

"We are all aware of the problem of illiteracy in developing countries but are we equally aware that the same plague is spreading, little by little, in the areas surrounding our great centres of population?"

That was the question asked, in the presence of the Academy Inspector of Pontoise and in that of leading personalities of the Departement, at the inauguration of our second Mobile School Unit for the education of the children of itinerants in the Paris area. That question, asked on 22nd March, 1983 on the wretched camping site of the itinerants of Eragny, found an echo in a recent report published by the Commission of the Mayors of France and which proposed the setting up of a "school without walls", organized by travelling teachers who volunteer for educational work among the "nomads".

In fact, the establishment of the first "school without walls" took place on opening day, in September 1982 when a mobile school unit led by Brother Camille and named "Antenne Mobile Scolaire" first left the St. Joseph de Pantin school yard for a camp site where about twenty motor caravans were parked on the east side of Paris.

It would, obviously, take too long to go into detail about the beginning of this venture, "revolutionary" in the context of the French education system, but which the Minister of Education had foreshadowed in the official regulations of 1970. These proposals, however, remained a dead letter. Briefly we could say that without the prophetic vision and drive of Brother Pierre (see *Lasalliana*, No. 3, leaflet 03-C-10) and of his small team of Brothers working under the title SIGEVO (Educational Service of Itinerants), hundreds of "gypsy" children would remain irredeemably condemned to illiteracy without hope of escape.

This is precisely the problem underlined by the Academy Inspector of Pontoise at the inauguration of the second Mobile School Unit when he uttered the significant words that warmed the hearts of the handful of Brothers present:

"M. Cote (Brother Léon Cote), by devoting himself to the disinherited, fulfills a mission of the utmost importance and brings to light a very painful problem of which we are not always fully aware within the confines of the established educational system. You and your fellow teachers are truly pioneers! I hope that we may follow your example and, particularly, that we may learn from your experience of the mobile school which I consider the best means of dealing with the problem of illiteracy". Who, precisely, are these people whom we call gypsies, tinkers, itinerants or nomads? In fact, there is general confusion on the part of the majority of people, which does not make it any easier to understand these marginal groups who tend to disturb and annoy right thinking folks.

If we study their origins we find the Gypsies who are of Indian origin and who came to Europe five or six centuries ago. They comprise several ethnic groups, notably Manouches, Sintis, Rom, and Gitans... The Rom are fairly numerous on the east side of Paris and are sedentary while the Manouches continue to live in caravans along the roadsides when there are no parking sites provided for them by the public authorities. In the Paris region alone there are an estimated 20,000 Gypsies. Their total number in France is about 200,000. Practically all of them are French citizens.

The Yéniches appear to have originated in the Germanic regions of Northern Europe.

There are others who do not belong to these two groups but who have lived and travelled like them for generations.

When we consider their way of life we find a people faithful to certain specific ways of acting: an

organization based on the nomadic tradition, respect for these traditions, a separate language, a highly developed sense of family solidarity and a strong religious sense.

From a demographic point of view, the population could be divided as follows:

- * Young people under 16 years of age: 47% (Total French population: 27%);
- * Adults between 16 and 65 years of age: 51% (Total French population: 59%);
- * Adults over 65 years of age: 2% (Total French population: 14%).

You will note that the population pyramid follows the pattern observed in the Third World. That is the result of the sub-normal economic, sanitary and social conditions of the itinerants as compared with those of the majority of the population and which demand from society serious efforts to improve them.

On the other hand, polls and inquiries show that the average itinerant family consists of from 4.5 to 6.6 persons. Families with seven, eight or even more children are common.

In the two Departments of the Paris region, Seine-Saint Denis and Val d'Oise, where the Brothers work with the help of the Mobile School Units, the gypsy population is estimated at between 8,000 and 10,000 people. If you accept that the majority of these are itinerants, the number of children without schooling reaches several hundred in each Department. It is to these that our four Mobile School Units go. The creation of these mobile units has been shown as the only workable solution to the problem of educating this itinerant population which no traditional system of education could ever reach.

Besides, the continual changes of location imposed by the public authorities on these unfortunate people, who have been rejected for centuries by almost the whole of French society, make attendance at normal schools impossible.

In addition, most schools find it impossible to teach the children of itinerants in normal conditions since families come and go without warning. Even if they could, the rate of illiteracy of these children, estimated at about 95% in the Paris region, causes them to feel themselves strangers and failures in face of an educational system conceived by and designed for a culture utterly different from their own.

The mobile school unit, on the other hand, allows for adaptation to the specific needs of itinerant children, and takes account of their anxieties and their feeling of insecurity which arises from the contrast between the security experienced in the intimacy of the clan and the threat of the outside world.

Our daily approach to this rejected world is proof of our willingness to accept and listen to each individual itinerant child who wants to learn to read and write.

Our teaching method is, above all, a personal dialogue with each of the children confided to us by the parents. This requires that we work with small groups (on average, eight) who are taken in turn for a maximum of two hours a day. We try to make each group homogeneous as regards rate of progress but we take a very special interest in the older ones. This is because the older children can become, later on, teachers of their own family group. One young girl, after learning our method, devoted herself to teaching a dozen children of her own clan to read and write. As a result, the Gabriel Drolin Centre awarded her a substantial sum of money to help her to continue her work in more favourable conditions.

The method used is that invented by Brothers Pierre and described in *Lasalliana*, No. 3: "The School goes to them". In the space of three or four months an itinerant child can learn to read intelligibly. What a success for a child who was convinced that "he would never be able to read!" That is why we created quite recently, with the help of the Gabriel Drolin Centre, a "Licence to read" which rewards the child's efforts to reach that stage with the gift of a book token worth 100 francs. What motivation for the 300 or so young itinerants of the Paris region whom our units reach.

What wonderful things have been accomplished in France in the last hundred years of free compulsory education! But how much more remains to be done? That is the problem the school is faced with. More than ever it has need of people who are passionately interested in teaching and education. More than ever is there a need for innovation to "re-invent" the school...

Above all, learning for the sub-proletariat must come through knowledge and love of their milieu, for there, more than anywhere else, you give not only what you know but what you are.

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