Youth Learns Government

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PROOF OF A GROWING DEVELOPMENT among the German people of a new civic consciousness and the value of civic activities has been shown in several communities where "Youth Government Days" have been held with surprising success. Such a project, staged recently in the Lahn River city of Giessen, in the state of Hesse, is further evidence of a German awareness of the need to acquaint young people with the workings of a government which they will one day take over.

Although spadework for Giessen’s "Youth Government Day" was done by John G. Gough, US resident officer, and his staff, the planning and execution of the entire project was carried out by the city’s German officials, youth group leaders and the young people themselves.

Although an effort to stimulate civic interest among youth had previously been ventured in several towns in the county of Giessen by choosing one or more boys and girls to spend a day with the mayor, the activity went virtually unnoticed by most of the county’s mayors and the general public. "Youth Government Day" on a large scale was thus introduced to awaken city officials to the importance of teaching self-government to the community’s youth. It was planned for countywide Youth Week.

WHEN THE IDEA WAS BROACHED to Giessen city officials and youth group leaders, there was a divided response. Some were enthusiastic from the beginning; others saw no point in such an activity. Following further discussion of German youth problems, however, the value of a "Youth Government Day" was put across.

It was decided that the head of every municipal office would be replaced for an entire day by a boy or girl, and a special committee set about the task of listing offices to be occupied and selecting students from the six city high schools for the governing job. Both local newspapers cooperated by consenting to youth editors.

Eventually, 75 boys and girls were chosen to fill 35 public offices, municipal and county, including the US resident office, and the two newspaper offices. In the morning of the big day, the group assembled in the city hall, where Mayor Otto Engler outlined city government and city officials met their young deputies and escorted them to their new positions-for-a-day.

On a tour made during the morning and early afternoon, newspaper reporters and photographers found the office heads and their deputies busy attending conferences, listening to visitors, studying maps and weighty files, and doing all the things that occur daily at the various offices. The young police commissioners went out on an alarm with the traffic accident squad; their colleagues in the homicide bureau studied evidence; the youthful housing officer went on an inspection tour; the boy youth commissioner looked into many homeless youth cases; and the deputy mayor peered over the mayor’s shoulder while discussing with the director of the city power works an involved plan designed to support this important public utilities plant.

Resident Officer John D. Gough explains many problems of office to, 1-r., Renate Richter (deputy for day), Students Schenk, Schmidt, Kauth. (US Army photo)
Although not many of them were given so much responsibility as the "lady resident officer," who even answered telephone calls, the impression was that the officials did their best to give the young people a thorough insight into their jobs in the short time they had.

At 5 P.M. THE OFFICIALS and their "deputies for a day" met again in the city hall. Mayor Engler asked them to tell of their observations and discussed with them the many aspects of city administration, the functions of the city parliament, and the general topic of German youth.

In a frank discussion with the head of their city the youth spoke openly of their problems and opinions and were answered openly by the mayor. All of them agreed that administering a city is a job much more involved and certainly quite different from what they had imagined. Said one young man: "I have seen that the many reproaches made to state and city government that they do not take care of youth are unjustified; a lot is being done at the Youth Office, as I have observed." The mayor's appeal to the youth "to be always eager to learn" concluded the day's activities.

Called a "quiet revolution" and covered with a picture story by the local newspaper, the youth government day was also given publicity in a radio program recorded by the Southwest German radio station three weeks later. Speakers at the panel discussion recorded in the Giessen youth center were some of the chief *dramatis personae* of the youth government day: Mayor Engler and the city police director, as "dethroned" office heads; Gerhard Kegler and Maria Knapp, city youth workers, and Gerhard Werner, representative of the city youth organization, as members of the committee which made the preparations; and five of the youthful public servants for a day.

An introduction by the youth workers who thought it a successful continuation of the boys' week held previously was followed by a lively interplay of questions and answers. When asked what she had found most remarkable while she served in the US resident officer's job, 17-year-old high-school student Ilse Schenk said: "I was struck by the remarkable difference between the resident office and most German offices. In the former I found much freer relations and no noticeable distance at all between boss and employees. I noticed that especially when Americans came into the office. I don't believe that such frank manners are possible in German offices."

A prospective student of medicine, who had been at the city slaughterhouse, remarked that he was most impressed to see how cattle were killed and how strictly the many sanitary regulations were observed. A judge-to-be and a prospective newspaper reporter said they were happy to have had an opportunity to "snoop around" in their future professions.

Said Police Director Wilhelm Duesing in conclusion: "I am all for such youth government days, and I am very proud that so many students wanted to go to the police. That, to me, is enough proof they're interested in public affairs. I would like to see students in my office again soon — but this time for a whole week." +END