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THE BALTIC AS A BASIS OF YMCA CO-OPERATION

by PAUL SUPER
(WARSAW, POLAND)

The Baltic Sea is gaining an increasingly important place in news despatches, articles, and conversation dealing with European matters. The countries bordering it draw more and more into focus as a group to be thought of in connexion with each other, as lands bound together rather than separated by this body of water. Nine countries, possibly ten, are immediately involved in this community of contact and interest: Sweden, Finland, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Germany, Poland, Denmark and possibly Norway.

The sea affords convenient possibilities for three kinds of contact: commerce, conflict, and culture. Commercial steamship lines plying between Baltic ports grow in number and ships of large burden replace smaller ones. Cruisers, pocket battleships, and submarines are launched in the name of protection and replied to in kind as a menace to peace. But cultural connexions also, though less advertised, grow in number and increase in strength. It is about one potential such line of cultural contact and mutuality of interest that this article is written. It is obvious, however, that the chief underlying idea and the methods proposed apply equally to education, science, the Boy Scouts, the Red Cross — or indeed to almost any international institution.

The fundamental consideration underlying the whole matter is this, that those of us interested in cultural relations between nations or the extension of culture within our own nation ought to be as alert to see and seize possibilities for the furthering of the interests that command our time and allegiance as are those whose minds are occupied with matters of naval strategy or commercial expansion. A new invention, a new idea, immediately finds adaptation to the purposes of war and business; its possibilities in the areas of moral, intellectual, social and spiritual values are not so quickly perceived and capitalized.

The Baltic Sea is in a fair way to acquire an importance it has not had since Hanseatic days. The naval men and the business men are both seeing and creating this new significance of an old body of water. But just as surely as it lends itself to purposes of statesmanship and exchange, equally surely it presents opportunities to those who seek national welfare along other lines, science, social improvement, public education, and religion.

So much for general considerations. The specific cultural agency which serves here as an illustration both of the general lines of intercourse proposed and of a movement concerning which there is advanced a definite project to be considered is the Young Men's Christian Association, as it is called in English speech, the *Christlicher Verein Junger Maenner* in German, and *Kristliej Foerening an Unge Maens* in Swedish. In the eastern Baltic states and in Poland, though the organization has a name in the language of each nation, it is universally known in common speech as YMCA, pronounced as one word, 'imka'.

Of the ten countries mentioned above, eight, all but Russia and Lithuania, have Young Men's Christian Association movements, and leading Lithuanians have expressed a desire for such an organization. These various national movements have a generally accepted community of aim, though they differ from each other in various respects, perhaps important, perhaps only interesting. It is the opinion of this writer that not only their geographic relation as all bordering upon the Baltic, but even their very differences form a reason for and basis of contact — contact sure to be profitable to all the parties involved.

The proposal of this paper is of greater or less interest to some 175,000 persons quite directly, and to others indirectly. The German YMCA has over 100,000 members in 2,000 associations. The Association in Denmark has about 30,000 members, in 629 associations, with 66 of these housed in their own buildings. The movement in Sweden is very strong, with Prince Oscar Bernadotte as its official head, and 20,000 members in 250 associations. This movement owns 42 buildings. The Finnish YMCA is old and well established, has 11,000 members in 271 associations, and owns 35 buildings. The movements in Poland,

Estonia, and Latvia are post-war, and are strong in the order given.

Only 5 associations have been organized in Poland, but of these Cracow and Warsaw have already large buildings, and Łódź is about to enter the first completed third of its new home. There are young associations in Gdynia and Poznań, and an expansionist programme is about to be realized. The movement has strong governmental backing. Estonia has associations in 20 places, enrolling 3,000 members. The movement is a vigorous one with a considerable programme, especially in industry. As to Latvia, there is a good YMCA building in Riga, and 4 smaller associations in other towns.

Not wanting to launch into this matter of a Baltic YMCA area until the views of world leaders of the YMCA were known, the matter was raised at Geneva, the seat of the World's Alliance of the YMCA, and a favourable attitude discovered. We therefore propose the Baltic as a 'natural area' of YMCA relationships and co-operation, and proceed below to analyze the situation, looking at the advantages and difficulties involved in a 'hands around the Baltic' in YMCA matters.

DIFFICULTIES AND ADVANTAGES

Perhaps it will be well to look at the difficulties at once and then approach concrete proposals with a full sense of the definite problems involved in a drawing together of the YMCA movements of the Baltic lands.

There is the language difficulty. The eight nations of the Baltic area having YMCA movements all speak different languages. But the matter is not as dark as it at first appears, for these eight lands fall into several groups, in one of which, the Scandinavian, there is no serious problem of mutual understanding; then in the eastern Baltic states Russian is widely understood, while German is spoken by most educated persons all around the Baltic.

During recent years, however, the English language has more and more been becoming the medium of international YMCA understanding. YMCA leaders from all the lands of the world are increasingly learning English, and in meetings of the World's Alliance it is an almost perfect international language. At the last meeting of the executive committee of the World's Alliance in July other languages were heard but rarely, all the delegates understanding English and all but a few being quite able to express themselves in it. In that meeting there were representatives from Sweden, Poland, Germany, Latvia, and Finland of the Baltic area. The Danish and Estonian leaders, had they been present, could have taken part in English with equal facility. The language difficulty is not an impossible barrier to the development of a YMCA *rapprochement* around the Baltic.

The Polish YMCA injects an element of difficulty into the situation by the fact that though it is an interconfessional movement it is practically a Catholic one. The general framework of Polish society is Catholic and the Polish YMCA naturally is of the same composition and faith as its social milieu. Processes of religious education and expression characteristic of Protestant YMCAs are not in use in the Polish YMCA, its character-building objectives being realized only by methods acceptable to Catholics. That is, there are no Bible classes, such instruction being the function of the church and the school in a Catholic society, and there are no 'religious meetings', these being a Protestant form of worship.

So there are certain methods used by all the other YMCA movements of northern Europe which find no place or exact parallel in the Polish YMCA, and there are a few features of the Polish YMCA buildings and work not familiar to non-Catholics. In all the Polish buildings one finds either a picture of the Virgin or a crucifix or both, and on occasions calling for prayer, as at the close of the day in camp, they are Catholic prayers that are recited. Yet this very fact of difference in confessional background is more a reason for closer relationships than a barrier against them.

A third problem is not so easily disposed of as are these preceding two. Nationalism, state control of all life and especially of all organizations of youth, is growing in some of the lands bordering the Baltic, and where that control and spirit prevail the leaders of the state are not too keen on their young people and their leaders developing a large amount of international visiting and comparison. The independence of the YMCA movement is threatened in several lands, and these movements may even lose their name and character as YMCAs. But here too the very difficulty is an argument for and not a final barrier against inter-Baltic relations, for no small comfort would come to the leaders of a restricted or even oppressed movement from fellowship with the leaders of the same movement in more favoured lands.

If there are other really serious obstacles in the way of developing YMCA contacts around the Baltic the author of this paper is not aware of them, and the total of difficulties is much outweighed by the sum of the benefits and advantages to be derived. Money? Distances? The distances are not great, two days travel as a fair maximum, and as to money, when leaders of movements become convinced of the positive values resulting from international visits and conferences they find the money with which to send men about and bring them together.

METHODS OF PROCEDURE

The forms which the realization of this idea would assume are at least six in number.

1. No formal organization of an area administration is proposed, merely the general recognition by leaders of the YMCA movements around the Baltic that in the fact of their geographic location around that body of water lie possibilities of valuable contacts. Valuable how? As preventatives of war? We raise the point merely to dismiss it. Valuable because such contacts are Christian, pleasant, and profitable both to culture and organization. What is here proposed is the bringing of our geographic relation into the focus of our attention, the centring of a certain amount of thought upon how to secure the benefits such contiguity affords, and the use of some of the plans proposed in the following paragraphs.

2. Let these movements arrange exchanges of boys between their summer camps. Poland, for instance, has two excellent permanent summer camps for boys, one in the Carpathian Mountains, not on the water but having a 25-metre swimming pool, the other on the broad and shallow Pilica River, and these camps operate all summer. Visitors from other Baltic states would be most welcome in the camps, and these guests from abroad would get an experience of another land and culture which would be of great value as education, not to mention pleasure. So also our Polish boys would experience intellectual stimulation and broadening from a period spent in a Swedish or Estonian camp. Eventually a special international camp period of two weeks duration could be conducted somewhere for say 100 boys chosen from the YMCA movements in this Baltic area.

3. Our very differences in type of work, our variety of ways of arriving at a common character-building objective, justify inter-Baltic conferences of volunteer leaders and employed officers. We can learn a great deal from each other, as to motivating spirit, forms of organization, and technique of method. Denmark can learn how the Poles use great YMCA buildings, Poland can learn how the Danish YMCA covers a wide area with few large buildings of its own; the work in each country is superior in some respect, and exchange of experience and point of view would be valuable to all. Leaders from six countries of Central Europe met in June in Czechoslovakia for such an exchange; the Baltic is an equally good conference area.

4. Inter-association visits of YMCA leaders, already in vogue in a small way, might well be multiplied. At the time of writing one of our Polish leaders is in Sweden, and the Polish YMCA is seeking to receive a visit from the heads of the Swedish movement. In Warsaw we have had as our guests leaders from Denmark and Estonia, and some of our Polish leaders have visited YMCAs in Germany, Finland, and Latvia, always to our profit. We should definitely plan and execute more of these visits, well arranged and with definite serious purposes as well as that of fellowship. With one of three European languages, French, German, or English quite generally understood by all YMCA leaders, and Russian widely understood in the East, the matter of language presents no serious difficulties.

5. For several years the Estonian and Danish YMCAs have had a cooperative relation. For instance, a young Esthonian secretary has spent a fairly long period in Denmark getting training under Danish leadership. Such cooperative relations could easily be extended and developed, until more and more ties bound the Baltic lands together in bonds of friendship and culture. Older movements might well give material help to younger ones, and weak movements could be reinforced and stabilized by stronger ones.

6. Finally, we propose more participation in each other's celebrations and enterprises, such as the celebration of the Hamburg YMCA birthday last year, and the 50th anniversary of the Stockholm YMCA a year ago. As to the enterprises, when country *X* builds a new YMCA building, why should not the association in country *Y* raise enough money to furnish one room to be called by its name, a Finnish room in an Estonian YMCA home?

Further elaboration is not necessary. Difficulties there are, but difficulties can often be turned into assets, and with thought one can capitalize disadvantages, converting them into elements of strength. The advantages and gains from such a developing of a Baltic consciousness, resulting in an ever increasing exchange of ideas and broadening of outlook are quite obvious, and practical avenues will open up through which the strong may share their strength with the weaker, and the young gain wisdom and stability by their contact with the more experienced.

The visits and conferences here proposed will bring new ideals to minds set in one way of thinking, suggest new solutions of old problems, uncover needs not yet felt, and reveal refreshing ways of looking at things. The younger members will get a new sense of the size and dignity of their movement as they meet fellow workers from abroad, the sense of world brotherhood will become vital through its physical demonstration, errors of thought and of process will receive their due corrective through wider knowledge, and workers discouraged by local difficulties will be refreshed and strengthened by contact with those with whom things are going better. We propose a new thing in YMCA relationship — the Baltic Area.

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