

MIGRANTS' CHILDREN

Under this title, the International Child Welfare Review¹ carries an article by Miss Ingrid Gelinek, Secretary General of the International Social Service. We believe that the publication in International Review of the Red Cross is of interest to our readers as the problem of aid to migrants is being attentively followed by the Red Cross, various international bodies and certain National Societies, which provide invaluable assistance, particularly in cases involving the reuniting of families and the provision of legal aid. It will be recalled, moreover, that the late Miss Suzanne Ferrière was at one time a member of the ICRC while still filling the post of Secretary General of the International Social Service, thus showing how closely connected are the fields of concern of both these non-governmental organizations which have each a part to play in finding solutions to the distressing problem of migrants.

... Certain basic factors must be considered in studying the problems of children : Was the decision to migrate made voluntarily or were there pressures of some kind which forced the individual or the family concerned to move? From what type of community did the family move and what is the attitude of the community to migration? The answers to these questions have considerable influence on the attitudes and behaviour patterns of parents who migrate and an important effect on the intellectual, emotional and physical development of children of migrant workers. Also related to the motivation of workers to migrate is the question of adequate preparation. Had it been possible to obtain personal and legal counselling before the move was made? Was language and professional training offered so as to facilitate later adaptation?

¹ Geneva, May 1974, No. 21.

Were the children involved in the process of emigration? And, given their age, were they able to understand the plans of their parents? This preparatory phase is of the utmost importance, but help, assistance and counselling after the arrival of the migrant worker in the host country is equally necessary. Countries, national policies, attitudes and conceptions differ widely in relation both to the sending abroad of workers and to their reception in the foreign country. These basic policy issues, however, affect the position, adaptation and integration process of the migrant worker and his family and, hence, affect the children.

Let us first take a look at the problems of children who move with the family group to a foreign country. Although there are of course variations according to age, number of siblings, stability of family unit, etc., one can distinguish certain common problem areas.

Housing: Housing facilities for migrant workers are frequently inadequate and not geared to the needs of children. Children are confronted with lack of space, unfamiliar surroundings and equipment, insufficient play areas, unhealthy conditions. If the parents economize so as to maintain a second household in their home country, this economic burden forces them to accept the cheapest possible housing facilities. If, in addition (and this is frequently the case), the move was from a rural community to an urban community, the child is deprived of necessary freedom, the security of moving around in familiar surroundings, the stimulation of a great variety of experiences, etc.

Food: Usually a child becomes accustomed to food patterns geared to his needs and based on community patterns. The adjustment to different food, the frustration felt by the mother at not being able to provide the child with the usual food, or her desperate efforts to cope with this problem very often pose serious problems for children, and bad eating habits with consequent emotional and health problems occur.

Climate: Changes of climate can also involve dangerous problems for the child. Very often these are complicated by the lack of

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proper clothing which, on the one hand, endangers the health of the child, and, on the other, makes the child look different from other children. For a certain age group, this is a serious personal problem.

Language: In the family group the language of the home country is spoken, but when the child wishes to communicate with the outside world, he is faced with the inability to express himself properly. Frustration and a feeling of inferiority result, frequently causing children to withdraw from experiences in the "outside world" and refrain from establishing emotional relationships in that world. Others, however, react aggressively and in an uncontrolled manner under this pressure, which in turn leads to a rejection, from which they suffer. Some children pick up foreign languages quickly, and if this is not the case with the parents, they become the "interpreters". This again is a situation which will pose problems for the children, since it has effects on the relationship among the members of the family.

School and friends: The language problem on the one hand, the status as a foreigner, the physical, social and emotional environment in which the child lives and his personal adaptation capacities on the other, strongly influence the performance of the child in a group of children. Children very frequently suffer from "being different", and their reactions to this situation spark off a whole process of interactions with other children. These interactions need to be positive and constructive to allow intellectual and emotional growth of the child, and the children of migrant workers are often at a disadvantage in this respect.

Parents' time: Very often, the new rhythm of work of the father is unfamiliar to the children; his work and his new life preoccupy him and he finds less time and/or has less energy to foster his relationship with his children. In addition, the mother may also have to work, for economic reasons or in an attempt to adjust to the social and cultural environment of the host country. In other words, children are very often confronted suddenly with what appears to them as a lack of parental attention and love, and they

interpret this situation as neglect. They are left to themselves or placed in institutions or day-care centres. This experience may lead to very serious emotional disturbances, which in turn affect the relationships in the family group.

This list of factors influencing the development of the children of migrant workers and the difficulties they may have to face could be prolonged. The reactions of a small child to pressure are different from the school child's or the child in puberty and the problems will vary widely. If one takes into account, furthermore, the fact that large groups of migrant workers often live in kinds of "ghettos" (usually in an effort to preserve their cultural and social traditions and to obtain support and security from relationships with their compatriots), that misconceptions about foreigners, misunderstanding about different cultural and social patterns exist in large parts of the indigenous population, and that every child needs a stable, secure and supporting environment to allow its emotional, physical and intellectual growth, the complexity of the situation becomes clear...