

Rescue operation "The Castles" (1945 – 1947) – saving the children from concentration and internment camps

During the occupation of Czechoslovakia, P. Pitter and O. Fierzová tried to help Jewish families and together with their colleagues they were interested in immediate aid to children in the postwar period. Immediately after the end of the World War II, P. Pitter was entrusted by the Health and Social Committee of the Czech National Council to put his plans into practice and launched "The Castles" operation.

Thanks to the great efforts of both pedagogical and medical staff, due to typhus epidemic the children from the Theresienstadt ghetto were evacuated urgently on the first days after the liberation. Although it was already considered to be a period of peace, thanks to this action a number of weakened children were prevented from the lethal infection. At the castles Štířín, Olešovice, Kamenice, and Lojovice and in the boarding house Ládví (all near Prague), which were transformed into sanatoria, P. Pitter offered children of different nationalities from concentration and internment camps the possibility of physical and mental restoration. His project of a common stay of children from exterminated Jewish families together with German children - until then they had been children of enemies, who had participated even in the Hitlerjugend - was shortly after the liberation extremely difficult, but certainly unique. Children were given medical care, high-quality food, but most importantly also loving treatment. After recovery of children, health and social care mingled with their upbringing and education.

P. Pitter condemned the postwar violence done to German inhabitants and advocated for the humanization of detention camps, which he visited as a member of the Social Committee of the Land National Committee. He was convinced that children were always children, and that it was inhumane and unchristian to make them suffer for the actions of their parents. At the displacement of the German population, which was agreed by the victorious powers at the Potsdam Conference in 1945, P. Pitter and his colleagues linked children and their parents or their relatives. Children of various age came to sanatoria, there were both toddlers and boys of eighteen. Most of the children were at the age of 10-14 years. Many of the older children had experienced slave labour in German munition-works, or labour camps, and deprivation in concentration and internment camps (most often it was Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Dachau, Chemnitz, etc.). The largest number of children stayed in sanatoria for two to four months, but some others stayed there longer than a year.

In addition to the care of children in sanatoria, in the Milíč's House office there was launched a nearly detective searching for lost children, who remained in the chaos of war without any contact with their relatives. Investigation stations of the occupation zones in Germany addressed P. Pitter and his colleagues with requests for help in search for missing children. Numerous volunteers helped to solve ever increasing number of cases. They carried out various investigations with local authorities and hospitals, made extensive correspondence. Thus, searching for hundreds of missing children was done. In cases where it was obvious that there was no chance to find any relatives, foster families were found for children. Search for lost children or their parents continued in a close cooperation with German authorities until 1950.