Bridgebuilders in Straubing

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America is making new friends in Straubing, and the American Women’s Welfare Club is doing the friendship job. By giving of what they have to help those in need, the American wives in the Bavarian city have demonstrated a person-to-person version of American policy that caused the editor of the local newspaper, the Straubinger Tageblatt, to break out his handsomest compliments.

Persistence and an honest desire to help overcame initial suspicion. (Some of the townspeople, for example, thought the help given by the Americans came out of occupation costs or Marshall Plan funds until the editor told them otherwise.) Now it looks as if the Americans have beaten the risks of the touchy business of being helpful. They appear, not as Ladies Bountiful, but as friends.

Two years old, the club had its first big chance to step into public view last autumn, when a fire destroyed the homes of 31 Germans. The Army wives found food and clothing to tide them over. That made its mark. A few months later, the club made Christmas real for all the orphanages and the two refugee camps in the vicinity. Day to day help is running at a level of 60 blankets (value DM 600) per month in winter, bundles of clothing and shoes, and enough food packages to feed 30 families every month the year round.

Organizational help and advice come from the local HICOG Resident Officer, John T. Lawrence, and his secretary, Miss Gretel Over. Requests for help are handled in cooperation with the German County Welfare Committee. But the ladies insist on investigating cases of need themselves. Twenty-five to 30 requests are checked and filled in an average week. That doesn’t leave much time for bridge.

While the American women do the work, they cannot carry the financial load alone. Money help has come from churches, organizations and individuals in the United States, but the chief donor is the American GI in Straubing, who has become accustomed to dipping into his pay for the good of the club — and liking it.

The club’s example has already struck sparks among the Germans. After the fire of last autumn, a German woman who had heard of the club’s help for the homeless insisted on giving one of the two chairs in her one-room dwelling to a victim of the blaze as a start toward some new furniture. A man donated some valuable old cups that had been in his family for more than 100 years.

The club members were happy when they heard about that. They hope it’s a sign that the editor of the Tageblatt was right when he said that the work of the club had opened the way to understanding and working together. They hope that they are what the editor called them — bridgebuilders.

Fire victims pick out shoes and clothing for size from the donations of the American Women’s Welfare Club. Thirty-one Straubing families lost everything in the blaze.

At Christmas party sponsored by American Women’s Welfare Club in Straubing, John T. Lawrence, Resident Officer for Straubing County, chats with refugee children.

Gratitude is easy to read on the faces of these homeless fire victims who received gifts of food and clothing from Americans in Straubing — and Germans they inspired.