britain were in transit only. The W.R.I. was thus enabled to put before the Home Office cases of many young men in the Dachau and Buchenwald Concentration Camps and, after obtaining the necessary visas, to secure their release and exit permits. Arrangements were made to finance their journeys to Great Britain, where they were always met and cared for by our people.

H. RUNHAM BROWN.

(N.B. In the above statement substitute names have been used in two cases only.)