

Bulgarian Relief Work in the Seventies

UNTIL 1870 various Christian Slavs of the Balkans, such as Bulgars and Serbs, were under the spiritual jurisdiction of the Greek Patriarch of Constantinople. In that year, pressed by the Russian government, the Sultan of Turkey, of whose empire they were subjects, recognized the Balkan Slavs as a separate religious community, having a Slav patriarch named the Exarch.

The encouragement this gave to the Bulgars led to an insurrection in April 1876. This was suppressed by the Turks with the accompaniment of fearful atrocities in which sixty or seventy villages were burnt and many thousands of men, women and children massacred in the districts around Tatar Bazarjik in the Maritza valley between Philippopolis and Sofia. After joint demands upon the Sultan by Britain and Russia had been rejected, Russia made war upon Turkey and finally, at the Treaty of Berlin (1878), secured the autonomy of an extended Bulgarian principality within the Turkish empire.

Meanwhile, as the news of the atrocities began to trickle through to England in the summer of 1876, various sections of the community, and among them Friends, were expressing their anxiety about the oppressed races of south-east Europe. John Bright led a deputation to the Foreign Office to urge that England should not uphold, by lack of action, the authority of the Porte, but instead that she should promote a policy of reconciliation between the Sultan and the subject peoples in revolt.

On 1 Sept., 1876 a letter from J. Edmund Clark of York was published in *The Friend*. He wrote: "Are we not bound by the ties of humanity, as well as the duties enforced on us by our religious belief to succour those who are in such distress," and proceeded to point out that despite the difficulties of language, official opposition and risk to life, Friends' former success in France and well-known stand against war would open the hearts of the English to subscribe money and the Turks to admit the workers to this fresh service.

On 18 Sept. in response to a widely expressed desire, a Meeting for Sufferings was especially convened

for the purpose of considering "whether any duty devolves on Friends in reference to the sufferers by war in Servia and Bulgaria." Hesitating to launch out in relief work so soon after the French venture had ended, the Meeting appointed a committee of eleven¹ "to obtain and diffuse information of the subject among Friends, and to advise as to the most reliable channels for distribution. They are also left at liberty to invite subscriptions, to be distributed through such channels as they may consider the most satisfactory."

The first meeting of the committee was held on the day of its appointment, and Gates Darton and Henry Mennell were asked to draw up and distribute to Friends a brief appeal for funds. The committee early received an offer of assistance from James Long, who came with wide experience of the work in France behind him. He was backed by funds raised by a northern relief committee organized in Manchester. Friends however decided to wait. The minute runs: "This committee, while gratefully acknowledging James Long's offer of service, deems it best on the present occasion not to decide on any course of future action but to wait to see what response their appeal meets with from Friends." Nonetheless, should sufficient funds be forthcoming, they would like Long to visit the distressed area to secure co-ordination of the various relief activities.

These other funds were outlined in *The Friend* of 2 October. The chief organizations were:

1. The Bosnian, Herzegovinian and Bulgarian Fugitives and Orphans Relief Fund, which was dealing with refugees on their arrival in Slavonia and Croatia. This work was in the hands of two ladies, Pauline Irby and Priscilla Johnston. They were later at work on the Dalmatian border at Knin. In September 1877 they estimated that more than 250,000 fugitives had crossed the Bosnian and Herzegovinian frontiers into Austria, Servia and Montenegro. Of these, thousands of old people had perished from disease and hunger. The numbers were, however, kept up by new arrivals. These two women were seasoned relief workers,

¹ Stafford Allen, William Allen, Joseph Armfield, William Beck, T. Gates Darton (who acted as clerk), Gray Hester, Henry T. Mennell, C. C. Morland, Edmund Pace, Edmund Sturge, George Sturge.

“to whom thirty miles in a springless cart is nothing of a day’s journey.” In marked contrast to James Long, they sent vivid reports at frequent intervals to *The Friend* and *The British Friend*. Though they had no official connection with the Society, Friends supported their work to the extent of several thousand pounds by individual gifts and grants from the War Victims Fund.

2. The American evangelical missions in European Turkey had issued an appeal for funds to be administered by the missionaries in their several localities.

3. A journalist in Philippopolis had formed a relief committee consisting of the vice-consuls of several European countries.

4. The Lord Mayor of London had set up a Mansion House Fund which hoped to work through the English consular agencies.

5. Lastly, Lady Strangford was on her way to Bulgaria to direct relief work without a committee.

By early October the response to the appeal was sufficiently large for the War Victims Committee to accept Long’s suggestion that he should act as its delegate in Bulgaria, upon his assurance that relief would be given on the same principles as had been adopted by Friends in France six years before. These may be summarized as the assistance of non-combatants according to need, without any regard for creed or race; and the provision of work at reasonable wages so as to avoid the demoralizing effect of almsgiving. The British and French Ministers provided him with full credentials and letters of recommendation, and he left England on 14 October. On arriving in Paris, he telegraphed to the Alsatian refugees living in the settlement of wooden dwellings named La Cité d’Alsace at Belfort, which they had themselves built under the supervision of James Long during his previous relief work.¹ Upon reaching Belfort he found that twenty-five master carpenters had volunteered to accompany him to Bulgaria, and of these he selected six, travelling with them via Vienna to Constantinople.

The speed with which James Long began work was

¹ See *They Chose the Star*, by the present writer, p. 21.

remarkable. He secured a Firman, conferring protection and giving permission to cut timber from the nearest state forest, together with the right to use one locomotive and a steam saw-mill. In addition he was granted free rail transport for men and materials and exemption from customs dues. He rapidly collected a team of workers. Besides the six master carpenters from Alsace, he secured as volunteers a French civil engineer, a railway contractor, a forest inspector and an army surgeon, all formerly in government service at Constantinople. In addition several Bulgarian dragomen served as interpreters. He arranged a concerted scheme of action with the other relief agencies, and after surveying the area of distress, decided to concentrate his efforts in the region of Tatar Bazarjik. Within a month of his leaving England, he was able to report that his organization was already in action. By western standards this would be rapid, but at a time of high political tension in the Balkans such a pace was astounding, and most welcome in view of the approach of winter.

Long's main object was to erect wooden huts or barracks on the sites of the destroyed villages around Tatar Bazarjik as quickly as possible in order to shelter the homeless people. The timber for these dwellings was cut from the forest of Belova situated at the head of the railway running from Constantinople up the valley of the River Maritza, and there the steam saw-mill was erected. The villagers were responsible for transporting the timber from the railway station at Tatar Bazarjik to their former homes, which they accomplished by means of "arabas" or native bullock cart. The Alsatian carpenters proved to be patient and skilful in superintending and instructing the Bulgarian peasants in the work of construction. Some hundreds of men and women were employed for several months at reasonable wages, thus distributing money to the needy whilst fostering feelings of self-respect through the undertaking of socially creative work.

At the end of 1876, after less than two months work, 200 dwellings and 7 schools had been completed, and houses were being erected at the rate of 60 each week. By May 1877 more than 4,750 persons, composing at least 600 families, had been rehoused in dwellings better than those ever before inhabited by the Bulgarian peasant. The

following statistics give some idea of the scope and type of the reconstruction :

- 18,000 days' work by labourers.
- 77,000 days' work by carpenters.
- 8,000 journeys made by arabas and similar vehicles.
- 80,000 planks sawn.
- 10,500 beams and rafters cut and squared.
- 85,000 bricks laid.
- 118,000 roofing tiles laid.

An interesting record of this extensive building work is contained in *The Graphic* of 17 Feb., 1877, which includes sketches of the dwellings drawn by an artist who attended one of the opening ceremonies, together with the following description :

“ The structures certainly show no signs of having been so rapidly run up, but are solidly built, and may with ordinary care last for generations. The buildings at Venis Keni consist of a quadrangle of commodious dwellings constructed in wood, some 50 in number, with a school, playground and teacher's house in front, and cow-houses in the rear . . . The inhabitants will no longer be allowed to house their cattle along with themselves as was their former custom. The houses were inaugurated by the Archimandrite or head of the Bulgarian church ; the service concluding by an address from Mr. Long who presided. The ground on which the several villages have been built has been purchased in perpetuity and duly registered by Mr. Long, whilst a placard is placed on each establishment in Turkish and in Bulgarian stating that the buildings are erected by the benevolence of Great Britain and France combined, and are under the protection of the State. The contrast of these clean dwellings to the dirty hovels which the people inhabited before being made homeless is very great.”

William Jones comments further on the provision of separate cow-houses by saying that the Bulgarian peasant had in the past had good reason for not considering his cattle, pigs and other livestock safe, unless they were all huddled into the same dwelling as himself ; but “ Thanks to these new buildings, habits of decency will be introduced into these remote mountain villages.”

From supplies bought and collected in many parts of Britain, 14,000 sacks of maize, vetches, barley and beans had been distributed by May 1877 to some 9,500 families, and 2,500 families had been supplied with clothing material and blankets. Warm and substantial articles of clothing were greatly appreciated, though a number of the gifts were referred to as being entirely unsuitable. Cloth for making into garments was welcomed, and dark grey blankets were the most prized, in view of the bitter weather and the fact that all the population slept on the ground. In addition to these emergency measures, James Long made one of his principal objects the building of 22 schools. In 4 other villages he established schools in existing premises, and in all 26 made arrangements for elementary teaching to some thousands of children hitherto illiterate.

On the eve of James Long's departure, the committee had decided to look for a suitable colleague to join him in Bulgaria, but his initial success caused them to delay for a time. Within a few months, however, they became anxious on account of the inadequacy of reports from the relief field, due to Long's heavy pressure of work and the difficulty of communications. In November two of his telegrams were so jumbled on arrival as to be meaningless; and in December he stated that he had been without correspondence for a month. The committee was concerned too lest the funds should be benefiting the Turkish authorities, rather than the victims of the atrocities. They therefore approached two of their seasoned 1870 commissioners as to the possibility of their visiting Bulgaria. Thomas Whitwell of Stockton-on-Tees, who was first approached, had only just returned from a business visit to America, and had reluctantly to refuse; but William Jones of Middlesbrough accepted service. He reached Tatar Bazarjik on 3 Feb. and, during the ten days which he spent with Long, was able to satisfy himself that the committee's fears were groundless and that a very worthwhile task was being carried through in face of grave difficulty.

In accomplishing this work during an exceptionally severe winter, and despite much local jealousy and hostility, James Long had seriously impaired his health, though he steadfastly refused to abandon the task. "The first glance

at his worn and emaciated figure at once revealed his suffering condition," wrote William Jones, and added that Long worked nightly on accounts and plans till 4 or 5 a.m., being ready for work again after only two or three hours' sleep. One of Long's rare letters written at this period gives a fuller picture of the strain to which he subjected himself in order to forward the reconstruction :

" I have only just reached this letter after 47 hours' incessant work, 25 of which have been spent on horseback. The circuit of my operations extends now over 90 miles of roadless country, at 10 different points of which I have artisans and labourers (almost entirely indigenes), both male and female, to the number of some hundreds to direct and control. Notwithstanding that my staff are indefatigable in their efforts, I cannot rest satisfied without taking cognisance personally of all that is to be undertaken and of all that has been accomplished. Thank God my strength seems always equal to the occasion though at times wearied and wayworn enough. I cannot quit my post—my lair is the mountains, beneath the shelter of the first hovel that presents itself, at several thousand feet above sea-level and at a temperature frequently of 70 degrees below freezing point."

Throughout James Long treated Mussulmans, Bulgarians and Israelites alike, distributing relief solely according to the degree of misery and misfortune. This attitude was for many months wholly misunderstood, and one of his greatest difficulties was the open or latent opposition of the Turkish authorities who had at the very outset appeared well-disposed. This was largely because the Turks wished it thought that they had repaired everything without external help ; though in fact they had done nothing effective for the area round Tatar Bazarjik, partly on account of the apathy of the Bulgarians themselves. These also took some time before being convinced that Long's real purpose was not that of inducing them to abandon the religion of their ancestors. Once satisfied on this point, they assumed that he would always defend their interests, right or wrong, against the Turk. To prove his impartiality, he included in his reconstruction programme the rebuilding of some burnt houses in Palanka, a purely Turkish village, the dwellings being officially opened by the Naib or chief of the Mussulman

church. Clothing and seeds were similarly distributed to needy Mussulman peasants. The task of holding the balance between Turk and Bulgarian, Greek and Armenian, Jew and Christian, Gipsy pagan and Gipsy Mussulman, had indeed required tremendous tact, but by the spring of 1877, Long was able to report a sudden change from suspicion to appreciation of his relief policy in all quarters. The Turks were at last convinced of the reality of the scheme, and no longer held back from accepting relief. Many petitions to rebuild came in and the work resumed the intense activity of the initial period. Within two months of William Jones' departure, work in six new villages, together with five further schools had been undertaken. Although no precise examples are available of racial opposition to the relief work, it had certainly been intense, for Long ends this report: "Thank God I shall soon *live down*, at least here, the calumny and malice that have hitherto threatened to paralyse my efforts."

In the planning of relief the inadequacy of local communications was a serious problem, not only during the winter when frost and snow isolated many of the villages, but at all seasons. Roads existed only between the largest towns; the tracks in the mountains were rocky and dangerous; and in the plains there were frequent quagmires. Those administering the work travelled long distances on horseback over rough paths and insecure wooden bridges. For the official opening ceremony at each village, however, more elaborate arrangements were necessary since the Archimandrite was no horseman, and yet his personal blessing of the dwellings was essential, as it was, in the eyes of the peasants, tantamount to a comprehensive insurance policy. Consequently a number of perilous journeys had to be taken by hill paths in a little carriage pulled by three spirited ponies abreast, and driven by a fatalistic old Turk with a hook in place of one hand. William Jones records the following frightening episode:

"On one occasion the conveyance, with four of us in it, slid down the frozen face of a slope, pushing along the three ponies down the incline towards the precipice at the bottom, the driver meantime pulling them back almost upon their haunches. Before reaching the abyss, the Turk, with marvellous skill, gave his three ponies such a sharp slew

round, that he succeeded in landing them safely on the wooden bridge crossing the adjoining ravine at a sharp angle, and which had no parapets or side rails to it. The centrifugal force of this action flung the outer pony over the edge of the bridge, and left him dangling in his rope harness above the boiling torrent which roared far below The old Turk dismounted, searched under his seat for a large knife, which he stuck between his teeth, stood over the spot where the pony was swinging in the air, and after taking a careful survey of the situation, deliberately cut the ropes, and let the animal fall into the torrent below. I saw the rapid current roll the poor brute over and over, showing the shining plates on his hoofs now and then in the air. (Ponies in Bulgaria are usually shod with a flat plate, in the same way as bullocks, a most unsafe plan during frost and snow.) The Turk now returned to his seat and drove the other two ponies across the bridge. There he stopped, and we all four sat in perfect silence. After a while, to my utter amazement . . . we heard a faint whinnying sound at a considerable distance down the stream In a little while the marvellous little creature, looking like a drowned rat, came trotting towards us, apparently no worse for the rough usage he had undergone Strange to say, we were all so absorbed in our driver's proceedings, that the whole affair was conducted with the silence and decorum of a Friends' meeting."

Throughout the country brigandage was rife. With no bank nearer than Constantinople (2 days' journey away), Long had to keep a considerable sum of money for wages in the house at Tatar Bazarjik. At first he hired armed policemen to guard the house, but in turn found them all trying to rob him, as they were seldom and badly paid by the authorities. After he had lodged several complaints, the Turkish Commandant allowed him the only trustworthy person available, a Turkish soldier, who guarded the headquarters with fixed bayonet, perhaps to the prejudice of Friends' peace testimony and his protestations against military oppression.

James Long persisted, despite all these obstacles, in his efforts to reconstruct the distressed region. He emphasized that the existing poverty was avoidable, since the soil was fertile, the climate normally temperate, and wood and water

plentiful. The country was however given no opportunity to recover, for Russia declared war on Turkey in April, 1877, and many thousands fled from the path of the contending armies, creating utter chaos, with refugees perishing of famine and cold in large numbers. A panic-stricken mob came from the north into Tatar Bazarjik, stampeded to the station, took possession of a train of empty carriages and stolidly refused to be dislodged. The train was at last compelled to start on its two-day journey to Constantinople. William Jones records that Long was able to secure a place in the last van, and how during the night he saw frozen corpses dropping from the roofs of the carriages into the snow at the side of the track.

So at last, worn-out and ill, he returned temporarily to England. On 7 May, 1877, he met the committee in London, and they reported to Yearly Meeting that his week's rest on the voyage from Constantinople to Marseilles had greatly improved his health, though he still suffered from lameness. The six carpenters of Alsace returned to Belfort at this period, and they received promotion in recognition of their services. A Friend informed the Yearly Meeting that one of these carpenters had brought back with him a Bulgarian orphan, "probably the only survivor from the massacre at Batak." The Russo-Turkish war continued until January, 1878. Nonetheless Long had returned to Bulgaria before August, 1877, for at the beginning of that month T. Gates Darton wrote to him there, expressing Meeting for Sufferings' complete confidence in his discretion, but at the same time urging him to avoid even the appearance of favouring one of the parties, "so that no political aspect whatever should be given to our action."

From this point the record is incomplete. The committee minutes become brief and unrevealing, and most of the available fragmentary details are contained in occasional paragraphs in Friends' journals. In September, 1877, Long was actively engaged in assisting refugees of all classes, travelling from place to place, and living in a carriage that had been placed at his disposal.

With the final rout of the Turkish armies at the turn of the year, the Russians advanced upon Adrianople, and *The Times* of 24 Jan., 1878, reported: "From accounts received from Tatar Bazarjik it is feared that the new

schools and playgrounds have been destroyed by the Turkish troops in their retreat from the Balkans.”

The lack of contact between James Long and the committee which had worried Friends at the outset of the work, now became acute. Many relief committees must at different periods have felt out of touch with their field representatives, but one doubts if matters ever reached a more serious state than is revealed in the following minute of 3 May, 1878: “In the absence of any information from James Long, from whom no communication has been received for upwards of 3 months, it is concluded to endeavour to obtain information from the Foreign Office as to his whereabouts.” Later in the month, however, James Long wrote to say that the newly-erected buildings had for the most part been saved, though many had been used to quarter troops.

In view of the military developments it is hardly surprising that Yearly Meeting in 1878 was informed that the committee had not appealed for more funds nor sought to extend the work, as Friends were deterred by the speed of military movements during the later period of the struggle, and by the uncertainty which still continued in the whole area. The committee was kept in being in case any opening for further work should arise, and was not finally laid down until Meeting for Sufferings on 7 March, 1879.

As in France, 1870, this Bulgarian relief work was administered without any full-time secretary in London. During the early stages the committee met thrice monthly, and one or other of the members attended at Devonshire House almost daily to acknowledge remittances and deal with current business. It was a task which Friends had been reluctant to take up in view of its complexities and of the activity of other bodies, which, however, assumed that the Society would be taking part, and urged Friends forward in a way which has since been repeated.

The total sum spent by James Long in Bulgaria is not known, but it may be broadly estimated at £30,000, of which Friends contributed about £6,000. The balance of the money came from the relief funds raised in the northern cities.

By May, 1877, Friends had raised about £6,750 of which only £500 was in hand. Yearly Meeting was informed

that Long had still a balance from the subscriptions sent by these other funds, and "there seems no present need to ask Friends for further contributions." In view of his satisfactory financial position on the one hand and the serious disturbances in the Tatar Bazarjik area on the other, the committee diverted the final balances to the Misses Irby and Johnston for their work in Dalmatia.

The last news of James Long is contained in an account in *The Friend* of August, 1878, concerning a deputation from the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, including Edmund Sturge, T. G. Alexander and James Long, which presented a memorial at the Congress of Berlin for the abolition of slavery and the slave trade. In this document emphasis was laid on the slave-trading which continued within the Turkish empire. The delegates stated with regret that no impression had been made upon the official representatives interviewed. They reported, however, receiving a warm welcome from the Crown Prince and Princess,¹ who discussed with them the subjects of war, slavery and liberty of conscience.

WILLIAM K. SESSIONS

¹ Afterwards Frederick III, German Emperor (d. 1888), he had married (1858) Victoria Adelaide Mary Louisa, Princess Royal.