

A M E R I C A N F R I E N D S S E R V I C E C O M M I T T E E

20 South Twelfth Street
Philadelphia 7, Pennsylvania

FOREIGN SERVICE SECTION

News from Germany

Number 21

June 30, 1950

"The sun is shining in Wuppertal and the people are coming out of the dark bunker into our yard for sunning and playing.... Recently we decided to take some time out to reconsider the direction of our work. The most important aspect, we all agreed, is a deeper understanding of the children who come to us. Now a committee including members of the staff and two doctors from the city health department has been set up, and are making visits to the homes.

"It is sad to discover that about 80% come from broken homes. Sometimes the fathers are dead or missing and an 'uncle' or numerous uncles have appeared as members of the household. This confuses the children, and is a source of deep spiritual wounding. The examinations show us all over again (as if we need to be shown) the enormous poverty, the sick bodies and warped feelings of children who have already lived through such terrifying experiences and are constantly being subjected to more.

"From the results of these examinations we will select the groups that most need a Jugendherberge experience. We must select, since fundamentally all need it and we can only take a few. We are planning four groups through the month of August at Schloss Burg. We will take each group for a period of two weeks. Also, as the examinations show needs, we will try to really see that the city facilities are used to meet these needs."

The Neighborhood Center Idea

Four years ago the idea of a neighborhood center existed only in the minds of some Quaker workers. It seemed a practical way through which people might be helped to help themselves. Through cooperative projects of community services the people might be helped to regain that dignity and independence which they so desperately craved and needed. In an atmosphere of mutual trust people could find themselves in their own ways, could learn the use of freedom, and develop a sense of responsibility that must accompany this freedom.

Now, in 1950, the idea has become a reality in seven different communities. In three universities there are student centers, geared to the more specialized needs of students, but with the same emphasis on

the importance of individual human values. The self-help work now being carried on among the refugees is carried out in the same spirit, and the experience gained in encouraging groups to help themselves is being applied.

The centers are not alike. Each has developed according to the needs of the neighborhood or community in which it is located. Highlights from the various reports can perhaps tell best the role the centers are fulfilling.

The Neighborhoods

In each and every center an attempt was made from the beginning to understand the problems of the community and then to plan together, with the people living there, a program to meet these needs. A recent report from Wuppertal vividly describes the setting there.

"At first I saw it as very similar to any slum area in a big industrial city in America, except that I felt the young people were more responsive than ours. From the very beginning I have been shocked at the thought that people are allowed to live in windowless bunkers. Contrary to the belief of many, the majority of the people living in the bunker are not refugees. They are people who were evacuated to other cities during the bombings. They returned to find their homes gone and took refuge in the bomb shelters.

"One family group who comes to the Center consists of the mother, father, two children and a stray child whom the mother found somewhere along the way. The father is a tailor. Half of a five foot cubicle is used for his work; the other half contains two beds, one above the other. The big boy sleeps on the floor. The two younger children came into the Center covered with contagious skin diseases, the grown-ups green from lack of air, their spiritual beings so fatigued as to make them seem beyond reach.

"In other words, a deeper glimpse into our work shows me that people are subjected to much greater hardships here than I have ever seen in my work before. For the bunker people it seems to me there is only one solution. To get out. Building goes on all the time, but it is all too often businesses that are being rebuilt and homes for well-to-do people."

The Programs and the People

The activities and services of the centers vary from community to community but all are built up around a core of basic community services, such as sewing rooms, kindergartens and youth programs. People of all ages find the centers a "home" in many ways.

A report from Brunswick in the British Zone tells of a new service:

"A sewing and knitting evening for the unemployed women of the neighborhood is developing. Requests for knitted garments and children's clothing have been received from orphanages. These will be made by a group of unemployed women. The material was received as a gift, so only the working hours for each garment will have to be paid to the worker. A work party held regularly in the pleasant work room in the Neighborhood Center is more than a purely material gain for the women who are suffering so intensely from the demoralizing effect of unemployment."

Wandering and uprooted youth, borderline delinquents, still constitute one of the largest problems in Germany. The Neighborhood Centers help to provide wholesome recreational and educational programs. The chaos of the war and post-war period was perhaps the most damaging to the young people. They had to begin to make decisions, judgments and to formulate moral values at a time when the entire social structure had collapsed. The most important help offered to these young people is sometimes indirect and subtle -- they share in other projects, they want the space and opportunity for recreation, they need and seek direction in their lives.

A recent report from Frankfurt shows one of the ways they have been working with this confused group:

"Our bunker program continues to thrive. Once a week a small group of our young people go to the Germania bunker where delinquent girls are housed. They plan their programs carefully according to the wishes of the girls themselves. The matron of the home is very happy about this program since it shows many of the girls for the first time that social gatherings can be clean and good fun at the same time. Two weeks ago the girls themselves telephoned to the center to say that this time they wanted to offer a program themselves. They did it beautifully!"

Most German young men begin to learn a trade in their teens. The hours are long and the pay is low. Those without home and family have difficulty keeping body and soul together, and often live in crowded hostels where there is little space for privacy or recreation. To many of them, the AFSC center in the neighborhood has become a second home. The Darmstadt Nachbarschaftsheim, in the American Center is typical:

"Regular play hours for the apprentice age boys were established after discussion with them. Every afternoon from 5-7, the 'Schlösschen' is open for ping-pong, chess, checkers and just as a gathering place. A small stove has been installed and the boys have taken the responsibility for keeping the room clean. We have a volunteer youth worker who comes every Monday evening to supervise this play period. On Saturday afternoon the boys have helped to clean and rake around the yard before they play. Sunday afternoon from 2-6 the Center

This is also open for the 'Jugendliche.' Committee members have offered to help in the library during these hours. There are always between 20 and 30 young people here on Sunday afternoon."

Aid to children is practically synonymous with relief and rehabilitation projects of the Service Committee, and so it is natural and expected that one of the most vital of the services of the centers is the kindergarten or day care centers.

In some communities, such as Cologne, the various welfare agencies select children in need of rest and special care (formerly these were very underweight children, now most of them are nervous children often from broken homes). The children spend most of every day at the Center. A marked improvement has been shown after each six weeks' period.

In Ludwigshafen, a crowded and badly bombed industrial city, the kindergarten services are especially for children of working mothers in the neighborhood. The delightfully set-up library and the playground provide cheerful and quiet surroundings. They have recently reported:

"Kindergarten and Children's Library: The number of active readers in the children's reading room now numbers over 160. The small quarters are filled each afternoon to overflowing with quiet and concentrating children. They delight in the small tables and chairs which are just their size."

"The Kindergarten continues to be a real service to the children of working families in the neighborhood. The Kindergarten is gaining recognition in the city as a pilot project. Ours is the only kindergarten which takes children for the entire day. This allows for many advantages. Aside from a nourishing noon meal, and a morning and afternoon snack, the children are given guidance in health habits and body development. It is one of the few places where there is adequate space for play."

Practically every report brings a story of new developments in the programs:

"We have embarked upon two new ventures. Plans for these arose from recent discussions in the unmet needs of people. One concerns the old and lonely people of the neighborhood for whom we plan a weekly afternoon of friendship, leisure and recreation. Friends of the Center have volunteered to take over full responsibility for the afternoon so that we can easily absorb it into our program. These volunteers are so fine and understanding that the venture is in the best possible hands."

"The other new plan concerns the counselling of refugees and also of others who are in special need. Ellen Simon of our new board, who is eminently qualified for this sort of thing, has volunteered to arrange for special counselling hours. We plan

to coordinate these hours with our program for old people that those who must wait their turn can do so in a friendly, happy atmosphere."

In the hypersensitive city of Berlin, the work at Mittelhof has developed in many directions. There is the children's United Nations, there is a regular Kinderhort, a variety of youth groups meet and work together here, and there is a rest home which is now primarily for guests from the Eastern Zone. The Christmas season included 48 separate Christmas parties and programs with a total of about 2,344 participants. The reports point up the problems and tensions of Berlin:

"We at Mittelhof must continually remind ourselves of the background from which participants in Mittelhof programs come. The energy and hope which committee members in particular put into their Mittelhof work becomes almost inconceivable when one thinks of the hopeless and desperate situation from which most of these friends come."

"There is no need to dwell on the tensions which exist between the forces representing the West and those representing Eastern Europe; they had previously found a brief unity in their agreement upon a common enemy. That is past and now the tension rises and falls, dependent upon incidents and factors, the pattern of which is becoming all too well known."

"Probably the most sensitive spot in the world today to the temper of East-West relationships is Berlin: for here is a city literally torn between these two forces. One's first sympathies go out to those inhabitants of the Western sectors because they stand, a little island, entirely surrounded by an area that is controlled and dominated by influences from the East. Yet one must not overlook the fact that the lot of the Germans in the Eastern sector and zone is no less hard and tragic. The course of events is not in their own hands, but only as the occupying powers direct; yet theirs will be the consequences for good or ill...."

"A new attempt was made this month to add a new type of program to the work of the Conference Center. A group of social workers was called together for a week-end conference at Mittelhof which was to be an experiment. Discussions and lectures on the problems of community life and on a specific youth project in the East Zone made up the program. It turned out to be a lively beginning of a new plan. The participants were so enthusiastic about the conference that they immediately suggested a second one to be held in conjunction with the nurses' group discussion. Both this second group and the first one suggested other possibilities for groups to meet regularly: one a group of youth workers from East and West, another a group of hospital social workers."

Integration into the Communities

In the beginning the initiative and resources for the Centers were provided by the AFSC. We did not, however, try to impose the idea on the Germans. The Centers were opened with an invitation to individuals. They continued through participation of individuals, and they are developing through the cooperation with individuals.

Much of the direction and the planning of the Centers is now done by German committees. They are operated by a staff of eight to ten people, two of whom are AFSC people, the rest paid German workers. In addition there are usually a large number of volunteers, anywhere from ten to fifty people, who help more or less regularly in one way or another.

Perhaps one of the most important indications that the centers are fulfilling a vital role in their communities is the increasing amount of actual financial support being received from these communities. In some places as much as 60% of the running expenses are provided locally, in others (the newer centers) perhaps no more than 20% is so provided.

Thus, the neighborhood centers have become joint endeavors, serving people in all age groups.

"In the Neighborhood Center, the trends are encouraging. An atmosphere of trust and friendliness is felt. A sense of responsibility for the Neighborhood Center, for its care, and for its activities is apparent. Additionally, one feels a growing willingness on the part of those he meets here to seek out the areas where work has been left undone, and where need has been passed unattended-- to look for and lead the way in meeting those problems."

* * * * *