The Central Office of the Protestant Train Station Mission: Progress Report (1945/46)

Abstract

The Christian churches played an important role in the devastated society of the immediate postwar period. In the war's aftermath, enormous crowds of people – evacuated civilians, returning soldiers, refugees from the East, "foreign workers" – travelled through Germany without adequate provisions and with very limited means of transportation. These itinerant masses turned train stations into hotbeds of social misery. The Protestant Train Station Mission began its work as early as May 1945 and tried, at first in large cities, to help travelers as best it could, despite the difficult circumstances and a general lack of space and funds. The pressure eased in 1946 and basic conditions improved.

Source

Train Station Mission (TSM) in 1945

I. The local work.

Three especially vivid impressions characterize the year 1945.

1. The TSM work is being revived everywhere. On September 1 (1939), the old, tried-and-true work of the TSM was suspended through a decree of the NSV [*National Socialist People's Welfare Organization*] (Hilgenfeldt). What was done instead, disguised as "Church Service to the Migrant Congregation," was very modest and could no longer be spoken of as TSM in the true sense – even though in this work, in particular, given the growing misery from the bombed-out cities and their evacuated residents, the Central Office worked with great love, and it can be said with gratitude that this work preserved the Central Office of the TSM for the service today.

The collapse came in May 1945. From the very start of the most modest passenger traffic, the TSM was there. From Berlin, from the province, from the zone, finally also from the West came the reports: "We are at work." In the months of May, June, July, August, and September, all of the chief TSMs were revived.

Behind the local TSMs and their work stood the initiative of all church forces, above all the work of the internal mission, which immediately went to work with great energy locally and in provincial locations. Women's relief also started up. Above all, the women's relief groups provided volunteers in large numbers and helped with material gifts. Some of this help was provided especially in areas where the greatest misery existed even in the villages. Likewise, church congregations helped in a similar way. The charitable breadbasket, the charitable wardrobe are becoming important sources of aid to relieve part of the boundless misery. Financial subsidies are being made available to pay for the workers. We have welcomed this anchoring of the work in the church congregations with great joy. It must be further promoted and deepened. (Congregations should, as they now do in Pomerania, sponsor TSMs, and members of the congregation must be called upon to distribute their gifts to those in need. It is important that train station missionaries continuously report in detail on their work at congregation evenings.)

[…]

2. The second lasting impression of 1945 is the shocking extent of the suffering. What took place at the

train stations offers a terrible picture of the German fate in an especially blatant and concentrated form. Unspeakable misery! A chaos of suffering! The TSM experiences all of this first hand, so to speak.

A few sentences from a report from Frankfurt an der Oder about the summer months of 1945 are enough to illustrate this:

“For weeks, 10–15,000 refugees arrived at the train station every day. As a result, the railroad had to haul away 124 carloads of trash from the station every month. There was a lack of shelter, food, clothing. Men and women came wrapped in ragged blankets and no longer own anything else.”

There are sick people – (mostly typhus and dysentery), there are people covered in vermin, the dying, the dead! The women missionaries work among them at the risk of their own lives! There are the starving! Harrowing is the following account from a western city:

“When the train entered the station, we saw with horror how people were falling from it, people who, completely exhausted, incapable of walking upright and screaming for bread, came crawling toward us over the tracks.“

The transports of returning prisoners of war began, and once again we recall Frankfurt an der Oder, where for many weeks, 100–200 soldiers are found dead every day in the streets in front of cellar doors and entryways. The train station Rummelsburg reported in November 1945 that an unannounced transport of returning soldiers, which took 1 ½ days from Frankfurt to Berlin, was pulling into the station on the Day of Penance. It carried 30 dead. (The work in Rummelsburg was especially strenuous. The railway grounds alone extend over 3 kiometers. Often, 3–4 transports arrived at the same time in different locations).

[…]

3. With this, the third lasting impression of the TSM in 1945 becomes clear: the difficulties, far greater than words can tell, of helping. Destroyed train stations everywhere. No space, no water, no opportunity to cook, no food, no drugs, no housing possibilities, or only those that fill one with horror, and where the poorest are better off lying and dying under the open sky (e.g. the La Plaza bunker in Berlin). No stretchers, no transportation options, no telephone to hospitals, offices, railroad offices, church offices, and so on. No porters, no accompanying persons to guide one through the streets, where all transportation options are lacking and exhausted mothers, children, the sick, and the elderly must walk the four kilometers to a shelter with their heavy luggage. And it remains one of the direst miseries that no answer can be given to a thousand questions and no help in a thousand cases. To all this we must add the personal insecurity of the female missionaries here in the East. Night work, dangerous for men, is simply impossible for women. After all, danger still exists today.

In view of these facts, one may say: surely, the TSM could not even begin to relieve the misery it encountered. But: it was present. As the first. The others who are now competing for the privilege of doing train station service came when the worst was over. What the women missionaries accomplished in this regard by bravely putting themselves on the line will remain unforgotten. True love to our fellow humans was practiced here, with a complete commitment of the self and without questions about compensation and gratitude. Indeed, one could behold with astonishment how ways and means of helping were found with indefatigable inventiveness. And we do not want to forget that our train station missionaries, themselves hungry, tired, at the end of their strength, assailed by suffering of their own, often served while refugees themselves and still do today.

II. The work of the central office.

[…]

In November, a relationship will be established with Caritas, and the old “Church Conference of the Train Station Mission” will be newly established. – This will lead from the outset to a very lively cooperation with the Catholic leadership. In addition, a lot of positive things are to be noted, genuine mutual help and support. At the same time, however, a very strong Catholic activity becomes visible, some of it not entirely without concerns. Vigilance on our part remains an urgent necessity. – Now, the Central Office is setting about procuring materials; there is a need, above all, for signs and arm bands. However, all attempts in that direction showed success only from 1946. – On November 16, 1945, a first meeting with representatives of the state and provincial offices of the TSM in the Eastern Zone was possible. It took place in the Central Committee of the I.M. [Internal Mission] Berlin-Dahlem and is generating a lot of mutual impetuses. The Central Office was asked for guidelines, which were soon issued.

[…]

IV. From the West it becomes clear that the TSMs there have more favorable working conditions. Even though train stations are destroyed, they manage to procure rooms much more quickly, work with fewer impediments, and have remarkable options for material aid, particularly in the distribution of food. – I was able to place the abbess of Alvensleben as my deputy in the British Zone, and, finally, to establish contact at the end of the year with our chairman, president von Kameke. In the American Zone, P. Schumacher, the head of the Internal Mission in Frankfurt am Main has assumed oversight of the TSM. All written publications of the Central Office, e.g. circulars, guidelines and so on are gradually being directed to the West.

Train station mission in 1946.

The year 1946 brings a picture that is similar in many ways and yet also very different, especially in the Eastern Zone. New questions, new miseries, but also new possibilities emerge. All in all, one can say this about 1946: it was a very active year with great concerns, and yet, in the end, we have good reason to be thankful.

I. The local work.

The following should be said about this:

1. The work is becoming more regularized.

Rooms are found, often too small, and yet they are an immense help. […]

2. The practical care-work now focuses on clearly delineated groups.

a) The refugees. The transports of expellees from the East continue to arrive unceasingly. Millions of people! And with them, terrible images of suffering, misery, and hopeless anxiety about the future. These large transports are estimated to continue for another 3–4 months. Although some things are becoming more orderly, the misery, especially now in the winter, has become terribly great once again, and the question of where to house the returnees is one of the most catastrophic problems for Germany. Transports from Pomerania arrive more rarely. In Löcknitz near Stetting, it is above all individuals who are coming across in the second half of 1946. The chief expulsions are taking place in Silesia. Among these refugees, special consideration must be given to:

b) Those cast back and forth. What a tragedy last summer, for example, at the Stettin train station in Berlin, where the trains from Pomerania arrive, and where these plagued, plundered, exhausted people were told: “Travel to Mecklenburg, there you will find a new home,” and who then, sent back from Mecklenburg, reappeared in Berlin and didn’t know where to go. The Magdeburg Bunker (unfortunately no longer in existence) can also provide harrowing reports about this. […]

c) Returning prisoners of war. There is no need to say much about the misery of these people, who stand so vividly before our eyes. Thanks to the *Hilfswerk* [Relief Organization] and thanks to much loyal help from the communities, the TSMs were often best able to offer energetic help to this group, especially in the West. A great cause for concern for all TSMs was

d) The hunger traffic. Only a small part of it can be referred to as "hording traffic." Let us recall the sad images of overcrowded trains, all the commotion, ruthlessness, terrible scenes, and accidents that came with them.

[…]

f) The problem of the endangered youth. In all of Germany we see pretty much the same picture at all train stations. Here, the TSM is called upon to show its full commitment. In the West, the Protestant and Catholic TSM submitted a joint request to the Reich Railroad for the creation of special aid measures for endangered youths and children. They are also hoping, by means of posters, to prompt parents and adults to pay attention and help with a sense of responsibility.

[…]

4. Financing the work has become possible in a great many ways. Many expenses were covered by donations. Great problems remain, however – especially when it comes to adequate pay for full-time workers. This is becoming a growing problem especially in the East. In the West, the TSM has been authorized to carry out a collection at the train stations five times a year.

[…]

Mother Superior L. von Schierstaedt

Managing Director

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Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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