Power of Open Forums

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Last month the tiny community of Muehlfeld, in northern Bavaria, decided that it needed a fire truck. One afternoon most of the town’s 500 residents assembled in the marketplace to inspect a truck which their community council had decided would fill their needs. That night a town meeting was called. After much discussion the people voted to buy the truck, and the contract was immediately signed.

Such town meetings have become one of democracy’s most important footholds in rural Bavaria. Following a pattern being used with similar success in other US Zone states, the New England institution is now an accepted part of community life in many Bavarian towns. No one can accurately predict how long town meetings will remain as democratic instruments after US Resident Officers are withdrawn from the counties. The continual increase in the popularity of these meetings, among citizens and officials alike, however, suggests that the idea may take root and be a stepping-stone to increased German interest in public affairs at higher levels.

The northernmost county in Bavaria, Mellrichstadt, is typical of the state’s rural areas, with some additional problems added by its geographical location. Based almost entirely on agriculture and lumber, Mellrichstadt’s economy has suffered acutely from the interzonal border separating the county from its former principal market and labor outlet in Thuringia, now part of the Soviet Zone. Thus today a high percentage of the 25,000 inhabitants are extremely poor while unemployment and public relief figures are high. Because of its relative isolation and poor transportation connections with the west, the rosy economic future predicted for Western Germany via the Marshall Plan seems still remote to residents of Mellrichstadt.

For such an area the primary interest of the people is obtaining the necessities of life. Politics, especially beyond the local level, is of little concern or interest to them. The problem of which candidate for the Bundestag should receive their vote is frequently solved for them by the local priest. This attitude and political apathy made the people an easy target for early Nazi political maneuvers, accompanied as they were by promises of an easier life for the worker and more money for the farmer. Similarly this attitude has made the American task of selling the importance of political responsibility by the people more difficult than usual.

Then came the town meeting idea. Actually town meetings or Bürgerversammlungen were not unknown in Germany. Since the 19th century it has been the custom to assemble after Sunday morning church services to hear the mayor read the latest government directives. But in the American-introduced version, something new was added: the element of open discussion by all citizens on all local problems, plus the concept of community action.

In the Bavarian towns power had long resided in the mayor and his council, selected periodically by the people and then left alone to rule. Now the people began to realize that if they didn’t like something they could do something about it—or at least have an opportunity to convince their neighbors in a public discussion that something should and could be done.

At first the people misunderstood the idea. When the local Military Government Officer or the mayor explained that free speech was now a guaranteed right, to be used by each citizen, it was customary to hear a few individuals launch into long tirades against the authorities, American and German. Such tirades were usually devoid of any element of truth or constructive intent. Any semblance of free speech had been so long suppressed by the Nazis that it was somewhat natural for some of the people to rebound toward the opposite extreme of irresponsible malignation of authority, while others merely sat and listened, refusing to express themselves.

It was thus necessary to explain that free speech also held certain implied responsibilities for the person exercising it; among them, that criticism should be responsible and, where possible, constructive.

Initial meetings in many communities were held only at the insistence of and in the presence of the Military Government Officer. In other towns, however, mayors

Several of the county’s mayors discuss plans for a series of town meetings in the office of the Mellrichstadt Resident Officer. The speaker is Dr. Werner May, Mellrichstadt’s Landrat (county administrator). (Photo by H. Raab)
welcomed the idea. Many of both groups have now made the town meeting an apparently permanent institution.

Prior to the end of 1948, the county of Mellrichstadt had held less than 10 of the "new style" meetings. In the first 10 months of 1949, the 38 communities in the county held a total of 140 such meetings. Each town has held at least one, and several have held as many as 10.

But the criterion in this case is quality, not quantity, and the quality has been high and constantly improving. The number of citizens attending and taking part in meetings has become a majority of the adult population in most towns, with youth participation also increasing. People are speaking their minds, and the results are encouraging. Community work projects of all kinds, with large-scale public cooperation, have developed in dozens of cases where difficulties previously seemed insurmountable. Community housing construction, road repairs, a new water line or solution of a local political squabble, are reported almost weekly by one or another of the 38 mayors—all coming as a result of town meetings.

Another of the early problems in establishing periodic town meetings, the status of the community council, has also been generally solved. Objections to the whole idea of town meetings—and there were many objections from many quarters—frequently centered around the idea that community councils had been democratically elected to deal with local problems, and that public meetings would reduce the prestige and importance of the council.

The answer to such objections was that the town council should be interested to hear the desires of the people it represents, and that its job would be easier and more free from criticism if the people expressed their ideas before the council took action. Now in most of the communities of the county, the community council insists on a town meeting in advance of any important decision it is called upon to make; and the leading advocates of and participants in the meeting are often council members.

The attitude of most local officials was expressed recently by one newly-elected mayor who had just held his first town meeting. He stated: "We will definitely continue to hold town meetings regularly. I am a farmer, and I expected to have a difficult time doing the job as mayor. But these meetings help me a lot; they give me a direct contact with the people, and make my job easier."

The town meeting is not advertised as a cure-all; and there are still a few officials who are disbelievers and prefer to issue orders to the population rather than risk criticism in a public discussion. And too, it may be argued that a town's decision to build a new bakery or to hire the local shepherd is not of great consequence. But the importance lies in the fact that such decisions are arrived at by uninhibited public discussion, and that a constantly increasing number of citizens are taking active part in public affairs.

From this comparative enthusiasm on the part of a generally politically apathetic area it would seem that there is a strong possibility that the town meeting as a public institution has taken firm root in Bavarian soil. It is also possible that the interests of these people may in time progress to the higher levels of public affairs, and that thereby Germany may have a government "by the people and for the people." Meanwhile the town meeting is a foothold toward this end.

New British Information Center Opened in Frankfurt

The channels of German contacts with the latest developments in western art, letters, science, politics and economics are being broadened daily through information centers, Dr. James Morgan Read, chief of the Education and Cultural Relations Division, Office of Public Affairs, HICOG declared Feb. 4, at ceremonies opening the new British Information Center in Frankfurt.

The center, located at 48 Friedrich Ebertstrasse, was formally opened to the public by Sir Gordon Macready, economics adviser to the British high commissioner.

Speaking in German, Dr. Read asserted that it matters little whether the lectures, films, books and discussions available at such cultural centers are American, British or French. Their importance, he emphasized, lies in programs pointing toward the development in Germany of a democratic spirit, which suffered in the period when individual thought and intellectual freedom were suppressed.

"These institutions represent one of our most important objectives in Germany," Dr. Read stated, "that of restoring German art and intellect as an invaluable contributor and beneficiary in western democratic culture."

Dr. Read hailed establishment of the first British Information Center in the US Zone for its cultural assistance to Germans. Other such centers are to be welcomed at Munich, Stuttgart and elsewhere, he said.