

Jean P. Inebnit, Apostle of Goodwill

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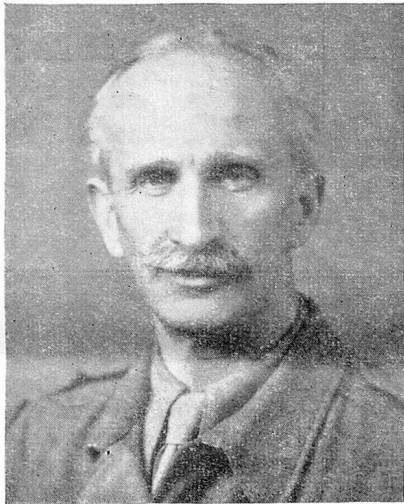
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JEAN P. INEBNIT, APOSTLE OF GOODWILL.

By John L. Plowman.

(We have much pleasure in reproducing below, by courtesy of the Editor, an article which appeared in the issue of June 29th, 1955, in the "Yorkshire Post".)

On a sombre autumn evening 35 years ago, a young recently married Swiss schoolmaster and his wife sat somewhat despondently on a bench in Woodhouse Moore, Leeds, waiting for eight o'clock — the time stipulated by their newly acquired landlady for occupation of her rooms.

Gazing over the rooftops of the smoky, drab city, so very different from the lovely Lausanne they had left a few days before, they agreed: "We'll try it for a year if we can stand it so long".

In a few weeks' time that same Swiss schoolmaster, Mr. Jean P. Inebnit, is to retire from his post as Senior Lecturer in the Department of French at Leeds University. Yesterday, in his room at the top of the Parkinson Building, with its view over the smoky heart of Leeds, he told me: "Although my wife and I doubted whether we would stick it a year, now we cannot bear to leave it".

So, despite his having retained Swiss nationality and having plans for the future which will entail a good deal of his time being spent on the Continent, Mr. Inebnit will continue to live at Adel on the outskirts of the city he has come to love.

"Yorkshire people don't show an immediate liking or enthusiasm for strangers," he told me. "They observe you; but once you have won their confidence and friendship you have it for life."

Mr. Inebnit, a former officer in the Swiss Army, was 30 when he gave up a congenial post as master in a Lausanne public school to broaden his experience in England. With only a limited knowledge of the language, he arrived in Leeds in September, 1920, to become French master at West Leeds High School. He went to the University as assistant lecturer in French language and literature 18 months later.

In his 34 years at the University he has been a friend and guide to thousands of students and colleagues and he has pioneered a number of projects designed for the furtherance of international goodwill and fellowship.

He has been a vital member of the International Voluntary Service for Peace, the Modern Language Association, the Leeds Polyglot Society, Youth Helps Youth and other associations connected with French studies, social education and relief work in post-war Europe.

As chairman of the Leeds United Nations Association International Service, he has for the past two years led teams of young people in helping to reclaim the flood devastated village of Nieuwerkerk on one of the Zeeland islands.

He will retain his connection with many of these organisations while in retirement and is already making plans to extend his work in the field of international relations.

When war broke out in 1939, Mr. Inebnit, his wife and two daughters were on holiday in Switzerland, but he had no hesitation in returning to England and the city of his adoption. Although officially an alien, he was recognised as a true friend of Britain and his services as a lecturer on France and French affairs to the Forces were in wide demand.

Before the Normandy invasion, Mr. Inebnit was given a top secret appointment as headmaster of a school to be established in the West Riding for French children rendered homeless by the campaign. A building was earmarked near Halifax, a staff of eight teachers nominated and plans made for about 200 refugee children to be accommodated.

"But the school never materialised. The French preferred to cling to their homes, and no children were brought over. I was headmaster of a school

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that hardly anyone knew anything about and which never opened," he recalled with a chuckle.

Towards the end of the war in Europe, Mr. Inebnit obtained a year's leave of absence from the University to visit France and assist in the relief work on behalf of children and young people.

"I was a sort of children's ambassador," he explained, recalling how a young Yorkshire schoolgirl had made the suggestion, which led to Youth Helps Youth, an organisation responsible for sending more than 120,020 gift parcels from children in Britain to children in France.

"I can still recall that first parcel to be received in France; it contained a pen, pencil, ruler and india rubber," he said. "It bore a little card with a Christmas tree on which was the name of the sender, nine-year-old John Atkinson, of Goathland."

Mr. Inebnit is a fervent believer in the part youth can play in breaking down barriers between nations. He will journey to Brussels in two weeks to lecture on the role of youth at a World Good Will conference. Shortly afterwards he will be in Holland on a rebuilding scheme.

"Unfortunately, one has only one lifetime. I could do with six to fit in all the things I want to do," he said, leaving no doubt that his retirement would be anything but restful.

He has had many amusing experiences in his work.

One that still makes him laugh occurred when he was invited to talk to prisoners at Armley Gaol. On his way down from his room on the top floor of the Parkinson Building he was trapped for nearly two hours when the lift stuck between floors.

"Throughout the time when I should have been in the prison, I was helplessly peering through the bars of the lift door," he recalls. "I was freed just in time to deliver another lecture I had arranged at the University."

His future work, in which his wife and daughters — both graduates of Leeds University — will share, will be furthered by "The Inebnit Testimonial Fund", which was launched in the past few days by his colleagues at the University.

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