Hesse’s Elder Statesman Views Life in America

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The American system of social insurance is a practical one, with practicality in all walks of life being one of the most eye-catching faces of American life for the European visitor.

That was the observation of Christian Stock, minister president of Hesse from 1946 to 1950, upon his return recently from a two-and-a-half-month visit to America at the invitation of the US Government.

Mr. Stock was particularly interested in political and social research work. He commented: “While we in Germany — although we lay claim to founding the whole social insurance system — have made almost no progress with it in the last 25 years, the Americans have kept abreast of the times in their social insurance. From the standpoint of any employed person, the American system is more generous and healthier than the German.” He found that private welfare work plays a far greater role in the United States than in Germany. “It is a matter of course in America that everybody with a large income makes his regular contributions to the welfare organizations.”

The greatest impression received was what he called the smooth and effective functioning of the American government and the relationship between government and people.

“Ours is a hollow government in comparison,” Mr. Stock said. “It looks like a government and makes noise like a government, but in truth is merely an operating system.”

The Social Democrat deputy in the Hessian legislature praised the American standard of living which enables the average citizen to own a car, to be the best-dressed and best-fed national in the world and even to travel in other parts of the world occasionally.

Although Americans theoretically like to take life easy, Mr. Stock said, he admired the industriousness of the people. “I have seen practically no loafing and idleness. Even people who are so well-off that they don’t have to work for a living do something just to make themselves useful in some way,” he said.

Mr. Stock noted “an atmosphere of genuine good neighborhood” everywhere and felt there was a complete lack of conceit and arrogance among the people. “Titles don’t mean a thing to Americans,” he said, “while in Germany every little public servant proudly uses his office title as often as possible, and even feels offended when not addressed by it, although he may earn less money than a worker. Nobody is less respected in the United States for doing an ordinary kind of work or for changing from brain worker to manual laborer.”

The 67-year-old Hessian elder statesman, a native of Darmstadt, near Frankfurt, made his across-the-continent tour by train and car with stops in Washington, Baltimore, Los Angeles, Buffalo, Detroit, Chicago, Denver, Salt Lake City, Reno, San Francisco and New York, where he was a guest of General Lucius D. Clay, former US military governor for Germany. He was given a free hand in choosing his itinerary and was accompanied only by an interpreter. Almost half of the time was spent in Washington and Baltimore, where Mr. Stock did research work.

The remainder of the period he traveled, made inspections and general studies of the American way of life and went sightseeing. He visited the Ford automobile works in Detroit, conferred with the governor of Michigan, lived with farmers in the country, was an honorary guest at a session of the San Francisco city council and spoke before the Bureau of Old Age and Security Insurance in Baltimore, Visits to Niagara Falls and some of the United States’ finest national parks rounded out Mr. Stock’s 75-day itinerary.

When asked whether he had brought any negative impressions back to Germany, the ardent Social Democrat pursed his lips to a “No,” then changed his mind and sighed, “Just one — that I did not have this opportunity to view America 30 years earlier.”

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