

International Notes

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A PIONEER IN CO-OPERATIVE EDUCATION

The death last August of Harald Elldin, founder and for almost forty years Rector of Vår Gård, the training school of the Swedish Consumers' Co-operative Movement, cannot pass unremarked in the S.C.S. *Bulletin* or any journal devoted to Co-operative education. Elldin was a great pioneer in the field of education and he was so fortunate as to live long enough to see his ideas appreciated, applied and adapted far beyond the frontiers of Sweden. These ideas concerned not so much the content, as the methods and organisation of the training of Co-operative employees and officials, and for this reason it is worth while recalling what they were.

The establishment of the school at Vår Gård in 1924 enabled Elldin to break away from traditional academic methods. He started from two considerations, first that the great majority of his students were shop assistants, a considerable minority were shop managers, and a still smaller but very important minority were managers of societies or their departments; second, that the object of their training was to attain the highest standards of performance. This meant that the studies had a strong practical bias and that the methods employed were designed to strengthen a student's self-reliance on the one hand, and to develop his capacity for collaboration on the other.

Lectures almost entirely disappeared from the time table. "Only persons of a critical and creative nature are capable of extricating themselves from a lecturer's clutches", wrote Elldin in 1950, "We have tried to avoid lectures, in order to make students think for themselves, and to substitute lessons with as many questions as possible by and to the teacher in the course of his presentation of the subject."

If the students were stimulated to think *for* themselves they were not permitted to think by themselves. A course of 25 to 30 students would be divided into 3 or 4 groups, the members of which would jointly investigate selected problems. Reports presented by individuals chosen to make investigations or collect information would be checked by their group as well as their tutors. In this way they were helped to acquire the art of accurate statement as well as to receive criticism and amendments with tolerance and good temper. Knowledge about Co-operation was ineffective, unless the students learnt to co-operate.

In Elldin's view the school could not hope to provide a complete education. Its work rested on basic training acquired by the students, while still candidates

for admission to its courses, through correspondence, local study and discussion groups and business experience in their daily work. In fact, at all stages, the students were responsible for the continuation of their studies in the intervals between attendance at Vår Gård courses which were designedly short, lasting from 1 or 2 to 5 weeks. It was for them to reach the standards required for admission at each successive level.

Beyond raising the general standard of performance, Elldin was continually on the look-out for prospective leaders. Those students who had passed three standard courses, besides showing practical ability and capacity for leadership might be accepted as "assistants" who, for a period of two years helped with teaching and group guidance, besides pursuing advanced studies in management and administration. Elldin thus provided a steady stream of young talent, well-prepared to shoulder responsibility as the older generation of administrators retired from active work. Owing to the Movement's rapid development in recent years, the stream needed to be augmented by recruitment from universities and technical institutes. This became a problem for Elldin's successors rather than for him. That they have been able to cope with it is due to his readiness always to learn from experience. In his own words, "We have been more or less compelled by our experience to develop our special methods of training and on the express understanding that conditions may necessitate a reorganisation of our educational work."

Before the second world war Elldin was powerfully influencing, through the example of Vår Gård, the educational practice of the Co-operative Movements of Scandinavia. After the war, this influence extended more widely through the biennial conference of principals of Co-operative Schools which he initiated and which have long become an established institution.

A HANDBOOK OF BUSINESS TRAINING

The Confederation (Bund) of Consumers' Co-operatives, which became in June 1967 the supreme authority and co-ordinating body of the Consumers' Co-operative Movement in Western Germany, has produced a remarkable handbook of business training for the guidance of its affiliated societies. With characteristic German thoroughness, the book covers the training needs of every grade of shop employee from apprentice to store manager. For each grade it gives a syllabus representing the minimum which the employee can be expected to know, together with hints and suggestions on organisation and methods. In regional societies much of the training will necessarily be in local training shops, and the rest given in special centres. The whole of the training is to be organised and supervised by a training department which is integrated with a society's personnel administration. It is assumed that every employee will participate in training appropriate to his or her grade and forms are provided by which the trainee can keep track of his or her progress in fulfilling the requirements of the Scheme. For every trainee a technical training pass-

book will be issued, containing a complete record of the courses taken by its possessor, including the courses attended at the training schools of the Confederation. The handbook consists of loose leaves, grouped in sections with appropriate index-tabs and held together by split rings between a pair of stout covers. Revised syllabuses and schemes of organisation can thus be easily substituted for old ones and the handbook kept constantly up to date. The general adoption by the regional societies of a training system based on the handbook will enable the Confederation's own college at Sasel, near Hamburg, to specialise in advanced studies and research, becoming, as its new title signifies, a seminar for management personnel.