Youth At The Helm

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THE YOUNG PEOPLE of Pforzheim, on being given the opportunity, showed such keen interest in the running of the city government that their demonstration belied the characterization by many critics of the youth of postwar Germany as "disinterested," "apathetic," "helpless," "hopeless," "lacking in idealism," "uninterested in government" and "without appreciation for the positive values of life."

Realizing the need for a comprehensive program for young people, the progressive Wuerttemberg-Baden city of 60,000 instituted a study of the local situation. The city council hit upon the idea, for years popular in America, of turning the city administration over to the young people for a day to give them a working knowledge of how a city is run and what are some of the problems confronting city officials.

An article in the Information Bulletin* encouraged Dr. J. Peter Brandenburg, mayor of Pforzheim, and municipal officials to launch the experiment. Mayor Brandenburg declared, "I wish to judge its merits." The results were gratifying.

Timed for Youth Week, held in Pforzheim in mid-June under the sponsorship of the County Youth Committee, the youth government day focused the attention not only of the young people themselves but also of Pforzheim's entire adult population upon the importance of encouraging active participation in community affairs.

THE DAY STARTED OFF bright and early on June 16. Promptly at 8 a.m., 42 boys and girls between the ages of 17 and 21 reported for work in the various city administration offices and in the US resident office. They included representatives of the city's eight schools and the County Youth Committee, elected by their classmates.

* See “Youth Help Run City for a Day” (Bremerhaven) in Information Bulletin, January 1951 issue.
Pforzheim's young city officials closed busy day with a discussion in which its regular officials participated.

by secret ballot. The job of their selection was an excellent one; every young officeholder turned in an outstanding performance.

Adult officials cooperated completely in the day's activities, each going to considerable effort to explain the workings of his office to his young deputy. Much of the success of the project was due to their interest.

At the outset, the youngsters learned that the duties imposed upon city officials are not easy to carry out. For instance, Heiner Wittarin, the youthful mayor, remarked at the luncheon table: "I was under the impression that the mayor reported at 9 o'clock, signed a few papers, perhaps made a speech or two and drove home. I was amazed to find that every minute of his time is scheduled — that there are dozens of telephone calls, letters to be answered, conferences with other officials and interviews with citizens regarding a host of matters."

Before the day was over, he had come to the realization that the responsibility of solving the multitudinous problems which befall a city approximately 85 percent destroyed in the war is a tremendous one.

IN THE REGISTRAR'S OFFICE, a young girl officiated at a wedding, going through the entire marriage ceremony. The only thing she did not do was sign the necessary papers. The boy who took over the construction office attacked his duties with a serious attention to detail which won him the glowing praise of the official he replaced. In the resident office, a pretty brunette found that every minute of her time was taken with the manifold duties relinquished to her for the day by HICOG's representative in Pforzheim.

All offices closed at 5 p.m., and the young officials then moved to the city hall to consider the budget, an important item on the agenda of the city council. A lively discussion of the 125-page budget brought forth a number of positive suggestions from the fledgling officials; regular city councilors sat nearby to answer questions and to explain the "hows and whys" of the budget figures. A youth forum was arranged several days later, at which certain of the young people's ideas were probed, and in which both the youngsters and adults took part.

Public reaction to youth government day was most encouraging. Each of Pforzheim's four newspapers wrote detailed articles about it; people were heard to remark that the activity constituted an unusual innovation, a definite break with tradition. The vast majority considered the project "progressive, well worth the time expended, and most enlightening." Die-hard conservatives and a few businessmen, however, expressed the opinion that "city officials have more important duties than to play games."

Youth should be trained for their jobs, they said, and then given the opportunity to exercise them.

OFFICIALS FROM THE neighboring counties of Nuer- tingen and Bad Mengentheim came to Pforzheim to observe the youth government day, and papers in the two communities evinced a keen interest and pleasure in what they had witnessed. The Armed Forces Network radio station at Stuttgart broadcast a report, and Southwest Radio in Baden-Baden made recordings of numerous speeches.

All the young officials were thrilled with their jobs and gratified with the cooperation they received from the authorities, and it was commonly agreed that the project gave them a wonderful start in political enlightenment. Only two took a slightly dim view — the heads of the forestry office and of the local jail. The one was not too keen about spending a day in the woods, and the other found the city jail "a little too confining."

Appointment of the young city administrators was only part of the Youth Week activity. Another highlight was the opening of the new youth center, called the "House of Open Doors," to signify that it is open to all youth, regardless of race, color, creed or organization. In operating this center, which cost the city more than DM 120,000 ($28,560), Pforzheim young people are learning to manage their own affairs with guidance from city authorities and two youth leaders.

All eyes were focused on "His Honor the Mayor" as Pforzheim City Council convened for open discussion.