The House That Youth Built

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FOR A CITY which observers said would never rise from the ruins, Pforzheim is putting on an impressive show. Eighty-five percent destroyed in a 1,000 plane-raid, it was called a “city of the dead,” and was written off because of its 10,000-man Nazi Party membership for any future contributions to democracy.

Today, five years after its destruction, a new city has grown up, a living city, an export city, showing the way toward democratic development.

Pforzheim can boast four outstanding officials who not only talk about democracy but constantly exemplify it. These are Dr. J. Peter Brandenburg, mayor; Dr. Will Koenig, first deputy mayor; Richard O. Dissinger, county supervisor, and Gottfried Leonhard, federal Bundestag (Parliament) delegate.

These men have lent their support to the city’s youth program and to the community center built last year.

Dr. Brandenburg staked his political future on building the center at a time when the city’s needs for housing, hospitals, bridges, schools and roads also were of paramount importance.

THE CITY OF PFORZHEIM in 1949 began construction of its Haus der Jugend (House of Youth) at an anticipated cost of DM 90,000. The city could scrape together only DM 60,000, but that sum built the major portion of the house. The balance is not available even now. US agencies such as HICOG, GYA and the local Resident Officer, realizing the predicament of the city, have contributed as much as possible toward equipping the center.

The community center is unique in that it was built by a city for its youth and is being operated by the youth themselves. The idea of such a community center previously had been virtually unknown in Germany. The open-door policy for youth is a new thought, and having youth develop themselves without the strong hand of political parties, churches or sport leaders is revolutionary to German practice.

The question that startled and befuddled neighboring cities was — how could a bombed-out city like Pforzheim build a house solely for its youth?

The House of Youth can be credited to the persistent and courageous efforts of the youth themselves. In 1947 they presented their problem to the Military Government Officer; from early days he encouraged and supported their effort. The youth knew what they wanted, and lacked only the know-how to accomplish their goal.

For two years the young people met regularly; they schemed and plotted and even camped on the doorstep of the mayor each Saturday morning, trying to find a solution to their problems. When the House of Youth opened on Dec. 10, 1949, it represented a great victory for the youth, whose untiring efforts had won city officials to their cause.

THE COMMUNITY CENTER did not simply rise out of the rubble. It took intelligent thinking and planning by city officials in which the Resident Officer gave moral encouragement. Dr. Brandenburg, from his sick bed, directed the young people’s efforts. Dr. Koenig persuaded a hard-pressed Stadtrat (city council) to vote for the House of Youth. The council, torn by the insistent demands of the population for housing, twice rejected the young people’s plea, but finally gave in.

Today, these same city councilmen are proud of the center, and proud they voted for its construction. Even the opposition forces — the church, which did not want to lose control of the youth, and the political parties, which wanted to direct them along party lines — today are giving it support. Officials in all quarters are beating their breasts and taking credit for this far-sighted achievement.

The Pforzheim Community Center has attracted to the city many outstanding personalities who are interested in learning about it first hand.

Among them were Dr. James Morgan Read, head of the Education and Cultural Relations Division; Dr. L. E. Norrie, of the Exchanges Division, HICOG; E. G. Chapman, Office of Public Affairs, HICOG; John Boxer, Office of Public
Indoor Activities

Youth preparing gay Carnival masks, hats, decorations for the pre-Lenten season under GYA director’s supervision.

Youngsters learn to make paper dolls—another of the numerous diversified activities in the House of Youth.

Groups get together in the evening to practise the intricate steps of a folk dance — sometimes even the Samba!

A dramatics group hard at work reading up on roles prior to rehearsals of play for “Week of Youth Activities.”

Ballet classes, popular with many members, are sponsored by GYA and are paid for by the Heidelberg GYA office.
Affairs, HICOG; Col. J. Wilson, leader of the Boy Scout movement in England; Mrs. Margaret Johnson, Cleveland Press correspondent; Lt. Col. L. B. Cole, EUCOM GYA chief, and many others.

Pforzheimer's House of Youth has been an astonishing success. It has no regular membership, but maintains an open-door policy which invites all youth to attend. It has taken youngsters out of crowded homes and brought them into a wholesome atmosphere where they can receive guidance from interested adults. It teaches them to live with one another in a tolerant manner. The House of Youth is a success because it is a German House of Youth, German-inspired, run by German youth.

The infant institution is completely financed by the city administration, which hires a youth leader and attendant and pays all bills incidental to upkeep. But this is far from adequate, as the city's means are limited. Happily, the facilities of GYA are available to fill the gaps; GYA has instituted a program which is worthy of the utmost praise. Major Everett T. Reniker, leader of the Heidelberg GYA, has brought the organization's work into the highest esteem through his local work. It is equally encouraging that GYA leaders and programs have been wholeheartedly accepted by youth and adults.

Axel G. Nielsen, director of Youth Activities in Stuttgart, has also given generous support to the House with a donation of DM 3,400, as well as through the Ruit School, the HICOG-sponsored school for training youth leaders.

Building the House of Youth is only a first step. What is of far greater importance is what goes on inside the building's walls. The House program is shaped by an executive council of four youth leaders, elected from the County Youth Committee (Kreisjugendausschuss). This executive council further divides its work through sub-committees for cultural, social, and organizational activities. These committees draw support from all participating youth.

Actual caretaker or program manager is Guenther Gim, a 27-year-old German youth who is employed by the city and who has developed excellent qualities of youth leadership. Rolf Meyle, paid by GYA, is his assistant. Members of the committees take an active part in managing various House activities.

While the House is operated by organized groups, it remains open to all unorganized elements. In fact, latest statistics show that of the 3,200 young people who have visited the House of Youth more than 80 percent belong to no youth organization.

One of the outstanding contributors of support from the outside is Mayor Brandenburg, who gives generously of his time and ability to work closely with the youth and to furnish the necessary guidance. His popularity is great.

The House of Youth has become the focal point for all youth activity in the city of 55,000. Accessible to all, the House is near a school and students make use of its facilities while waiting for classes or during off-hours. Young people constantly play chess, checkers and table tennis during the day. In the evening, through the assistance of GYA, part-time instructors teach ballet, dramatics and sewing.

In addition, the youth are planning a "Week of Youth Activities" in which they intend to show their elders what they have learned. They are now sponsoring a soapbox derby. Public forums are regularly scheduled to which outstanding lecturers are invited. Movies depicting life in America are regularly shown.

In short, it can be said that within the community center the youth are learning democracy by example and not by dry definition. In this mission, the mayor is setting the example and his leadership is gratefully accepted.

The Youth have a multitudinous number of problems to settle, but at least they are learning to work with one another. In their struggle for self-development, they find support and assistance from all American agencies. This assistance has been generous and whole-hearted and wherever possible, they are giving much-needed material assistance.

A well-planned community center embodies all democratic aims and objectives in that it brings several groups together in a tolerant atmosphere where one listens to the voice of the other. A community center is a means for attracting unorganized individuals to a central location where they can be reached by a planned program. It permits city officials to show an active interest in youth activities. It provides the atmosphere in which youth can learn to think for themselves.

And so it appears that the "city of the dead" is not at all dead; that the city of 10,000 former Nazi Party members still has the nucleus for democratic development. Through their own courageous efforts, youth have shown the way to the older generation. Occupation officials have helped with guidance and with material assistance. Together the seeds of democratic development have been planted and now have taken root.

A new life has been started in Pforzheim — a democratic life that looks into the future with hope and vision. +END