

M I S C E L L A N E O U S

AN INSTITUTE FOR THE BLIND IN POLAND

The review *Hospitalis* (Zurich, 1961, No. 10) has published an article by Mr. Zoltowski on a Polish society for the education of the blind and there follow a few extracts from this article :

Fifty years ago, a young Polish girl, Rose Czacka, who had lost her sight at the age of 22, gave her fortune on behalf of the blind in Poland. Under her influence, the Society for the Protection of the Blind was founded in 1910.

This work had a very humble beginning. The founder took into her own private apartment seven blind orphan girls, taught them Braille and the professions open to the blind : basket work, cane-bottoming of chairs, knitting. The society also organized the first "patronages", that is to say assistance to the families of the blind living in Warsaw (this was later extended to other towns), set up consulting-rooms for blind children, courses in writing Braille and professional courses for adults, and it also gave certain material help.

This was the first Polish institution of such importance devoted to the welfare of the blind.

After the First World War, the most urgent question was that of setting up a school for young blind people. A place 9 miles from Warsaw was chosen, by the name of Laski, where the children could enjoy country air, peace and quiet, without losing contact with the intellectual life of the capital.

A wooden hut was built in 1922, where the blind lived with nuns. This was only a beginning and the Institute grew to the extent that it now comprises 36 buildings, the biggest of which are : two schools with boarding-houses, one for boys and one for girls. There are also offices, workshops and accommodation. Between these

buildings there are cultivated fields and orchards, a kitchen garden, a flower garden, an apiary and a farm

The institute possesses a bakery and a laundry, as well as a big kitchen for the central buildings, and two smaller kitchens for the boarding-houses.

The reason behind the long distances between the buildings (the two schools, for example, are separated by more than 800 yards) was that the founder intended to have the blind trained to develop within themselves a feeling of independence and a capacity for getting about under the supervision of people who are friendly towards them. This means that there is no risk of their being run over by a car or losing their way. A stadium and a swimming-pool have been built in the grounds of the Institute.

Organization of the schools. — The Laski Institute possesses a kindergarten, an elementary school, a professional school and a special section for mentally retarded children.

Education in the kindergarten begins at the age of three and there is also a section for the mentally retarded. Future projects, therefore, include the construction of a building for 30 children. The next stage is the elementary school which has seven classes corresponding to the seven classes in schools for those with normal vision, apart from a few modifications essential to the programme. The first class is divided into two years of work with a preparatory class followed by the first class. The work of the primary school is divided according to the "work centre" method.

On leaving the seventh form, the blind pupils go on to the professional school, where their studies last three years. Outside school hours, they learn a profession of their own choice.

At the end of their studies, the students take an examination before a Government commission. Till recently, both boys and girls were prepared exclusively for their chosen profession. Now, the first year of professional school represents a stage in which the students pass through different workshops, so as to be capable, in the end, of choosing a profession in full possession of the facts.

This system was introduced as an experiment during the scholastic year of 1958/1959 . . .

The workshops. — Besides the usual professions for the blind, such as brushmaking and weaving, other activities have been taught for some years:

1. Metal work, the construction of metal beds, cages for minks and rabbits, etc.
2. There is also a workshop for the construction of modern metal furniture such as armchairs, tables and various household objects like lamps and ash-trays. In the beginning, the metal work was done solely by hand but now the blind are learning to use machines like lathes and electric machine drills.
3. In the woodwork section these young blind people use milling machines, planing-machines, lathes and machine drills. Furniture is the principal produce here : stools, tables, school desks, work benches for the production of shoe-scrapers, shelves, folding chairs, etc. The Institute sends these products to different State commercial enterprises.
4. Tapestry work is comprised principally of making mattresses and upholstered furniture of various models.
5. Cane-bottoming of wicker furniture was first introduced as an experiment but it has now gained in importance. Under the direction of a professional artist stools and modern armchairs in wood and metal are made.

In principle, people who have suffered amputations learn weaving, which is within the capabilities of even those who have no hands. They work with specially fitted machines, using artificial limbs and special hooks. A person with both hands amputated can make up ten yards of material in eight hours. It is a tradition of the Institute that when they leave school, the pupils always know two crafts, so as to be more independent in later life.

There is a surgery on the spot, where a doctor gives three consultations each week, and close attention is paid to the pupils' state of health. The Institute also has a dental clinic . . .

Contacts. — The Institute remains in continual contact with old pupils and its interest is shown by the way it endeavours to

find them lodgings or work, lend them books from the Braille Library, help them materially and facilitate holidays at Laski for them, often with their families. These old pupils come as often as possible for holidays. In Warsaw, a few years ago, an artistic co-operative of weaving and knitting was organized for them, called " New Work ", where more than 30 blind are employed.

Contacts are also numerous with the associations for the blind of other towns. These associations notify the Institute of blind children who should be received at Laski and, for its own part, the Institute avails itself of their help to find work for its old pupils. Laski is often visited by groups of over 90 blind people.

The young blind people also take part in competitions organized by the associations of the blind, such as recital competitions. One of the old pupils, a pianist, took part in several competitions and international music festivals. School children exchange correspondence with the Institute's blind children and send them parcels, paper, old note-books (which can be used for writing Braille), and food. They invite groups of blind children to community games and visit them at Laski . . . The blind children also take part in games organized by the holiday camps for children with normal vision.
