Democracy Stalks the Library

By ROBERT BEHRENS

Director, US Information Center, Stuttgart

An American, let loose in a German library for the first time, would doubtless be more than a little puzzled about procedures. His habit of browsing among the shelves, pulling out an occasional volume, and maybe choosing three or four, would do him no good there. Patrons in German libraries never see a book until the librarian fetches it for them.

By using the closed-shelf system, the German library takes better care of its books than of its readers’ minds. Under this system, a man could request a book from the librarian and be turned down cold—all because the librarian has decided the patron hasn’t the education, the background—and perhaps the reading habits—which warrant his borrowing it. It sounds far-fetched, but it happens.

To the American way of thinking, this is deliberate suppression of information. But the German librarian will argue that it is his duty to prevent wear and tear on books. And he will say that the closed-shelf system necessitates fewer library employees, since there is less chance of stealing. In a limited sense this is true. But the basic question is: what is the function of a library? Is it a dignified mortuary for the preservation of books? Or is it a center to which people freely come and freely take away the books they wish to read? The latter definition is, of course, the one Americans have chosen and practiced.

The US Information Centers, and their appended reading rooms, carry this philosophy into Germany. The response, in terms of the number of patrons, has far surpassed the number totaled by similar German installations. German readers have run into something new, and they like it.

Presented with these facts, German librarians are prone to say: “Of course, but our audience is more select than yours.” This is shallow rationalization; perhaps the educational elite are the only group with courage enough to tackle the German system. But the elite turns up at the Information Centers, too, along with persons in much lower educational brackets.

As a result, there is competition, of a friendly nature, between the German and the Information Center libraries. But there are indications that the US library idea is making inroads on the German.

In Wurttemberg-Baden, some of the town libraries are giving the open-shelf system a try. Without benefit of school-developed prejudices (town librarians are usually not graduates of library schools), they have taken their cues from the Information Center reading-rooms which are established in 20 towns within the state. They report surprising success. Reversing the claim of their counterparts in the large cities, they are finding there is no such thing as a monopoly of interest in books by one class. They are finding to their amazement that the commodity of books, like the ubiquitous commodity of the refrigerator in America, finds more customers as it is made more easily available to the public.

The influence of Information Center reading rooms is well illustrated in the town of Leonberg, Wurttemberg-Baden. There the American library began with two Army foot-lockers full of books. Its success was immediate, and eventually it was given headquarters in a small room for low rental by the city’s mayor. The continuing popularity of the library convinced the mayor that the townspeople really believed in the American book-dispersal system. Although the town already had a library of its own, a proposal was made that the US reading room be given larger quarters and that the town library be incorporated with it under the American system. With the mayor signifying his willingness, the idea was tried. Attendance doubled and trebled. Today the townspeople can read the books they want, when they want them.

The books are on open shelves in other areas, too. In the town of Bruchsal, badly damaged in the war, both the German and American libraries are run by the American library representative.

All librarians in the US Information Center reading rooms are Germans. In most cases, just one person is needed to handle the job. In July, a peak month, 76,000 persons visited the American libraries of Wurttemberg-Baden. In all cases but three, these libraries were operated by one person. This persuaded German librarians that the open-shelf system was feasible from a practical point of view. And as a result, other German librarians in other towns began to seek advice on how to convert their old systems to the new. Bad Mergentheim, a resort town, adopted the US system, and so did Tauberbischofsheim in the northern part of the state. As time progresses, the picture is changing in all 20 of the towns where there are US reading rooms. But for some people, it is still not moving fast enough.

In Backnang, a small industrial town, the readers themselves went on a strike to hasten the process. They declared they would not use the town library until it instituted the open-shelf system. This is the type of public opinion pressure found all too rarely in Germany, but it illustrates that free information is worth a strike and that a good idea is bound to catch on.

Information Center Book Loans Grow

Approximately 60 town libraries and 15 schools, universities, hospitals and other public institutions of northwest Germany have been supplied, since May 1948, with books and publications through a large-scale book-loan program sponsored by the Eremen US Information Center. To date 27,000 books have been distributed.