The first thing I noticed when I went to the United States was the absence of ruins; the second thing that impressed me was the lack of suspicion between people."

This was one of the many vivid impressions brought back recently to their compatriots by German women who this year traveled and studied in the United States. During a weekend of informal discussions and round-table conferences, sponsored at Haus Schwalbach by the German-American Women’s Club of Wiesbaden more than 200 American and German women talked, ate and lived together, discussing with the newly returned Germans how mutual home and community problems could be solved.

During the more formal part of the program, a baker’s dozen German women—persons who had studied US prisons, education, labor relations, farm extension work and community life as part of the US cultural exchange program—gave their views, interrupted by many questions and interpolations from the listeners. Beginning hesitantly and always with an apology for their knowledge of English, although many of them spoke fluently, these women described customs common in democratic nations as voyagers must have related two centuries ago the new ways of living observed in the Far East.

Perhaps the most confusing aspect of their reports was the inability of both visitors and audience to grasp the size and complexity of the United States. Each visitor had been to America for two to three months; yet several were inclined to think their own experiences and observations were typical of the whole country. For example, when a trade union lawyer reported that the average worker’s salary in the United States is $53 for a 40-hour week, it was very difficult to convince a listener later that a Tennessee cotton picker may not get that amount in a whole month. Isolated examples of high living standards attained in the United States discouraged some as impossible goals to reach in Germany.

In spite of seeing too little too briefly, however, the Germans returned with a rich fund of information and new ideas on how US ways could be applied constructively in their own communities. One visitor suggested that Europeans must forget their own standards and customs in order to understand America.

"In Germany tradition is considered sacred," she said, "but Americans are not burdened with the past. They consider tradition that which tries to limit them."

There was unfelt admiration for social attitudes they had observed in America. One woman summed up her remarks by saying that US life “is so much easier and practical than that in Germany. People have more time for group activities, and they have more time because they cooperate in group life.”

One thought the reason for the high standard of living was the ideal balance between collectivism and individualism. Another reported that she “never before realized there could be such a high percentage of citizens in a country who were interested in what they can do to make the world a better place in which to live.” She was particularly interested that idealism was combined with an attitude of realism or practicality.

How American citizens attain these traits deeply interested all those present. The director of a Frankfurt kindergarten thought she had learned the answer, “The aim of US education,” she observed, “is inner security. This will stand when material security goes. The groundwork for this inner security must be laid in early childhood and it is in the American kindergarten that this element is established. The child is given a sense of belonging because the parents respect the child as an individual. The teacher, on the other hand, believes each child will be a better individual if he is trusted. This attitude of trust remains when the children have grown into adults.”

In an American child’s early school experience the teacher stands in the background, respecting his individuality. “But,” she added, “the child is trained to listen. While one
describes his little experiences, the others are disciplined to listen carefully, to understand and see upon which points they agree. Then, after seeing the points of agreement, they may state the issues upon which they disagree. Agreement and listening to the other person’s opinions thus become an early part of an American child’s training.”

The smooth transition between kindergarten and first grade in the United States is not common in Germany, where kindergartens are separated from the schools and the school system. This transition should be made easier, she believes, in order that what is taught in the all-important first years will mesh together.

For the first time the idea of coeducation is being discussed as a possibility for German public schools. While some women from the audience reported that girls and boys could not concentrate so well or devote themselves so seriously to their studies in mixed classes, others maintained that it was a healthy arrangement for children to be in mixed groups as they would be in later life.

Problems of adult life were also discussed, including conditions in correctional institutions, public health and, in particular, women’s problems in postwar Germany. Until 1933, German prisons were up-to-date, but since then the penal system has fallen back while other countries have gone ahead. "The United States is first in the practice of new, improved ideas," reported a director of a Frankfurt women’s prison.

"We must encourage in Germany the attitude in institutions of helping people instead of punishing them. Inmates must be enriched spiritually if they are to improve."

She cited the advantages of using psychiatrists to classify prisoners according to their abilities and their needs. The parole system in force in the United States was also a plan which she favored for Germany. Although the parole is used to some extent already in Germany, the director pointed out that German prisoners must serve longer before applying for parole and that more careful, understanding help is needed for persons leaving their regimented life for the outside world.

Through the American schools is also developed an understanding of the principles of public health which a returning German doctor thought should be instilled in the German population. One of the visitors remarked upon the excellent friendly relations between US school children and the public health doctors and nurses who came to treat and examine boys and girls at the schools. It was suggested that "a close contact between physicians in the United States and Germany is especially important in bringing Germany up-to-date in medicine and public health."

Above all, the German women gathered at Haus Schwabach were interested in the woman’s place in postwar Germany—how she can lift herself from the drudgery of the ill-equipped home and farm and find time to take an active interest and part in the life of her community and nation. Lacking experience in group activities, the women complained that they were afraid of public speaking and were unfamiliar with the basic principles of group organization.

On the other hand, they showed an awakening sense of responsibility and an eagerness to take part in improving community life. Until the housewife can free herself from some of the old-fashioned time-consuming equipment and routine, however, such community participation was felt to be impossible for the majority of German women.

Visitors to the United States were impressed particularly by the modern equipment made available to women for their work. They observed that most US working women are married, in contrast to those in Germany. They found that US women work both to improve the financial status of the family and because of a pride in accomplishment. One woman remarked that "professional women in the United States look well-groomed; they have personality and femininity along with their careers."

Such a dual role of worker and housewife was possible, they found, (Continued on page 15)