Stars Over West Berlin

By MAURICE E. LEE
Staff Writer, Information Bulletin

If Hans Muehle has his way, West Berliners will be seeing stars by the millions in the months to come. Hans, a student of astronomy, was one of the first to realize that the results of war had left the western portion of Berlin without an observatory. The famed Treptow Planetarium had become part of the Russian sector and the well-known astronomical facilities of Potsdam were in the Russian zone outside Berlin.

As Hans and his few associates had little desire to study astronomy with political connotations, the small group of stargazers appealed for help to West Berlin's Revenue Office for Landed Property. Hardly a Mount Palomar but still a starting place, the rubble strewn remains of an old German army officers' club in the industrial section of south Berlin were eagerly accepted by the youthful astronomers.

In the fall of 1947 the work of cleaning up began and by spring of the following year the first telescope had been installed. Today three telescopes are situated in the courtyard of the old Kaserne while a 12-inch telescope, to be the largest in the collection, is under construction. In the meantime the basement of the ruined building finally has yielded a workroom for 40 persons, an office with a small library, a photographic laboratory and a gallery for poster displays.

Every Thursday evening approximately 30 persons, mostly students of astronomy, gather to listen to Mr. Muehle's lectures. The group has named its small installation the Wilhelm Foerster Institute after the well-known German astronomer, who, in 1888, was a co-founder of Berlin's first "people's observatory," the Urania. It is in July 1951.
the spirit of this scientist’s desire to bring astronomy to the man in the street that Hans Muehle and his associates have dedicated themselves.

Although not a professional scientist and lacking much of the necessary equipment for a well-functioning observatory, Mr. Muehle by his persistence and deep love for astronomy has brought his dream of a people’s planetarium for West Berlin before the city government, which has donated some funds for his present lectures. The Office of the US High Commissioner has given the institution furniture for the lecture hall. The telescopes have been presented by friends or constructed out of scrap metal. And the group is in contact with the American Association of Variable Star Observers, which furnishes much needed data and information.

Models owned by the Institute include one of the planet Saturn with its ring system; a tellurian demonstrating the movements of moon and earth, a chart detailing the distance from earth to moon and an astrolabe demonstrating the rising and setting of the sun, moon and stars.

A special interest of the Institute’s small staff is its photography classes, which give the students an opportunity to record their discoveries high in the skies. These photographs have helped greatly in illustrating the lectures given for visiting students as well as the regularly scheduled talks to the organization’s members.

In 271 days since the first observation in August 1949, a total of 7,063 celestial observations were made. Pictures were taken and measurements recorded. In between clearing rubble and constructing equipment that first hectic year, Mr. Muehle gave lectures in 47 youth summer camps and 66 youth homes. Since its inception the Institute has taken the story of astronomy to 12,000 young people.

It may be a long time before West Berlin has something equaling Treptow or Potsdam, but increased activity at those two observatories has been reported, rumoredly in anticipation of Hans Muehle’s results. Consequently, says Mr. Muehle, it’s possible that the so-called Cold War may be extended to the moon.

An important part of the Wilhelm Foerster Institute’s work is its effort to bring knowledge of astronomy to all phases of West Berlin population through media of lectures. Various pictures of moon serve to illustrate the lectures. At left are photographs taken at the Foerster Institute. Right, a photo from Mount Wilson Observatory, California.

Sound knowledge of astronomy is necessary to plot stars’ position on graph at each reading, as demonstrated here to two earnest young Institute enthusiasts by teacher Muehle. The Institute’s interest in young members stems from a desire to make youthful West Berliners avid devotees of the stars and supporters of a permanent city planetarium.