

Means of Helping the Population Suffering from Bad Harvests

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Help for the population suffering from bad harvests may have two objects : support of the peasant proprietors and prevention of people running the risk of illness, and even death, from want and from the bad quality of food.

Are these objects attained by the aid now extended in the form of twenty or thirty pounds of flour a month to each consumer, reckoning or not reckoning laborers? I think not. And I think not from the following considerations :

All the peasant families of all agricultural Russia may be distributed under three types. First, the wealthy farm with eight or ten souls, on the average twelve souls to a family, with from three to five hired men, on the average four, from three to five horses, on .the average four, and from three to nine desyatins of land, on the average six. That is a rich farmer. Such a muzhik not only feeds his family with his grain, but frequently hires one or two laborers, buys up land of those worse off than himself, and sells them grain and seed. All this, maybe, is done on conditions not favorable for the poor, but the result is that in the country, where there are ten per cent of these rich men, the land is not idle, and in case of necessity the poor man may have the means of obtaining grain, seed, even money.

The second type is that of the average muzhik, with great difficulty making the ends of the year meet by means of his two parcels of land, and one or two " hands," and one or two horses. This dvor is almost wholly supported by its own grain. What it lacks is obtained by a member of the family living out.

And the third type is the poor fellow with a family of from three to five " souls," with one laboring man, and frequently with no horse. This kind never has grain enough ; every year he is obliged to invent some means of getting himself out of his tight place, and he is always within a hair's breadth of being a pauper, and at the slightest misfortune he will beg.

The aid given in the form of flour to the inhabitants of the famine-stricken places is distributed by means of lists of peasant families according to their means. By means of these lists calculations are made as to how much help is to be afforded to any particular family. And this help is given only to the very poorest, that is to say, to the families of the third type.

A "dvor" of the first type, belonging to the rich or well-to-do peasant who still has several chetverts¹ of oats, who has two horses, a cow, sheep, receives no help. But investigation into

the condition, not only of the average, but of the rich muzhik, makes one see that if the peasant agricultural class is to be sustained, these are the very farmers that need help most.

Let us suppose that a rich peasant has still a little rye left, he has twenty or more chetverts of oats, he has five horses and two cows and eighteen sheep, and because he has all this he receives no help. But reckon up his income and his expenses, and you will see that he is in just as much need as the poor man. In order to support the rotation which he has undertaken with his hired land, he must sow about ten chetverts. What grain remains, at forty, fifty, even sixty rubles, is nothing in comparison with what he needs for his family of twelve souls. For twelve souls he needs fifteen puds at one ruble fifty kopecks twenty-two rubles fifty kopecks a month two hundred and twenty-five rubles for ten months. Moreover, he needs forty, fifty, or seventy rubles to satisfy the rent on his hired land ; he has to pay his taxes. The members of his family living out this year either receive less than before, by grain being high, or are entirely paid off. He needs three hundred and fifty rubles, but he receives even less than two hundred, and therefore one thing is left for him to do, to give up his hired land, to sell his seed oats, to sell a part of his horses, for which there is no price, in other words, to descend to the level of the average muzhik, and even lower, because the average muzhik has a smaller family.

But no help, or very little, is given to the average muzhik if he has any oats left or a horse or two. So that he is obliged to sell his land to the exceptionally rich, to eat his seed oats, and then also his horse. So that by the distribution of help as it obtains now, the rich must infallibly descend to the level of the average and the average to the level of the poor. And by the conditions obtaining this year, almost all, except the unusually rich, are obliged to descend in this way. The distribution of flour, not attaining its object of supporting the peasant husbandry, does not attain its second object either that of safeguarding the people from famine diseases. The distribution of flour by "souls" does not secure this for the following reasons :

In the first place, because in such a distribution of flour there is always a possibility that th'e person receiving it will yield to the temptation of squandering what he has received, and selling it for drink, and this has happened, though not in many instances.

In the second place, because this help, falling into the hands of the poor, saves them from starvation only in case the family has some means of its own. The largest apportionment amounts to thirty pounds to each man. And if thirty pounds of flour, together with potatoes and some admixture with the flour for baking bread, may support a man for the period of a month, then in complete poverty, when they have not the wherewithal to buy even lebeda-weed to mix with their bread, thirty pounds of flour is used up in the form of unmodified bread in the course of fifteen or twenty days, and the people, left in an absolutely starving condition for ten days, are likely to become sick and even to die from lack of food.

In the third place, the distribution of flour among poor families, even among those that still have means of their own, does not attain the purpose of forefending men from famine diseases, because in a family where strong men easily get along with poor food, the weak, the young, and the old contract disease from want and the poor quality of food.

In all famine-stricken places all families, both rich and poor, eat miserable bread made with lebeda-weed.

Strange to say now in a large number of cases the very poor, on receiving grain from the zemstvo, eat unmodified bread, while almost all the rich families eat it with orach, with this year's disgusting unripe lebeda-weed.²

And it all the time happens that while the stronger members of a rich family thrive on the lebeda-weed bread, the weaker, older members pine away and die of it.

Thus a sick woman comes from a rich farm, carrying in her hand a piece of black lebeda-weed bread constituting her principal article of food, and asking admission in the eating-room simply because she is sick, and then only while she is sick.

Another example : I come to a muzhik who is not receiving assistance and considers himself rich. He lives alone with his wife ; they have no children. I find them at dinner. Potato soup and bread with the lebedaweed. In the trough is new bread, likewise adulterated with a large proportion of the lebeda. The husband and wife are healthy and happy, but on the stove is an old woman who is ill from the effects of the lebedaweed bread, and declares that it is better to eat once a day only to have good bread to eat, but that this does not keep up one's strength.

Or a third case : a peasant woman comes from a rich farm to ask for her thirteen-year-old daughter admission to the eating-room because they cannot feed her at home. This daughter is of illegitimate birth, and therefore she is not liked and is not willingly fed. There are many similar cases, and therefore the distribution of help in flour from hand to hand does not keep the old, the feeble, and the unpopular members of the family from sickness and death, in consequence of the unsuitability or lack of food.

Painful as it is to say this, notwithstanding the remarkable energy and even self-control of the majority of provincial workers, their activity, consisting in the distribution of help in corn, does not fulfill its purpose of supporting the agricultural peasantry or of preventing the possibility of diseases from famine.

But if what is done now is not good, what is good ? What should be done ?

Two things in my opinion are necessary, not for the support merely of the agricultural peasantry, but to prevent them from ultimate ruin : the organization of work for every community able to work ; and the establishment of free refectories for the young, the old, the feeble, and the sick in all country places suffering from the famine.

The organization of labor ought to be such that it should be accessible, well-known, and familiar to the population, and not such as the people have never occupied themselves with or even seen, or else such as they are often unable to perform ; as, for instance, by compelling the members of the families who have never gone away to leave home, or undergo other adverse conditions, such as lack of clothing.

Work ought to be such that, besides their work out of doors, to which all the capable and able-bodied muzhiks can resort for wages, there should be domestic work suitable for the whole population of the famine-stricken places men, women, hale old men, and half-grown children.

This year's distress is due not only to lack of grain, but also to the no less absolute lack of both money and chances of earning money there is no work, and several millions of the population are condemned to enforced idleness.

If the grain necessary for the support of the population is at hand, in other words can be placed where it is needed, at a price within their reach, then the starving people might earn this grain for themselves, provided only there was an opportunity of work, and materials for work and sale.

But if they do not have this opportunity, hundreds of millions will be irrevocably wasted in the distribution of gratuitous aid, but the misery will not be relieved. The matter is not wholly in the material loss ; the idleness of a whole population receiving gratuitous food has a terribly demoralizing tendency.

Outside industries may be organized in the most varied ways, both for winter and still more for summertime, and God grant that these industries may be organized as speedily as possible and on the largest possible scale. But besides these great private industries, it is a matter of immediate necessity and enormous importance that the population be furnished with the opportunity of doing their own familiar work, without leaving their homes and their accustomed surroundings, and of getting pay for it, even though it be at a very cheap rate.

In the famine-stricken country districts neither hemp nor flax grew, oats almost wholly failed, and the women have no yarn and nothing to weave. The wives, the girls, and the old women, ordinarily occupied, sit idle. Moreover, the muzhiks, who stay at home and have no money to buy linden bark, also sit without their usual winter avocations the weaving of lapti, or bark shoes. The children, as well, waste their time idly, for the schools are for the most part closed. The population, having to face only the trying scenes of a more exaggerated need, deprived of their ordinary and more than ever indispensable means of recreation and forgetfulness, of work, sit for whole days at a time with folded hands, discussing various rumors and propositions about help given and to be given, but especially about their poverty ; " they grow gloomy and lose their spirits, and that is the reason more than anything else that they get sick," said a sensible old man to me.

Not to mention the economical significance of work for this year, its moral significance is enormous. Work, any kind of work which should employ the idle people this year, is a most pressing necessity.

Until we shall see organized the great industries for which there were various very sensible plans, now, it is rumored, being established, and destined to confer inestimable blessings, if only in the establishment of them the habits and convenience of the population are taken into consideration, if only in all the famine-stricken districts the opportunity is given for all the remaining people to work at the work they are accustomed to, the men to pleat lapti and the women to spin and weave, and the opportunity is given to sell what they make by this labor, then this would be, at least, a great help against the decline of the Russian husbandry, even if it did not entirely stop it.

If it be granted that a place can be obtained for cloth at eight kopecks the arshin and this is possible when it is produced in large quantities and that lapti which will last for years will be bought at ten kopecks a pair, then each man's earnings will be at the very least five kopecks, that is to say one ruble fifty kopecks a month. If in addition to this it is admitted that in every family on the average not more than one-fourth of the members are unable to work, then it seems that for every person in a family there will be earned one-fourth of 4.50 kopecks, in other words 1.12 kopeck; that is to say, considerably more than what now comes from the zemstvo with such strain, bickerings, and quarrels, and producing such general discontent.

Such would be the calculation, if work familiar to all the country population, unquestionably accessible, and the very cheapest, were performed.

Means would be received exceeding that which is now received from a gratuitous or loan distribution, to say nothing of the insoluble difficulty of giving it out, and especially the discontent which is produced by individual distribution. For the attainment of this it would be necessary to spend comparatively small sums for the purchase of materials for labor flax and linden bark, and secure a place for these productions.

In the organization of these industries, and the furnishing the women with materials for spinning and the sale of the fabric spun by them, many people are already interested, but as yet only

on a very small scale. We have also begun this work, but up to the present time have not yet the flax, wool, and bast ordered. Our proposition to the peasants to occupy themselves with work for the sale of lapti and cloth was everywhere received with enthusiasm. They would say to us :

”If we earn only three kopecks a day it is far better than to sit idle.”

Of course this refers only to the five winter months; during the four summer months, till the first fruits, their industries might be vastly more productive.

For the attainment of our purpose, not, perhaps, the support of peasant husbandry, but at least the stoppage of its decay, there is in my opinion only this means the organization of industries.

.For the attainment of our second purpose, the salvation of the people from disease consequent on bad and insufficient food, in my opinion, the only infallible means is the organization in every village of a free table at which every man may have enough to eat if he is hungry.

The organization of free tables, begun by us more than a month ago, is now carried on with a success exceeding our expectations. These eating-rooms are arranged in the following way :

On my arrival at Yepifansky District, toward the end of September, I met my old friend, I. I. Rayevsky, to whom I communicated my intention of establishing free tables in the famine-stricken districts. He invited me to take up my quarters at his house, and while not desisting from all other forms of help, not only approved my plan of establishing free tables, but undertook to assist me in this work; and with that love for the people, resolution, and simplicity characteristic of him, immediately, even before our arrival at his house, began this business, opening six such eating-rooms in his own vicinity.

The method employed by him consisted in his proposing to widows or the poorest inhabitants of the poorest villages to feed those that should come to them, and in furnishing the necessary provisions for this purpose.

The starosta and his assistants made out a list of the children and old people deserving of maintenance at the free table, and these eating-rooms were opened in six villages. These eating-rooms, in spite of the fact that they were opened by the starostas and Rayevsky’s steward, without his personal superintendence, went very well and were maintained about a month.

Toward the time of our arrival, which coincided with the first distribution of help from the government, five of the free eating-rooms were closed, because the persons frequenting them began to receive a monthly allowance, and consequently did not need double help.

Very soon, however, in spite of the distribution of aid, the need had so increased that it was felt to be necessary to reopen the closed eating-rooms and establish new ones. In the course of the four weeks spent by us here we opened thirty.

At first we opened them in accordance with information received concerning the most poverty-stricken villages, but now for more than a week, from various directions, petitions have come to us in regard to opening new eating-rooms, but we have not yet had time to grant them.

The act of opening eating-rooms is as follows we at least have proceeded in this way : Having learned of a particularly needy village, we drive to it, go to the starosta, and having explained our purpose, we call in some of the old men and question them about the actual condition of the farms from one end of the village to the other. The starosta, his wife, the old men, and perhaps one or two more who have come out of curiosity to the izba, describe to us the state of affairs in the village.

”Well, on the left hand side: Maksim Aptokhin. How is he?”

” His is a hard case. He has children, seven of them. And no bread this long time. We must relieve him of his old woman and one child.”

We write down, ”From Maksim Aptokhin two.” Then comes Feodor Abramof.

” They are in a bad case too. Still, they can get along.” But here the starosta’s wife puts in a word, and says that he is in a bad state and we must relieve him of one child. Then comes an old man, a soldier of Nicholas’s time.

”He is almost dead of starvation.”

Demyon Saprnof ”they are subsisting.”

And thus the whole village is scanned.

A proof of the justice and lack of caste feeling shown by the peasants in appraising the needs of the villagers may be seen in this : that notwithstanding the fact that many peasants were not admitted in the first village, in the village of Tatishchevo in Ruikhotskaya Volost’, where we opened an eating-room, in the number of the unquestionably poor whom we had to admit to the free table, the peasants nominated, without the slightest hesitation, the widow of a pope and her children and the wife of a diacJiok or sexton.

Thus all the enumerated forms were generally divided according to the report of the starosta and the neighbors into three classes: those unquestionably hard up, some of whom ought to be admitted to the free table ; those that were unquestionably well off, such as could support themselves ; and thirdly, those concerning whom there was some question. This doubt was generally settled by the number of people coming to the eating-room. To feed more than forty persons is no easy matter for the hosts. And therefore, if the number of those applying is less than forty, the doubtful ones are admitted; but if more, then some have to be turned away. Generally some persons unquestionably deserving of sustenance at the public tables seem left out, and according to the force of testimony changes and additions are made. If it is learned that in a village there are very many unquestionably needy persons, then a second and sometimes even a third eating-room is opened.

On the average, both at our establishments as well as at those of our neighbor, N. F., who is acting independently of us, the number of persons getting their meals at the public table always constitutes about one-third of all the effective population.

There are many almost every householder willing to keep the eating-room, that is, to bake bread, to cook, to boil, to serve the pensioners, in exchange for the right of having free food and fuel. To such a degree are they desirous of keeping the eating-rooms, that in both of the first villages where we established eating-rooms, the starostas, both of them rich peasants, proposed to have them at their houses. But as those that keep the eating-houses are guaranteed all fuel and food, we usually select the poorest, provided they live near the center of the hamlet, so that the distance to be traversed shall not be disproportionate in either direction. On the place itself we do not lay much stress, as even in a tiny six-arshin izba there is room enough to feed thirty or forty men.

The next thing to do is to get the food to each eatingroom. It is managed in this way : In one place, taken as the central point of the institutions, there is arranged a storehouse of all necessary provisions. Such a storehouse was for us at first found in Rayevsky’s ” *Ekonomia* ” ; but as our work widened, three other storehouses were arranged, or rather selected, on the estates of wealthy landowners where there were granaries and some provisions for sale.

As soon as the location of the eating-room was selected and the persons privileged to avail themselves of it were inscribed on a list, the day was designated on which the keepers³ of the

eating-room or the cart whose turn it was should go for the provisions. As now in a large number of eating-rooms, it was a trouble to give out the provisions every day, two days each week Tuesday and Friday were set apart for that purpose. At the storehouse the keeper of the eating-room was given a little book or schedule in this form :

According to this book the provisions are received and entered. Besides the provisions, on a designated day from all the hamlets where the free tables are established come carts after fuel; at first this was peat, but now, as there is no more peat, firewood. On the same day the provisions are taken the loaves are made, and on the third day the eating-rooms are opened. The question as to the cooking utensils, the bowls, spoons, tables, is decided by the keepers of the rooms. Each eating-room keeper uses his own dishes. But if he has none, he gets them of those that come to him. Each person brings his own spoon.

The first eating-room was opened at the house of a blind old man who had a wife and orphan grandchildren. When, on the day it was opened, I went to this blind man's izba at eleven o'clock, the wife had everything all ready. The loaves had come out of the oven and were placed on the table and on the benches. On the stove, which was heated and closed, stood shchi, potatoes, and beet soup.

In the izba, besides the blind man and his wife, were two neighbors and a homeless old woman who had begged permission to come there so as to get something to eat and warm herself. There were no people as yet. It seemed that they were expecting us, and no announcements had been made. A boy and a muzhik were delegated to spread the news. I asked the woman how all would find seats.

" I will arrange it all satisfactorily, don't be troubled," said the woman.

This housekeeper was a thick-set woman of fifty, with timid and anxious, but intelligent, eyes. Until the opening of the eating-room she had begged, and had thus supported herself and her family. Her enemies declared that she drank too much. But, notwithstanding these reports, she attracted due favor by her attentions to her husband's orphan grandchildren, and to the blind old man himself, lying half dead with consumption on the sleeping-bunk.

The mother of the orphans had died the year before, the father had deserted them, and gone to Moscow, where he had disappeared. The children a boy and a girl were very pretty, especially the boy, who was about eight ; and, notwithstanding their poverty, were well clothed and shod, and they clung to their grandmother, and kept asking things of her, as spoiled children generally do.

" All will be in good order," said the mistress of the house. " And I will get a table. And those that can't sit down may eat afterwards. Nine loaves," she confided to me, " took four pounds, and moreover I squeezed out some kvas. Only I had a hard time with the peat," she said. " It doesn't heat. I had to get some of our own straw from the shed. I opened the shed, and then the peat would not burn."

As there was nothing for me to do there, I went behind the ravine to the eating-room of the next hamlet, fearing that they might be expecting me also there. And in reality they were waiting here also. And here was the same thing the same odor of hot bread, the same round loaves on the tables and benches, the same pots and kettles on the stove, and the same inquisitive people in the izba. In the same way the benevolent ran around to make the announcements.

Having talked with the mistress of the house, who also complained that the peat did not heat, and that she had split her trough in making the loaves, I went back to the first eating-room, thinking that I might find some misunderstanding or difficulty which might need regulating. I

went to the blind man's. The izba was full of people, and was swarming with restrained motion like a beehive open on a summer night. Steam was pouring out of the door. There was an odor of bread and shchi, and the sound of eating was heard. The izba was tiny and dark with two diminutive windows, and on the outside a great heap of manure on both sides. The floor was of earth, very uneven. So dark, especially from the people obstructing the windows with their backs, that at first you could distinguish nothing.

But, notwithstanding these inconveniences and the narrow quarters, the meal was proceeding with the greatest good order. Along the front wall, at the left of the door, were two tables, around which on all sides the people eating sat in order. In the middle of the izba, from the outside wall to the stove was a bunk on which the emaciated blind man was, not lying as before, but sitting clasping his naked knees, listening to the conversation and the sounds of eating. At the right, in an empty corner before the stove door, stood the mistress of the house and her benevolent assistants. They were all watching the wants of the pensioners and serving them.

At the table in the front corner under the images stood the soldier of Nicholas's time, then an old man of the hamlet, then an old woman, then the children. At the second table nearer the stove, with their backs leaning against the wall, a pope's wife, withered looking, with children grouped around boys and girls and the pope's daughter, a grown-up girl. On each table was a bowl of shchi, and the pensioners were taking sips of it, eating the fresh, savory bread with it. The cups of shchi were emptied. "Eat your fill, eat your fill!" exclaimed the mistress of the house, gaily and hospitably, passing slices of bread over the heads. "There's still enough To-day we have nothing but shchi and potatoes," said she to me; "there was not time for svezkol'nik. We'll have it for dinner."

An old woman, scarcely alive, standing near the stove, asked me to give her some bread to carry home; she had managed to drag herself there that day, but she could not come every day, but her boy would be eating there and he could bring it to her. The mistress of the house cut her off a piece. The old woman stored it carefully away behind her apron and expressed her thanks, but she did not offer to go. The sexton's wife, a lively woman, standing near the stove and helping the mistress of the house, eloquently and vivaciously expressed her thanks for her daughter, who was also eating there, sitting near the partition, and timidly asked if she herself, the diachikha, might not eat there.

"It is long since I have tasted any pure bread; you see this is like sweet honey to us!"

Having received permission, the sexton's wife crossed herself, and crawled over the plank which was stretched from a stool to a bench. A boy, her neighbor on one side, and an old woman on the other made room and the diachikha sat down. The mistress of the house gave her bread and a spoon. After the first course of shchi, she had some potatoes. From the common salt-cellar each person took a little salt and heaped it up on the table and dipped the peeled potato into it.

All this the service at the table and the acceptance of the food and the disposition of the people was done with deliberation, politeness, and dignity, and at the same time in such a matter-of-fact way that it seemed as if it had always been done so, would be done so, and could not be done otherwise. There was something in it like a natural phenomenon.

Having finished his potatoes and carefully laid aside his remaining morsel of bread, the Nikolayevsky soldier was the first to get up and come out from behind the table, and all the rest followed his example, turning to the images and saying their prayer; then uttering their thanks, they left the house. Those that were waiting their turn deliberately took their places, and the mistress again cut off the slices of bread, and once more filled up the cups with shchi.

Exactly the same thing took place at the second eating-room ; the only peculiarity was that there were very many people as many as forty and the izba was still darker and smaller than the first. But there was the same politeness on the part of the pensioners, the same calm and joyous, somewhat proud, relation of the mistress to her work. Here a man served as master of ceremonies,⁴ helping his mother, and the work went on faster.

And exactly the same thing took place at the other free tables established by us there was the same elegance and naturalness. In some instances the zealous mistresses prepared three and even four courses: svekol'nik, shchi, pakhliobka,⁵ and potatoes.

The work of the eating-rooms is accomplished with the same simplicity as many other of the muzhik's industries, in which all the details, even very complicated ones, are left to the peasants themselves. In the matter of transport, for example, in which muzhiks are employed, no employer ever bothers himself about the canvas coverings or the nails, or the linden baskets, or the buckets, and many other things essential for transport work. It is taken for granted that all this sort of thing will be provided by the peasants themselves ; and in reality all this is always and everywhere uniformly and intelligently and simply done by the peasants themselves, who need no aid or direction from their employer.

Exactly the same thing occurred also at the free eating-rooms. All the details of the business were carried out by the keepers of the rooms themselves, and so thoroughly and circumstantially that nothing was left for the inspector except the general business of the rooms. There were four such chief duties for the in- spector of the eating-rooms to attend to : first, the getting of the provisions to a central location from which they could be distributed among the eating-rooms ; secondly, care that the stores should not be wasted ; thirdly, care that no persons among the most needy should be forgotten, and their places taken by those that could get along without free food ; and fourthly, trial and use in the eating-rooms of new and little used means of alimentation, such as pease, lentils, millet, oats, barley, different kinds of bread, vegetables, and the like.

A sufficient number of workers furnished us with the list of people receiving rations. Some of the members of the families receiving insufficient quantity were admitted ; some turned in their rations to the eating-rooms so as to have their meals there. In regard to this we were guided by the following considerations: in the uniform distribution as it was carried out in our locality, at the rate of twenty pounds to each person, we gave preference to the large families. In the insufficiency of the distribution these twenty pounds a month apiece the larger the family, the more entirely inadequate they were for the support of the people.

The theory of the free tables was therefore this: in order to open from ten to twenty eating-rooms, for the feeding of from three to eight hundred men, it is unavoidable in the center of this locality to collect the necessary provisions. In such a center there may always be the establishment of some opulent proprietor. Provisions for such a number, let us say five hundred men, will consist, if it is proposed to keep up the eating-rooms till the season, of first fruits, reckoning by the pound of flour mixed with bran for each person for three hundred days, will be one hundred and fifty thousand pounds for five hundred persons, or three thousand seven hundred and fifty puds, or two thousand five hundred puds of rye and one thousand two hundred and fifty of bran ; the same amount of potatoes, twelve sazhen⁶ of wood, a thousand puds of beets, and twenty-five puds of salt, two thousand heads of cabbage, and eight hundred puds of oatmeal.

The cost of all this at present prices amounts to fifty-eight hundred rubles. That is to say, with the increase of expense for oaten kisel at the rate of one ruble sixteen kopecks a person.

Having established such a storehouse, around it, at a distance of from seven to eight versts, one can open as many as twenty eating-rooms which will be supplied at this center. It is necessary to open the eating-rooms first of all in the very poorest of communities. It is necessary to select a place for this eating-room at the house of one of the very poorest inhabitants. The dishes and everything needed for the preparation of the food and the tables must be furnished by the person who keeps the eating-room. The list of persons admissible to the free tables must be made up with the assistance of the village starosta, and if possible of well-to-do peasants whose families are not represented among those applying for aid. The supervision of the eating-rooms, should there be very many of them, may be entrusted to the peasants themselves. But it is a matter of course that in proportion to the direct part in the matter taken by those that open the tables, the closer will be their relations both to the keepers of them and to those that frequent them, the better the business will go, the less waste of money there will be, the less dissatisfaction, the better the food, and, above all, the more cheery will be the disposition of the people.

But it may be boldly said that even under the most distant supervision, even when they are entrusted to the people themselves, the eating-rooms will satisfy great needs, and by reason of throwing the supervision on the interested parties, the needless waste of provisions will never amount to more than ten per cent, if you can call needless waste the bread which the people carry home with them, or share with those that have none.

Such is the plan of establishing free tables, and every one who wishes to make a trial of it will see how easily and naturally this is accomplished.

The advantages and disadvantages of the free eating-rooms are as follows :

The first disadvantage of the free eating-rooms is that provisions in them cost a little more than in the hand-to-hand distribution of flour. If relief amounts even to thirty pounds of flour to each consumer, then in the eating-rooms you must reckon on the same thirty pounds, and besides, the soups, potatoes, beets, salt, fire, and now also oatmeal. This disadvantage, apart from the fact that the eating-rooms provide for people more than hand-to-hand distribution, has its compensation in this, that by the introduction of new, cheap, and wholesome articles of diet, such as lentils, pease in various forms, oat-kisel, beets, Indian meal kasha, sunflower and hemp oils, the quantity of bread used may be diminished and the food itself improved. A second disadvantage is that the eating-rooms keep from starvation only some of the feebler members of a family, and not the young and average peasant, who does not frequent the free table on the ground that it is humiliating for him. So that in the designation of those that are subject to support at the free tables, the peasants always exclude grown-up lads and girls on the ground that it would be disgraceful to them. This disadvantage has its compensation in the fact that precisely this sense of shame at accepting charity at the free tables prevents the possibility of misusing them. A peasant, for example, comes with the request for a share in the rations, and declares that he has not had anything to eat for two days. He is invited to come into the eating-room. His face turns red and he declines to do so, while a peasant of the same age, being left without resources and unable to find work, will take his place in the eating-room.

Or another example : a woman complains of her condition and asks rations. They propose to her that she send her daughter. But her daughter is already a promised bride, and the woman refuses to send her.

But meantime the bride-daughter of the priest's wife, of whom I have spoken, comes to the eating-room.

The third disadvantage, and the most serious, is that some of the feeble, the old, and the little ones, and very ragged children, cannot get to the eating-room, especially in bad weather. This inconvenience is obviated by neighbors or those from the same farm carrying the food to those unable to be present.

I know no other disadvantages or inconveniences.

The advantages of the free tables are the following:

The food is incomparably better and more varied than that which is prepared in families. There is opportunity of getting food-stuffs cheaper and wholesomer. The food is provided at much cheaper rates. Fuel for baking loaves is saved. The poorest of families those at whose houses the free tables are established are perfectly provided for. Any possibility of inequality in receiving food, such as is often found in families in relation to unloved members, is done away with ; the aged and children receive food proportioned to their needs. The eating-rooms induce kindly feelings instead of dissensions and hatred. Abuses, that is, the acceptance of help by such persons as are less needy, will be found less frequent than in any other form of help. The limits of the abuses, which can be found in taking advantage of the free tables, is confined to the capacity of a stomach. A man may carry off as much flour as he can, but no one can eat more than a very limited quantity.

And the chief and most important advantage of the eating-rooms, for which, if for nothing else, they can and should be established, is that in that community where there are free tables no man can get sick or die from the lack or wretchedness of food; nor can there be, what unfortunately is constantly happening over and over again, that an old man, feeble, a sick child, to-day, by taking poor or insufficient food, languishes, pines away, and dies, if not absolutely from hunger, yet from the lack of good food. And this is the most important.

Lately, wishing to avoid the discussions which arose when the eating-rooms were first opened, as to who should have admittance to them and who not, we took advantage, at a newly opened eating-room, of the throng that was attracted by the affair, and proposed to the peasants to decide for themselves who should be admitted. The first opinion expressed by many was that it was impossible, that there would be disputes and quarrels, and they would never come to a decision. Then the proposition was made that one person from every dvor might be admitted. But this proposition was quickly put aside. There were homes where no one would need to come, and there were others where there was not one, but several, feeble members. And therefore they agreed to accept our proposal, to leave it to their consciences.

” Places will be prepared for forty persons, and whoever comes ’ we beg your pardon, but everything is eaten up ’ - you won’t get anything.”

They accepted this plan. One said that he was a healthy, strong man, and was ashamed to come and eat up the portion of orphans. To this, however, one discontented voice replied : ” You would not go away happy, no, you would go away unhappy, if, like me a little while ago, you had not had anything to eat for two days.”

This very thing constitutes the chief advantage of the free tables. Any one whosoever, whether inscribed or not inscribed in the peasant society, household peasant, soldier’s son, soldier of Nicholas’s or Alexander’s time, priest’s wife, burgess, noble, old, young, or healthy muzhik, lazy or industrious, a drunkard or sober, but having gone two days without eating, would receive the food of the commune. In this is the chief advantage of the free tables. Wherever they are no one can either die of hunger or, being hungry, can be compelled to work. Everything you can think of can be a stimulus to work, but not starvation. You can train animals by starving them, and

compel them to do things contrary to their nature ; but it is time to realize that it is shameful to compel men by starving them to do what they do not wish to do, but what we wish them to do.

But is it possible to establish eating-rooms everywhere ? Is this a general measure which may be applied universally and on a great scale ?

At first it would seem that it was not, that it was only a partial, local, accidental measure, which might be applied only in certain places where men were found especially adapted to this sort of thing. So I thought at first, when I imagined that for such an eating-room one would have to hire a place and a cook, to buy the dishes, to plan and to foresee what kind of food and when and for how many persons one would have to prepare ; but the form of free eating-rooms which, thanks to I. I. Rayevsky, have now been established, did away with all these difficulties and made this measure most effectual, simple, and popular.

With our small resources and without special effort, we opened and started, within four weeks, in twenty localities, thirty eating-rooms at which about fifteen hundred persons got their meals. Our neighbor N F alone in the course of a month opened and is conducting in the same conditions sixteen eating-rooms at which not less than seven hundred persons are fed.

The opening of eating-rooms and superintending them present no difficulties ; their support costs only a little more than the distribution of flour, if it is given out in the quantity of thirty pounds a month.⁷

This measure of establishing eating-rooms, not arousing any bad feelings in the people, but, on the contrary, perfectly satisfying them, attains the chief object which now faces society the guaranteeing people against the possibility of dying of hunger ; and, therefore, it ought to be adopted everywhere. If the authorities of the zemstvo, the guardians and the administration, can persuade themselves of the need of the peasantry, and, supplying bread, give it to the needy, then incomparably the least troublesome method would be for the same people to provide depots for provisioning the free tables, and free tables as well.

A few days since we were visited by a native of Kaluga, who brought to our place the following proposition : Some of the landed proprietors and peasants of the Kaluga government, rich in feed for their cattle, sympathizing with the situation of the peasants in our region who were obliged to part with their horses at a very low price, and not likely to be able to buy them at ten times the price the following spring, proposed to take for the winter for their board ten wagons that is to say, eighty horses from our region. The horses should be accompanied by certain trusty men from the hamlets from which the horses were taken, to take them there and then come back. In the spring they would go for the horses and fetch them home.

The day following this proposition, in two hamlets where it was explained, all the eighty horses, all young and good, were entered for the transfer, and every day, from that time forth, peasants kept coming, begging that their horses also might be taken.

Nothing could be a stronger or more decisive answer to the question whether there is famine or not, and in what proportions. There must be great need when peasants so easily give up their horses, trusting them to strangers. Moreover this proposition and its acceptance was to me peculiarly touching and instructive. The peasants of Kaluga, not wealthy people, for the sake of brother peasants, strangers to them, people whom they had never seen, out of pity take upon themselves no small expense and labor and trouble ; and the peasants of this locality, evidently understanding the impulse of their Kaluga brethren, evidently conscious that in case of need they would have done the same, without the slightest hesitation entrust to strangers almost their last

possession, their good young horses, for which even at present prices they might get as much as five, ten, or fifteen rubles.

If even a hundredth part of such vital brotherly conscience, of such unity of men in the name of God, were in all men, how easily, yet not only easily, but also joyfully, we should endure this famine and all other material misfortunes.

BYEGITCHEVKO, DANKOVSKY DISTRICT,

December 8, 1891.

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