The Sonthofen Case
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When citizens voluntarily pay a tax not required of them, something unusual has happened.

That is just what took place not long ago in the Bavarian county of Sonthofen, a tourist's mecca lying amid rugged mountains, serene valleys, spring-fed lakes and streams in the southwestern corner of the state where the Bavarian border dips peninsula-like between the Austrian Vorarlberg and Tyrol.

Sonthofen's remote natural beauty, far from the smudge and smoke of factories and the hustle and confusion of metropolitan areas, attracted large numbers of prewar tourists from all parts of Germany. They came in quest of tranquil atmosphere and unspoiled nature, and the thrills of summer and winter outdoor sports. They found them all in Sonthofen.

In this respect it differs but little from other communities in the Bavarian Alpenland, except perhaps in its size. The second largest county in Bavaria, it has an area of 2,533 square miles. About 43 percent of its land is too mountainous or swampy to be used even for pasture lands. And of the area fit for use, 99 percent is utilized for grassland only.

Most of the population centers are located in the valley of the Iller, a stream flowing northward from the Allgaeuer Alps into the Danube near Ulm. Chief cities are Immenstadt, with a population of 9,180; Sonthofen, 9,096; Oberstdorf, 8,525; and Blaichach, 2,651. Altogether the county had a prewar population of approximately 50,000. The influx of refugees and evacuees has boosted the postwar population to more than 68,000.

The most important source of livelihood in this vacation land before the war was the tourist industry, with 60 percent of the population dependent upon tourism for its livelihood. Dairying was the second most important source of income, followed by textiles and miscellaneous industries.

War left Sonthofen with a legacy of little cash and an abundance of refugees. As elsewhere in Bavaria, the county received its share of expellees and refugees.

It's a long climb up for tiny Astrit Colross (above, left) who shares a bunk with two-year-old Hans Jahn in a crowded one-room billet typical of Bavaria's Sonthofen county refugee settlements. A new tax and loan scheme is gradually taking these children and others like them from the dangerous and unsanitary conditions (above, right) under which they live. Modern, pleasant new homes will end life in the stable-like shacks (below) for some Sudeten and East German refugees.
The von Goldammers, formerly of the Sudetenland, enjoys games and reading at a typical family gathering in the new housing units at Sonthofen. Right, nine-year-old Eberhard von Goldammer relaxes in his new bed while father reads him to sleep. The Goldammers are one of 150 families who last year found new hope through private, county and ECA financing.

from the Communist-dominated regions of East Germany as well as the Sudetenland and territories put under Polish administration after the war. Hotels, with which Sonthofen had accommodated its tourists, were used to shelter these uprooted men, women and children.

Housing in the small industrial centers was especially cramped. In Immenstadt, for example, two new industrial plants, an undergarment factory and a motorcycle works, employed about 600 residents. The garment mill, previously located in the Sudetenland, employed refugees, for whom housing in the city was impossible. Some of these employees lived at the other end of the county, spending two hours each way traveling to and from their work each day.

In Blaichach, another small industrial center, a cotton mill gave employment to 800 workers. In the city of Sonthofen, there was a factory which produced road-building and other heavy machinery. And in other villages it was the same on a smaller scale.

And so it was in this picturesque and remote area early in 1949 that the mountain folk hit upon a novel tax scheme designed to solve both the housing and refugee problems, as well as to revive the all-important tourist trade. In doing so they also discovered that community action pays off.

If Sonthofen was to see prosperous days again, county officials decided, it had to have hotels available to house its tourists. Tourism, they pointed out, would in turn provide additional job opportunities. Thus, it became apparent that for the prosperity of the region, it was necessary to do something about the refugees.

In EMBARKING ON its uniquely-financed housing project, the citizens organized a housing corporation which planned not only to open up facilities for the tourists in the resort centers, but also to improve the overcrowded housing in the factory towns. And what was important for the individual, workers living farthest away from their factories would be given dwelling priority in the new housing projects so they could live in the town in which they worked.

Sparkplugging the project was County Supervisor Martin Ditterich, a banker. He chose accountant Mathias Lintermann to manage the county’s housing program.

To finance the project, Ditterich hit upon a scheme whereby most of the needed funds would be raised by a voluntary head tax of one Deutsche mark (23.8 cents) for each resident of the county. As an incentive, each community subscribing 100 percent to the project was promised one apartment for one of its refugee families.

The tax plan worked. As a matter of fact, it was oversubscribed by the county’s 68,000 residents, who contributed a total of DM 90,000.

Since most of the apartments were to be built near industrial plants, the housing committee was confident of getting ECA counterpart fund aid for partial financing. This they did, and though ECA usually underwrites not more than 33 1/3 percent assistance for projects of this sort, Sonthofen was granted 40 percent aid. The balance of the money needed was raised through private loans.

Shown are three recently completed buildings for refugees in Sonthofen county. Last year 148 apartments were completed; 181 more are due for completion by year’s end. Each apartment, along with other rooms and toilet, has a fuel-saving living room-kitchen including cook stove.
GROUNDS WAS BROKEN early in April 1949, with a goal of 150 apartments by the end of the year. By the following December the number of finished apartments was only two short of the year’s objective.

Of the 148 completed dwelling units, 14 buildings, containing 145 apartments, were built in three communities. Immenstadt had five buildings with 70 family units, of which three buildings, totaling 42 dwelling units, were constructed with ECA counterpart fund aid. Blaichach received four houses with 59 units, of which three buildings containing 45 units were financed with ECA counterpart funds. In Oberstaufen, a resort village, five structures, containing 16 units, were built with community-raised funds.

Also impressive is the number of additional projects planned for 1950 nearing completion. Thirteen buildings with a total of 181 apartments are scheduled to be completed by the end of this year. Marshall Plan counterpart aid figures even less in the financing of these than in the projects completed last year; only four of the 13 buildings under construction required ECA financing.

Two of Blaichach’s three buildings, housing 36 families, are being built with the aid of ERP counterpart funds, as are two of the three houses providing 46 apartments in Immenstadt. In Sonthofen seven structures providing 99 apartments, sponsored by local funds only, are under construction.

In appearance, the buildings are pleasant two-, three- and four-story structures with apartments consisting of large combination living room-kitchen and one, two or three other rooms in addition to toilet facilities. Each apartment is equipped with a cook stove.

THE OCCUPANT’S RENT amounts to approximately 2½ cents per square foot per month. This varies from $7.15 a month for a one-bedroom apartment to $16.70 for the three bedroom-kitchen unit. This is considered fairly high for the area, but occupants feel that the facilities, plus the easy access to their jobs, compensate for the higher rentals.

Take the Kleinach family, for example. Husband, wife and three children, aged 11, eight and three years, now occupy an apartment at Immenstadt, where Herr Kleinach is employed in the motorcycle factory. They have two rooms plus the dual kitchen-living room. Formerly they lived with a farm family several miles outside of town under cramped and very primitive conditions — two tiny rooms and no running water at a monthly rental of $8.33. They now pay $13.10 rent per month, but consider it well worth it for an apartment which includes cookstove, electric light and water.

The Seiferts, refugees from southern Moravia, also moved into one of the new Immenstadt apartments. There father, mother and grown daughter occupy two rooms, twice as many as when they lived at Vorderberg, nearly an hour’s travel time from the Kuhnert textile mill where the daughter works. Now she is only 10 minutes from work and can spend considerably more time caring for her ailing mother.

Herr Zentgraf, whose family of six also lives at the Immenstadt development, can now spend five hours more at home each day, than he did when he lived in Freundpolz, a remote mountain village. There he had to leave home at five o’clock in the morning for his hour and 45 minute trip by foot and bus to his job. Then, in the evening it was an hour’s wait for the first bus and he did not get home until about eight o’clock, three hours after quitting time. Now he lives a scant five minutes from the factory in which he is employed and is able to go home each noon for lunch.

COST OF THE APARTMENTS depends on the size of the building. The 14-unit apartment houses in Blaichach, for example, cost approximately DM 100,000 ($23,800), of which nearly 40 percent was financed with ERP counterpart funds, 30 percent by voluntary “head tax” contributions of the citizens, and the remaining 30 percent from private loans.

The Housing Corporation is set up as a non-profit organization. Income from rents will be utilized to pay off the loans and maintenance expenses. And as the loans are repaid, housing officials say, the rents will be gradually decreased.

While officials say it will be a number of years before housing conditions in Sonthofen reach the prewar normal, they are encouraged by the progress being made to lick the problems. And though skeptics say it is impossible to establish once again the “norm” of the years 1936 to 1939, members of the housing committee are determined to make the maximum effort.

Outwardly Sonthofen still looks much the same as ever. The Iller still tumbles down the valley past the sleepy mountain towns. Overhead the majestic peaks of the

View of a partially completed housing unit in Sonthofen. Rents in these buildings vary from DM 30 ($7.15) a month for a one-bedroom apartment to DM 70 ($16.70) for a unit containing three bedrooms. Now high by German standards, rents will decrease as loans are repaid. (PRB OLCP photos)
Germany Needs Its Women

WHILE A GROWING NUMBER of German women have become active in politics and public affairs since 1945, the great majority are still inhibited and hesitant about taking part in the life of the community.

These were the basic conclusions drawn by Mrs. Bartlett B. Heard, one of the vice presidents of the US Young Women's Christian Association, in a report to the Women's Affairs Branch, Office of Public Affairs. A visiting US consultant, Mrs. Heard based her findings on three months of visits and conferences with hundreds of women leaders and organizations in the US Zone.

The significance of her findings is underscored by the fact that there is an excess of 7,500,000 women in Germany today, and nearly two-thirds of the voters between the ages of 20 and 40, the most active period of human life, are women.

"In this critical period in history, every government needs all of its citizens, it needs the women and women themselves must keep the fact ever before them and the men," she said. "In Germany where for centuries women have been relegated to a status below that of men, and psychologically conditioned to interpret the role of homemaker in its narrowest terms, very special efforts will have to be made over a period of years before women and men understand that, while the home is a center of a woman's life, it cannot be the boundary."

Mrs. Heard found considerable evidence that German women can be developed into active and responsible citizens. "There is reason to believe that a significant number of able women have overcome their fear to such a degree that they are beginning to work in social organizations again, to organize new groups and to take part in political life," she reported. She pointed out that the concerted effort of many HICOG offices to have women included in local civic groups "have given many their first chance at community service."

YOUNGER WOMEN ARE beginning to take an active part, often forming groups of their own age where it is difficult to work with older leaders. There is more attendance at open community meetings, and more expression of opinion in the joint meetings with men.

She emphasized, however, that these activities of women are exceptions to the general rule, and that "psychologically the great majority of women are still inhibited and hesitant about taking part in the life of the community."

Many are fearful of being identified with anything political and mistrust new women's organizations.

She pointed out that the Communists have trained women speakers spreading their propaganda throughout Germany, and democratic women must be trained to combat this menace.

In solving these problems Mrs. Heard cited many suggestions from German women themselves, such as establishment of speakers' bureaus to lecture to women's groups on topics related to civic education. She also urged that the exchange program be expanded to send more women leaders to America and European countries.

She praised the work of HICOG's Women's Affairs Branch, in pointing out that "even in the short period of time in which this program has been in operation, dozens of women have made the discovery that the democratic way of work is exciting and rewarding, and given a longer period of time, it is fairly safe to assume that enough women can be trained in democratic techniques to prevent a return to former authoritarian methods."