

LETTERS TO A FRIEND IN THE REALM OF IDEALISM

Transcribed by S. B. Kaufman
LETTER I.

Dear Friend:—

Many changes have taken place in my life since you have heard from me. From the study of theology, I entered a course of jurisprudence and from law, I took up social work and social service. I am still engaged in the latter, and a little knowledge of the former makes my work more interesting and instructive.

Social work is rather very popular and fashionable nowadays, both with the paid and volunteer worker. Many men and women even spend large fortunes in order to be affiliated with some philanthropic organization. We shall soon have enough societies to satisfy every faddist and the most whimsical in social service.

But, friend, with all the social service and philanthropy, with all the twentieth century civilization and the boasting of brotherly love and humanity, you are a million times better off to remain in the Realm of Idealism than to return to this earth, at least for the present. To tell you the truth, I am beginning to believe that I am no longer human. The reading, day after day, for the last few months, of all the horrible atrocities and suffering caused by the greatest crime of all ages, the present war, is destroying and annihilating in me all human attributes and instincts.

Think of it! More than 5,000,000 men have already been killed and wounded on the battle-field, and yet some still speak of European and Western civilization and some still argue that war is necessary. Horrible, horrible, friend. Woe to such a civilization and a thousand times woe to such humanity. How happy you ought to be in the Realm of Idealism!

Another reason, my friend, why you should not return at present is that you may not be able to find a job. Practically every large community is now confronted with the problem of the unemployed. Every city is organizing so-called Citizens Relief and Employment Bureaus. Some are semi-municipal and semi-philanthropic, and in many instances not much of anything, for with all these labor bureaus,

thousands of men are still idle in every large city.

In the course of my discussions in future letters, I will have occasion to show how superficially and aimlessly we do things here and what a great part the love of publicity and notoriety plays in a good many of our activities.

It might be of some interest if I give you a brief description of one of the Citizens Relief and Employment Bureaus which I recently visited. The offices are held in a building large enough for many purposes. There are registration and statistical rooms—to keep records of how many have applied for jobs. Here applicants are required to give a little history about themselves and families, which is very important for the compiling of records and statistics. There are rooms for meetings of the various committees and sub-committees who plan the work of the Bureau, and many interesting discussions take place here, and generally there are more discussions than jobs. There are rooms for a municipal lodging-house for all kinds of transients, including vagrants and police characters; work-rooms where a few poor women can earn 75 cents a day mending old clothes sent by liberal contributors—I am not sure whether they are paid in cash or in groceries; work-rooms where a few cobblers can repair old shoes; and rooms to store old clothing, furniture and provisions.

There are also rooms to house families. At the time of my visit, there were already housed in that building nineteen families and their small children. With one or two exceptions, these families were residents of the city and were evicted for non-payment of rent. I regret that I cannot give a detailed report about these families. Why was not their rent paid by one organization or another? Where were their friends and neighbors? Does it not cost to move and feed these families in the municipal lodging house? Why were they not taken care of at their own homes if they were at all worthy? Why should the children of

these families be brought into such an atmosphere. Where were the good Poor Laws, which provide that the poor be taken care of in a proper way? These and many other questions I should like to ask about the nineteen families.

The newspapers have published many beautiful articles about this Bureau and lodging house. Thousands of men have already registered and applied for jobs. It may be true that a few have secured temporary or permanent jobs through this Bureau, but should not the honest working man be treated with more respect and dignity? If labor exchanges are at all necessary, they should be conducted in a most dignified and businesslike way and not be associated with poor philanthropy.

No doubt the men and women who are interested in these Bureaus are doing the best they can under the circumstances, but it is nevertheless worth while to point out how inadequately we cope with our important problems. "What is the remedy?" you will ask. I shall speak about it another time.

Well, friend, I think I have said enough in this letter. I shall write to you from time to time on various problems pertaining to social work. My letters will be written in a spirit of friendly to all and with malice to none, and I hope you will read them carefully.

Your friend,

WHO WANTS TO KNOW.

SETTLEMENT VOLUNTEER WORKERS' ASSOCIATION

Belle A. Lowenstein
Cincinnati

Assembled at the Jewish Settlement for the purpose of listening to an address by a noted speaker, a man with a real message, one who gave his hearers food for thought and reflection; in fact, one who made us think. At the end of the evening, we, the volunteer workers, sat around in social converse, discussing the address of the evening and analyzing the efforts we were making in our modest attempt to accomplish something.

Many of us had been volunteer workers for years, and many a time had we wondered whether the social work we were doing, was of any benefit to anybody but to ourselves. There grew out of this reflective mood, in which the speaker of the evening had left us, a healthy discontent, from which there was created an organization, the necessity of which had been felt for a long time, Jewish Settlement Volunteer Workers' Association.

Our head-worker, Dr. Bozen, realizing the earnestness of our plan and in full sympathy with our efforts, helped us to bring this association into existence, by means of his valuable advice and suggestions. We feel the need of the organization, because we realized the necessity of assembling our too or more volunteer workers from time to time, in order to afford each one of them the opportunity of pre-

senting his difficulty or discussing his problem. For we recognized the fact that many of us suffered the same sort of discouragement, and encountered the same sort of difficulties.

We realized that we were never scarcely acquainted with the work of the other volunteers, knowing of only by the name of the club which he led, without any further knowledge of the aims he was trying to accomplish, or the results he was trying to attain.

And so, our Volunteer Workers' Association was to be a sort of "Clearing House," one by means of which we could present frankly and fearlessly any suggestions or criticisms which we felt might help us or our co-workers; for here we met on common ground, each one of us only an amateur, united by common interests, and encouraged by mutual efforts of earnestness and good will.

A committee was formed to present plans stating the needs and purposes of the organization; notices were sent out for a called meeting to consider these plans; the response was splendid, the enthusiasm so great, that at the very first meeting the organization became a permanent one, and there was put on foot at once a plan for definite work. This was just four weeks ago, since then a constitution has been