Young Farmers Return

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In US Zone farm homes, Brethren Service Commission and HICOG state commission offices, it was time to take stock. The first batch of HICOG’s young German farm exchangees returned from the United States with saddle shoes, letter sweaters, impressions and plans. At banquets and conferences, sponsors and travelers added up the experience, blueprinted for the future. Brethren Service Commission, the Stateside sponsor, even sent 19-year-old special delegate Rodrick Rolston to talk to returnees and their families and report on his youth-to-youth findings.

Everyone seemed to be satisfied with what the boys and girls had brought back. Out of experiences in nearly all the farm states of the union, out of home life with a host farm family selected by the Brethren Service Commission, out of US high school classes crystallized the awaited conclusions:

Life in America is freer, friendlier, happier — at least for young people.

Americans are no different from Germans, have no hate for former enemies.

Co-ed schools, mechanized farms, absence of strip farming, use of father’s car by high school students made hits with most of the visitors.

Nearly all liked the American schools for the informal atmosphere and practical approach, but insisted that German schools were “harder,” ergo, better, at least for “classical education” what the youngsters termed.

Most found something special to praise or criticize. One boy was relieved to find that “the average American does not want war.” A girl admired American separation of church and state; another deplored the lack of religious training in the schools. Most were critical of race problems, while the more objective noted progress being made.

But the leitmotif in all returnee comments remained the surprise of democracy experienced. “The tremendous
freedom, the elbow-room," one boy called it. One girl,
in a magnificently laconic summation of a year, declared:
"I've learned to understand American people, improved
my English, made friends and come closer to God."

Some of the exchangees spoke hopefully of returning
to the States; others rolled up their sleeves for Germany.
Said one girl: "Somehow my visit here in the country
of 'unlimited possibilities' challenged me to go back to
my own country and strive toward a higher goal."

To strengthen this resolve among the returnees, Maj.
Gen. Charles P. Gross, state commissioner for Wurttem-
berg-Baden, spoke encouraging words to a banquet group
of 44 at Stuttgart's Hohenheim Agricultural College.
His plan:
1. Decrease drudgery of farm work for your mothers,
sisters and your sweetheartas well as for yourselves.
2. Increase the interest and participation of your rela-
tives and friends in the political, social, cultural and
economic conditions surrounding you in Germany and in
the world. The horizons should reach beyond the village
and its yearly fest.
3. Show that the time and the money to accomplish
the above can be gained by following modern methods
in agriculture and in home economics.
4. Prove that the closest and most intimate contacts
must be maintained between the farm and the research
agencies of school and ministry.

"When the German farmer reads and gets out his
pencil to figure instead of doing what his father and
grandfather did, when he thinks rather than drives him-
self and his family, there will be a happier and better
life on the farm," General Gross declared.

RETURNEES APPLAUDED, proceeded to organize a com-
mittee to coordinate their efforts and to maintain con-
tacts across the ocean. Organization of 4-H Club groups
of farm youth in villages was labeled a high priority task.

Another group of exchangees, already back home a
while, met in Kassel to share readjustment experiences.
Rudolph Stahl had encouraging news. He has already
introduced some outstandingly new ideas. For one thing,
he has brought Holstein cows onto the farm to increase
milk production. For another, he is building for use on
his farm a special hog feeder similar to the one he built
in agriculture class in America.

People of the community are a little pessimistic about
his work, and he knows they are watching him with a
great deal of curiosity, but he works on anyway because
he believes the new things he learned about agriculture
in America can be transplanted here and can improve
Germany's own agriculture.

His Stateside sponsoring family keeps him up to date
on improved methods and sends him latest information
in the agricultural field. Rudi, like most of the students,
has shown a great deal of care in his introduction of
new ideas since his return. They say: "I am just a small
person and cannot make many changes. But by my
actions people will see what life in America did to help
me, and it is only slowly that these ideas can be intro-
duced to the community and become a part of it."

CHRISTA STOBER, OF HESSE, made a good adjust-
ment in the States. She lived in Michigan, studied
chemistry, English, mathematics, government and home
ecoanomics at school. During her stay she gave approxi-
mately 35 speeches to clubs, church and school groups.
Her cheerful personality, her maturity gained by hard-
ships as a refugee, won her many friends. When she re-
turned she worked first in an office, later began her
studies in dietetics.

A letter she wrote to Miss Verna Rapp, representative
of the exchange program for Brethren Service Commission
in Germany, points up dramatically one of the main
problems facing the returned student:
"Here in Wiesbaden I had the opportunity to attend
meetings of all kinds. We are here just about 45 ex-
changees of all ages and occupations. We together built
a group with the help of the resident officer. Besides I
went to the America House and to some American church
clubs. I did this in the early days after my return. Because at that time I felt the American people would be interested in me, the same way they were in the States. But I found out that most of them don't care very much about a German.

"People I met in the States and meet here again are just entirely different. My personal thought is and always will be: There may be more than 1,000 students going over to the States and may come back as enthusiastic as we did and here in Germany it won't help very much, as long as the Americans, who live over here are not an example of their own country."

GERHARD WEISER, a student from Wuerttemberg-Baden, is a good example of one who has found many of the experiences he learned in America useful to him now that he has returned. He has helped form 11 rural youth groups, basing them on the 4-H and FFA pattern he saw in the States. From January through March he has attended 76 evening meetings of rural youth.

In connection with this work, and cooperatively with the Jugendverband (Youth Association), he arranged for the rural youth in Heidelberg county to have opportunity to participate in a judging contest of chickens and cows, held April 8, in Heidelberg. The idea for this contest also came from similar contests he saw in America.

Gerhard works on these projects for DM 80 ($19.04) monthly — semi-voluntarily. He lives on a small farm not far from Heidelberg, and helps on the farm in his spare time. His many activities there are only an extension of the activities he found time for in the States. He gave 52 speeches there to farm bureaus, church groups, high schools, Lion's clubs and youth groups, and as proof of what the experience gave him, he wrote:

"I learned to know the Americans as very fine people. I learned to know that wars between different countries are not only unreasonable, but foolish, because I made in America — in the country with which my country was at war just a few years ago — the very best of friends very easily. I learned to love America and its inhabitants. I learned to know what it means to live in a democracy."

Just as Gerhard has found a big place for himself in the life of the community to which he has returned, so also has Johannes Haese, a refugee student from Bremen. Johannes works as assistant to the leader of two youth groups in the Evangelische Lutheran churches of Bremen. In one group there are 60 boys under 14 years of age, in the other are 15 boys under 18 years of age. A camp is planned for the smaller group this summer, to teach these boys more about their country and about nature. Finance is a problem because the boys come from working men's homes and economic resources are very limited.

Another project of Johannes' began when 25 to 30 packages, worth DM 2,000 ($476), came to him at Christmas from the people of Oregon whom he had learned to know during his year in America. From these packages he and his parents prepared 82 smaller packages, distributed to every child in his father's school, and to some parents.

"How thankful I am that I could show to the people here that the Americans too have a desire for peace and that they want to help where help is needed," Johannes said. He has come back to find himself more at home in his community than before, and even though his school work takes a great part of his time, still he finds a place in his busy schedule for community activities.

NOT ALL THE STUDENTS find their adjustments so easy when they return home. Two letters which came into the Brethren Service office stress the difficulty of adjustment for Ilse Fuercih, a refugee student from Bavaria. On Jan. 28 she wrote: "You see, I live here in a very small town near the Russian border and have a pretty tough time. Prejudice and jealousy are so great that I get often so discouraged, that I give up fighting it. In school I hear all the time remarks about my stay in America and I am telling you they are not nice ones..."

Another letter on March 5 is more hopeful: "...I have never been asked to talk. I don't think there is much interest and I don't feel as much a part of the community as I did before. The longer I am back, the better I get along with people. They forget that I was over there and..."
slowly see that I haven’t changed and that their prejudice was unreasonable.

"The last two Sundays it was the first time I was with my old girl friends again. We went skiing, but never talked one word about America. Now they ask me more to be together with them again, because I am not so proud as they thought... You have to consider that I live as a refugee in a small town near the Russian border, that I am a Protestant in a Catholic region, and that I am just a girl. Maybe that clears the situation a little bit..."

In order to give Ilse some encouragement and support, the Brethren Service Commission invited her to an Easter work camp near Kassel. Her contribution was good, and the participation with people sympathetic to her problem gave her a new sense of her capabilities. Contact with the students is always good, the Commission feels, and in the case of students like Ilse who have had so many difficulties in their adjustment, it is a positive need.

WITH THIS IN MIND a program of visitation has been developed, whereby all the homes of students who are in the States at the present time can be visited. Brethren Volunteer Service personnel, under the direction of Miss Rapp, visit in the homes, take pictures to be sent later to the student in America, and seek to find any difficulties that have arisen that can be referred to John Eberly, Brethren Service director of the program in America. Mr. Eberly, in turn, contacts the student in the States and works to adjust any misunderstandings or problems.

Good relations are thus developed, both here with the parents, and in America with the student and his sponsor. The background gained has proved valuable in helping students to readjust to life in Germany when they return.

Visitation is not the only means of contact with the students. A newsletter, Echoes, published each six weeks, is by, for and about the teen-agers. All student correspondence is given immediate attention, and the student is encouraged to write about his problems. Whenever possible, Brethren Service staff members visit in the homes of the returned teen-agers.

RENATE HANDKE, OF LOWER SAXONY, unlike many of the students, has retained much of her German conservatism since her return. Her adjustment in the States was excellent. She fitted well and maturely into her foster home when the mother of the five small children died. Now back in Germany, she is most enthusiastic about her year in America, and she has written to the Brethren Service Commission a letter that is a testimonial to the value of the program in terms of helping to build better human relationships:

"But there have been other moments, and many more of these, when I have been feeling a great, indescribable love in my heart for all those I learned to know and, most important of all, to love and to understand, to be able to think of them as of people with great ideals, which didn’t exist just as ideas in their minds but as something which was brought into action, first of all. This living picture of Christianity I shall never forget.

"I learned to know my foster parents and lots of other people as great persons, so impressive I can’t but strive to become like them, although it will be a constant striving to a faraway, high goal, never entirely to be reached... Several times I said to people in America that I believe the future first will prove the real and everlasting value of our being together.

"I know, I can feel already, how strong this tie of love is which binds us together... Now, don’t you think, that the fact of loving and understanding each other has been worth a whole year’s stay in America?"

The Brethren Service Commission thinks so. So do the US officials who administer the exchanges program in Germany: James R. Keim, OLC W-B, Dr. Trude Gunther of HICOG Cultural Exchanges and Dr. John F. Mead, chief, Cultural Exchanges Branch, OLC W-B. The program will be accelerated. Before long, the returnees here can look for reinforcements.

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