THE WIND FLAPPED the stained cardboard loose from the windowframes, letting in spasmodic light to add to what seeped through cracks in the tin-covered roof. Gradually, on that summer day in 1947, the details of the attic that was to house the YWCA neighborhood house became discernible. Heaps of broken tiles, smashed furniture, soggy mattresses, broken china and plumbing fixtures lay about on the floor. The house-finding committee of the newly-formed board of directors appraised the advantages this building could offer: it had a roof, and walls, such as they were, and there were only a few missing steps in the stairway.

The American liaison office for the borough of Neukoelln had scouted every vacant building in the borough, but none could boast such a combination of luxuries!

What was required to make it livable — materials and workers — would have to be found. As word got around in the neighborhood that there would be a new youth club in this building, groups of young people came knocking on the broken door to ask permission to join. The only price of admission was willingness to set to work to put the space into shape for club meetings.

Temporary quarters were arranged in a basement room in the same building which could be used on Sundays and Mondays. By the end of the second week, 50 boys and girls had joined up and started work on the materials available: scrap wood and broken furniture given by the American military, and old X-ray plates donated by the US army hospital. All through that winter of 1947-8 groups met all day on Sunday and after their school or work on Mondays, repairing furniture and cleaning the X-ray plates which gradually replaced the dismal makeshift cardboard windowpanes.

AMERICAN FRIENDS OFTEN VISITED, and while everyone scraped the black slime from the X-ray plates, they discussed the questions about which the German young people had such insatiable curiosity: education and politics and family life in America. Occasionally British, Danish or Swedish friends were in-

It's sunny but cold outside and this little girl (above) knows that inside is the warmth of friendship and hospitality that has made the Neukoelln Center one of the outstanding neighborhood houses in Western Berlin. Since 1947 this YWCA-sponsored institution has served the community, the name of which it bears, by providing clothing (left), food and recreation. (Photos by Hannes Rosenberg)
Youthful members of the Neukoelln house played a major part in bringing about its inception. A Youth Council works in conjunction with Adult Council and the two play an active role in the self-governing procedure used in the center. The contrast in ages that profit from and work for the project are shown in these photos of children (right), leaving after games and elderly members (below) dining.

invited to speak, or one of the group read aloud to the rest, and always there were games or folk dancing or singing to leaven the earnestness.

Fun was a rare luxury in those days, and one seldom heard laughter in the streets of Berlin. The serious-faced young German students would break off an evening of work and sober discussion to play even simple games with the abandon and glee of children.

The first group of elderly neighbors — four little old ladies — came in one evening to ask if this was where they could get a cup of coffee from the Americans. When they learned that there was no coffee, but that the mayor of Neukoelln was to speak that evening, they reluctantly stayed and listened with interest to his history of how Neukoelln had grown from the village of Rixdorf to become one of the largest boroughs of Berlin, with a population of nearly 200,000 — as great as the city of Hanover.

The four women returned on other evenings to watch the groups at work and help where they could. They enjoyed being around young people, and the group liked them so well that they staged a special Christmas party for elderly people in the neighborhood.

Gradually, slowly, the center began to take the shape which had been projected by the board of directors. This board, consisting of 11 German men and women from various walks of life, chosen for their interest in neighborhood work, came together first in August 1947. They helped and advised the German YWCA staff, and the representative sent by the YWCA of the United States, on all plans and drafted a statement of purpose and constitution for the new neighborhood house.

The first plans for the center had been laid in 1946, when the German YWCA had asked the YWCA of the United States to assist in rebuilding the work in Germany which since 1933 had been carried on within and in spite of the strict limitations imposed by the Nazis.

As one of three projects of assistance, it was decided to set up a demonstration service center in Berlin to experiment with new methods of group and community work. A grant from Church World Service to the YWCA financed the start of the project. It was not to be a transplanted American pattern, but was to be adapted to the peculiar sociological conditions and the needs of the community and developed along modest lines that could be continued by the German YWCA as soon as financial support from abroad was no longer possible.

Neukoelln was chosen as the most likely borough in the US Sector of Berlin because it had the greatest density of population, the highest proportion of youth, and more than its share of delinquency, crime and broken homes.
Old US Army x-ray plates were scraped during early days of the YWCA Neighborhood House to provide windowpanes for the original temporary wooden structure. Mrs. Anthon (left), author of article, is assisting in operation.

The board of directors laid out the task of the neighborhood house along the lines of centers already established by the American Friends Service Committee in Germany, in the tradition of the settlement movement stemming from London's Toynbee Hall, founded in 1884. Until the Nazis forced its closing, Berlin had had an influential settlement, founded in 1911, and affiliated with the international settlement movement. The idea of neighborhood work of this kind was therefore not new. The workers and members of the earlier settlement in Berlin who came forward to help in Neukoelln understood how to work democratically, and have been a real influence in the development of the work there.

THREE MAIN PURPOSES for the neighborhood house were laid out by the board of directors in Neukoelln. First, it was to provide a meeting place where people of all nationalities, walks of life and ages could develop the habit and practice of self-government. When one has really tasted active participation in planning and carrying out projects of his own choosing, the sheeplike obedience to the commands of a leader have little appeal to him. The neighborhood is the seed-bed of practical citizenship, and the job of the neighborhood house is to draw out and cultivate good citizenship—neighborliness and fair play.

Youth should not be singled out for special attention and privileges, as in the Fascist and Communist programs. All members participate according to their interest, and share responsibility according to their competence. Through responsibility they develop the independence of spirit which is fundamental to democracy.

The process of learning self-government is slow and painful. At first in Neukoelln, groups were unwilling to take any initiative in planning. They trusted their adult leaders unquestioningly, and shrank back from making decisions themselves. It was sometimes necessary for leaders to fail deliberately in carrying out plans, in order to persuade groups that they could do better themselves. The first youth groups met regularly for nearly a year before they could be brought to the point of electing officers. The groups trusted their own elected officers so reluctantly that at first they were chosen for a term of only a month. This was healthy, since these officers often understood their jobs as being "little dictators."

Adult leaders needed to work intensively with each elected officer to interpret to him how to draw out group decisions, instead of directing affairs single-handedly. At the same time, it was often necessary to encourage members to rebel against dictatorial methods of club officers, to make them realize that the rights and opinions of all members must be carefully considered.

THE YOUTH COUNCIL, on which all of the 30-odd clubs whose members range between the ages of 13 and 25 are represented, and the Adult Council, on which the four mothers' groups and the Heimkehrer (returned prisoners of war) are represented, help to decide all important as well as lesser questions of policy, government and program in the center. They assist in planning all "open evenings"—concerts, lectures, movies and parties for the neighborhood. Last year youth groups earned expenses for 30 members to take a two-week jaunt around the Bodensee (Lake Constance) and plan a similar project this year.

The principal project of the Youth and Adult Councils last year was the laying out of plans for the new center building to be constructed on an adjoining lot and financed by a grant from the HICOG Special Projects Fund. The Youth Council itself planned and carried out the ceremonies for laying the cornerstone of the new building on Dec. 9, 1950. As a special honor to Maj. Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, former US commander of Berlin, who represented US High Commissioner John J. McCloy, the Council inducted him as an honorary member.

The second purpose of the neighborhood house is the development of a creative social ethic which applies as well to nations as to neighborhoods. To replace the aggressive and ruthless philosophy, the suspicion, fear and hatred fostered by National Socialism, thecenter is working toward the "City of Friends" of Walt Whitman, where everyone belongs and shoulders his share.

No medals were ever given for the volunteer workers at the neighborhood house because the work itself re-paid richly in companionship and some sense of accomplishment, and because nearly everyone who comes is a volunteer worker in one way or another.

IN THE EARLY DAYS, when the center needed a bathtub and no bathtub could be bought, a search was made for some tub suspended from a ruined building which might be rescued and used. Finally the Army scrap disposal yards yielded up a giant bathtub said to weigh half a ton. The jubilation at finding it was somewhat dampened by the question of how to get it up to the attic of the center. The five boys who had volunteered to bring it home were no match for its weight.

A quick call for help was sent up and down the street. Five sturdy neighbors dropped their work and spent the next four hours inching the mammoth tub up the narrow stairway to its destination. They were rewarded at the top with a cup of hot chocolate and the promise of a
Margaret Day Anthon, wife of Carl Anthon, Higher Education officer, Berlin Element, HICOG, came to Germany in 1947 as one of two representatives of the Young Women's Christian Association of America. Following three months as consultant in Youth Activities with Military Government in Wurttemberg-Baden, she was assigned to Berlin to work with the German YWCA.

bath as soon as the tub was in operation.

Subsequent crises have been met by equally willing volunteers. The readiness of neighbors to help build the center was matched by that of the Army, US occupation officials and members of the American community in Berlin whose moral and material assistance brought into actuality the neighborhood's desire for a meeting place. One of the persistent worries of the Neukoelln housewives was how to clothe their families. One mother painstakingly unravelled 13 pairs of old rayon stockings collected from relatives, in order to knit her child a pair of socks, working by the dim candlelight which must serve the whole family on long winter evenings!

The mothers' club of the new neighborhood house then decided to help each other by putting old clothing in shape to be used by such families as most needed it. Appeals for gifts of clothing from the United States were met by generous bales of discarded "old look" garments. With these, the mothers' club set up a thrift shop, and invited at first 100 of the neediest families in the neighborhood to come and select one garment each. In return, families were asked to help with the work of the center in any way they could, with time or with money.

Fathers and young men came in to wash windows or help repair furniture. Mothers and young girls volunteered to put more garments in shape, or to help with housework in the center. As more gifts of clothing steadily poured in from America, the volume of work done by the thrift shop increased, so that 30 women volunteers were needed to help with the distribution, and the funds donated provided a substantial portion of the budget.

The thrift shop policy was decided democratically by the women's club members who also shared in determining how the funds were to be used. When, in the spring of 1949, the work was moved into new and larger quarters in a barracks allocated by US Occupation Authorities, the thrift shop earnings were used to provide central heating to replace 10 old smoky, time-consuming coal stoves.

THE DAILY PROBLEMS FACED by the Neukoelln neighborhood house since its early days have gradually changed. No longer are three groups huddled together in one small room to share the luxuries of heat and candlelight. No longer, when the telephone rings, does it have to be taken to pieces and laid out on the stove to dry, and quickly screwed together again before communication is established, as was necessary before there was glass in the windows. With prospect of larger permanent quarters on its present site, the neighborhood house building will no longer require such a large proportion of the woodshop's time just to keep it in repair. However, its long-range problems of how to provide strong democratic leadership in its neighborhood, and of how to secure independent financial support, still exist.

Democratic self-government requires the most intelligent skillful leaders it can get—leaders who will live and work and play with their groups, and try to help them find the best solutions to their needs and problems.

The problem of financial support for neighborhood houses in Germany requires development of the tradition of private subsidy, since these centers function best when they can act independently of sectarian or political control. Business and industrial leaders must be interested to help support the work in neighborhoods, and gifts and subscriptions from private sources must be obtained, since even the most industrious work by members cannot bring in sufficient to support more than a small percentage of the operating cost of the center.

The 12 new neighborhood houses founded in Germany since the end of the war—six in Berlin and six in Western Germany—have all been started with financial assistance from abroad. The broad and enthusiastic interest they have awakened point up the value of what they can accomplish. The International Federation of Settlements, and other international groups to which these neighborhood houses are affiliated, offer sturdy moral support, but financial support must eventually rest on the German communities where they are located. +END

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23

INFORMATION BULLETIN