

# Mission in Germany

## by W.P. Watkins

The Minister lost no time in coming to the point. "I asked you to come here because we are looking for a man to do a missionary job in Germany". Seeing a puzzled look on my face, he added: "I mean, of course, to set the Co-operative Movement going again. What do you think of that?" I answered: "If we are to believe what you politicians are saying about restoring democracy in Germany, then the Co-operative Movement will have to be revived". "Do you think democracy can be restored in Germany?" he asked. "I do not know if it can be" I replied, "but I am sure that it has to be tried".

That is how the conversation began, that ultimately led to my becoming in December 1946 a temporary civil servant, with the official title of Adviser on the Co-operative Movement, stationed in Berlin under the Economic Adviser to the Military Governor.

That scarcely reads like a missionary job. Nor was it in the sense that I was required to preach Co-operation or re-convert Co-operators who had relapsed into Nazism. Not even Nazi Germany was so monolithic as that. The only people that I met, and they were not many, who could do with a little Co-operative preaching or teaching were British officials whose ideas of Co-operation had been mainly derived from Lord Beaverbrook's journal which it is not necessary to name.

### What the Nazis had Done

However, the fact is that the defeat of Germany, which brought about the collapse of the Nazi regime, brought liberation to many Germans, liberation in particular, to consumer Co-operators to recreate their Co-operative Movement. Those of them who could read the signs of the time had begun to prepare for this even before the fighting ended, and needed only that to make a start by calling the faithful together to discuss ways and means.

Let me recall what the Nazis had done. They had liquidated a number of consumers' societies, including that in Berlin which was the largest, in 1935. They liquidated the rest by decree in 1941, dissolving the Co-operatives but keeping their business running. They re-grouped the store in what they called 'Versorgungsringe', which were under the financial control of a holding company called the 'Gemeinschaftswerk' which was itself controlled by the Labour Front (Arbeitsfront) which was the Nazi substitute for trade unions and related workers' organisations.

The reconstruction of the consumers' Co-operative Movement therefore required not merely the foundation afresh of local or district Co-operative societies and the re-establishment of their federations, trading and non-trading, but the restitution of property and funds to the new units which would take over from the *Versorgungsringe*. This process of replacement was bound to be slow and complicated and therefore require time. Fortunately the British forces which entered Hamburg took without damage the headquarters of the Labour Front and with it the documentation revealing much, if not all, that the Nazis had done to the Co-operative Movement.

### **First Steps for Re-Creation**

The first important step taken by the British authorities was to issue in February 1946 a public notice (*Bekanntmachung*) informing all Germans in their Zone of Occupation that they could form Co-operative societies to conduct any form of business permitted to Germans and indicating the procedure to be followed in promoting and registering them. Their proposed constitution and rules had to be submitted to a double scrutiny – by the Property Control branch of the Control Commission and by a German committee – to establish their conformity to British regulations and to German law. At the time of my arrival in Berlin, the number of societies which had satisfied these requirements exceeded twenty.

The Property Control Branch allowed such societies, in order to conserve the value of the assets, to take *Versorgungsringe* stores as going concerns into custodianship, pending final decision on ownership. In the British Zone therefore consumer Co-operatives got off with a flying start, especially as they might use any relevant bank balances.

### **Role of the Adviser**

This was the position when I myself took over. These measures had been taken by British officials carrying out the policy of the British government, which was, of course, headed by Clement Attlee. In a sense I was the Government's watchman, to see that the policy was successfully carried out. None of the other Occupying Powers took similar action, except perhaps the Russian, which in 1945 issued a decree forming Co-operative unions on the Moscow model. My function, and that of my small staff (I had three people in Berlin, one representative in Dusseldorf for North Rhine-Westphalia and one in Hannover for Lower Saxony, Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein) was largely to remove hindrances and external obstacles to the practice by the societies of business in a truly Co-operative manner.

For example, my officers would intervene where societies were not getting fair supplies of rationed commodities, or when their quotas were not increased as their membership grew. Until the currency was reformed in the middle of 1948 there were many shortages and much black-marketing which the Co-operatives naturally avoided. The trump card in dealing with

an obstinate official, British or German, was that the promotion of Co-operatives was the British Government's policy, and we had to play it occasionally. The Co-operators and their leaders knew this very well, but did not abuse it with unjustified complaints. Grievances were mostly dealt with by my two men in the provinces.

### **The Main Questions**

The chief complaint of the German Co-operators was the slowness with which the Occupying Powers handled such questions as the establishment of federations, especially the Central Co-operative Union, and the restitution of property. With the first of these questions the monolithic fallacy had more than a little to do. Notwithstanding the fact that former active Nazis had been rounded up in concentration camps and held until they were judged to be safe to set free, there was a widespread disposition amongst the Occupation Powers in the early days to regard with suspicion any attempt to associate on the part of the Germans. The British *Bekanntmachung* actually forbade any former Nazi from being elected an officer of a Co-operative.

With regard to the second question the four Powers had to agree amongst themselves that they would make no claim upon the property or funds sequestered by the Nazis from the people's movements. That they eventually did, leaving the field clear for each Power to adopt its own methods of restitution in its own Zone. That did not begin in the British Zone until the latter half of 1948, before a German judge sitting with German assessors.

### **Formation of the Union**

Unions of societies, especially regional, were a necessity in order to comply with the law's requirements for the efficient audit of societies' finances. But Dr Remmele the leader was anxious to have the provisional Central Union recognised, so that he could guide and supervise the nascent societies. I took the view that it would be beneficial for the societies to have at least a business year to find out who was who and what was what, developing their sense of corporate responsibility as free associations, after twelve years of totalitarian discipline. Ultimately the Central Union was formed, held its first Congress and elected its full-time Board in 1948.

The Congress was nearly a fiasco, because the delegates listened to but would not discuss the speeches from the platform. Only a few unimportant questions were asked. The second day, which was by tradition, the day of the Wholesale Society, was similar. Such was the effect of the Nazi system, until the meeting reached the question of electing the new Board. The whole story is too long to be told here. It must suffice to say that a special committee had selected seven candidates whom Henry Everling the old leader of the Wholesale Society proposed should be adopted with acclamation. This, after a rather long silence, was challenged from the

floor. A debate ensued, after which there could be no question of acclamation. There had to be a ballot vote; the candidate whom the meeting objected to was not elected.

This was the first time I had seen the floor score a victory over the platform and I was delighted, because I had seen German democracy at last in action.

### **Note of the Author**

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