This is a story of people — average people — who see in mutual understanding and cooperation a basis for real and lasting peace. Other communities, too, can proudly point to their own achievements. Still others which have been lax may see in this story a pattern which they may apply to their own community affairs. The idea is ageless — its application requiring only the determination of citizens to know and understand each other, and to make a real effort to bridge the sea of misunderstanding.

Democracy Comes to Dachau

By WILLIAM J. CALDWELL
Chief, Public Relations Branch, OLC Bavaria

They used to say in the Bavarian city of Dachau that Americans and Germans there got along just fine as long as each stayed on his own side of the street.

Some said the feeling of animosity stemmed from reminders of the concentration camp of the Nazi era, which made the name Dachau synonymous with evil.

Other thought the term "animosity" a bit strong. They were inclined to say it was rather a matter of distrust between conqueror and conquered.

Still others, and in the beginning a very few, thought the whole trouble revolved around mere misunderstanding, or rather total lack of understanding.

As one Dachau citizen put it: "We knew the Americans wouldn't like us because we were, unfortunately, residents of a city in which a notorious concentration camp had existed. The sins of the Nazis were passed on to every man, woman and child here. So we felt the easiest way to get along with the Americans was to keep out of their way as much as possible."

Americans and Germans did just that for the first few years of the occupation. Occasionally, when they did come together, tempers flared, harsh words were flung and, sometimes, someone was pushed around. Each such incident was duly investigated by American authorities with punishment meted out to the offenders. Usually though, neither participants nor witnesses were exactly sure what had started it all — except that Americans and Germans "just happened to get together."

A strained atmosphere existed up until late summer of 1950, when two Americans — one a US Army officer, the other a HICOG resident officer — were assigned to posts in Dachau.

Herman Frankel, of Brooklyn, N.Y., the resident officer, and Lt. Col. Vincent J. Conrad, of Hollywood, Cal., the Army officer, almost immediately sensed that something was wrong when they took up their duties in Dachau.

Mr. Frankel said government and community representatives who visited him in his office during his first few days there were "cordial in a reserved way."

"They seemed to want to be friendly," Mr. Frankel explained, "but at the same time they were distant. They reminded me of people who acted unfriendly because they felt the people they were dealing with expected them to be and, accordingly, were on their guard."

Colonel Conrad, too, was mystified by the attitude shown by the Germans with whom his work as commanding officer of Munich Military Post's Service Center in Dachau, brought him into contact.

"It wasn't something you could actually put your finger on," the amiable colonel asserted. "It just seemed to be a situation born and exaggerated as the postwar years rolled by."

Mr. Frankel and Colonel Conrad both decided to look into the matter to determine causes and possible solutions to a seemingly hopeless problem. The fact each speaks fluent German, is conscious of his responsibilities in creating better relations between Americans and Germans, and is gifted with a personality conducive to encouraging and fostering the desired relations, helped their tasks greatly.

The resident officer's investigation disclosed one pertinent factor: that while relations between Americans and Germans were anything but friendly, relations between various community interests in Dachau were not much better.

"It seemed that each group — religious, educational and so on — worked just among itself," observed German and American youngsters in Dachau are learning at an early age the value of tolerance and friendship. They know no nationalistic differences in the classroom. They are truly democracy's seedlings.
Mr. Frankel, "Civic spirit was sadly lacking with no one apparently making any effort to bring about a working arrangement within the community as a whole."

Shortly after assuming his duties in Dachau last August, Mr. Frankel hit upon an idea to better relations not only among Germans and Americans but among the Germans themselves. He invited various representative citizens of the city to his office one day and suggested a community chest-type Christmas fund raising drive.

"In other words," the youthful American proposed to them, "instead of Catholics and Evangelicals, girls' and boys' schools, and the various charity organizations in Dachau carrying out individual Christmas programs for your needy families, why not get together and have one overall community-wide campaign?"

Dachau, like many other German communities, traditionally had never before attempted such a bold undertaking. But a few were impressed and their enthusiasm kindled the interest of others. Some 37 German groups, as well as representatives in Dachau of the Office of the US State Commissioner for Bavaria and of the US Army, joined in bringing Christmas cheer to more than 3,000 needy families and individuals, or one out of every eight residents in the little city of Dachau.

Colonel Conrad and members of his command gave the Christmas drive committee their unequivocal support, providing transportation facilities whenever necessary and in other ways assisting the committee. To help increase funds for the drive, he further arranged a symphony concert presented by members of the faculty of the US Army in Europe Bandmen's School, located at the Service Center in Dachau, with the wholehearted approval of the EUCOM chief of Special Services. All the proceeds were turned over to the committee.

The Community-Wide Christmas Committee helped greatly also in bringing about a community spirit that Dachau had sadly lacked. Even some who had originally scoffed at such an "unorthodox scheme" have since opened their eyes to the potential advantages of civic cooperation. Some are now exploring the prospect of making the committee a permanent communal institution which can be the springboard for other civic enterprises.

Already the various sectarian welfare groups are coordinating their efforts. Recently, a city welfare official called at the office of a private welfare organization to discuss a mutual problem. Hitherto such a visit was virtually unheard of in Dachau.

One needy Protestant woman with seven children living in one of Dachau's many refugee camps was among the recipients of the Christmas packages. Her plight moved a Catholic priest, who assured her of further assistance from his organization.

"The Christmas committee," declared one community leader, "showed us the way toward neighborly cooperation — something we had neglected in the past. I myself have lived in Dachau for about 25 years and never thought for a moment I would see the day when Catholics and Protestants, for example, would ever get together to work out their problems and objectives."

Meanwhile, Colonel Conrad also concentrated his attention on the question of improving German-American relations.

One day while strolling through the Service Center's grounds he noticed a group of ragged German children grouped outside one of the buildings eagerly peering through the windows. He looked, too, and saw that their intense interest was focused on some American children joyfully roller skating on the rink within the building.

The colonel checked, learned that the German children had no similar skating facilities. Consequently he directed that the rink be made available to German as well as American children in the community. And when winter rolled around, German children were permitted to use the Service Center's outdoor skating rink, which previously was reserved for American children only.

Earlier it was discovered that the city had no kindergarten facilities for children of the Service Center's employees, who are housed in their own community within the center. The Service Center had one for children of its American personnel. A study of available facilities and teaching staff in the American-run kindergarten disclosed these already were overtaxed. As an alternative, it was decided to have one built for the German children, and to make sure they'd have opportunity to mix with American youngsters, interested American parents were granted permission to enroll their children. Many did. The Army further provided the same school bus service for the German children, as it had for the American youngsters.

The American Parent-Teacher Association at Dachau welcomed the mixed class idea as a means of creating a spirit of comradeship between children of the two nations.
“In the past,” said one American parent, “our children had little if any opportunity for contact with German children. Now, however, thanks to the Army’s interest and initiative, these children can study and play together and are realizing that basically they have much in common. Language was a barrier at first, but in a few weeks the American children were picking up German and the German children were learning American. Most important, though, they were learning to be friends.”

The Parent-Teacher Association furthermore invited German parents to visit the kindergarten to see the class in action. The visiting parents were happily impressed for two reasons—one, that their children and the American children were at last playing and studying together and, secondly, because American school officials had permitted the parents to observe their children in the classroom.

“In Bavaria,” explained one German parent, “parents can visit the classroom only with the explicit permission of the ministry of education. In our schools the teacher is the boss, and unfortunately, most of the teachers prefer not to have parents visit the class. They seem to think that parents seek only to interfere. The Americans on the other hand try to foster parental interest in the school. I think that is an excellent way of bringing the school and community closer together so that one may better serve the other.”

Colonel Conrad further helped break down German-American prejudice last New Year’s Day, when he invited German civic representatives to a party in the Dachau Officers’ Club. That was another Dachau precedent. And he set still another when, after speaking briefly in English, he spoke in fluent German, reciting the beloved German ballad, Lorelei. It made a big hit with the Germans, several of whom commented later that they never had expected an Army officer to invite them to one of his parties, least of all to speak to them in their own language.

Colonel Conrad said American members of the Service Center’s staff, both officers and enlisted men, were greatly responsible for helping to create better U.S.-German relations. He especially singled out the work of Maj. E.J. Summers, Jr., Service Center executive officer, who, as Special Services officer and German Youth Activities officer at Dachau, has contributed much toward better understanding between youth of the two nations.

Mr. Frankel felt that Dachau was handicapped in its efforts to create a cooperative community atmosphere because there was no meeting hall available to serve as a cultural focal point for community planning. Furthermore, the city has no indoor gym. Its only theater, located in a building 300 years old, went bankrupt some time ago, and its only cultural center, if you can call it that, was an old beer hall.

Consequently, he and Colonel Conrad joined forces with interested Germans to provide Dachau with its own community center. A town meeting was held. By getting together to air the problem, interested civic groups were able to reach agreement on a youth center. Later they expanded their plans into a community center which would have public baths, a combination theater and gymnasium, and meeting halls available to all groups in the city, regardless of religious views.

Through the help of the Resident Officer, American funds are being obtained to help defray the cost, and Colonel Conrad promised assistance in the form of lumber and trucks to haul the building materials to the site of the proposed structure.

Mr. Frankel said it is hoped that ground for the community center will be broken this month.

Today in Dachau there is a new spirit. Americans and Germans are now becoming friends, are learning to know each other, to understand each other and to work and play together. Since Dec. 14 last, troop incidents have declined from the previous three to five a week to none.

Said Mr. Frankel: “At last we’ve been able to open the door to better community relations, among Germans themselves and between Germans and Americans.”

“Yes,” agreed Colonel Conrad, “and now that it is open, we must keep it open. And we can if each of us will continue to try to understand the other fellow and try to be friends.”

INFORMATION BULLETIN