Bonn - The National Village

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To a person arriving in Bonn for the first time, the city seems to be preparing for a World's Fair. Wherever he looks, he sees buildings shooting up, streets being repaired and sewer pipes being replaced; even old men sitting in the park have an uneasy look, as if they half-expect the park to be subdivided right under their feet.

But with all the hustle that accompanies the transition of Bonn from Beethoven's birthplace to Federal Capital is mixed a reminder that the adjective "provisional" precedes the new title. With the hectic construction work is combined a sense of impermanence, as when road-shoots put up a circus tent. Thus, the headquarters of the Office of the US High Commissioner has been specially constructed to be turned into a hospital later on, and the parliament building itself, once a Teachers' college, can become that again - bigger and finer, of course - if the legislators should move out.

This sense of make-shift does not mean that the old Frankfurt-Bonn rivalry is still rife. On the contrary, though SDP members still chortle "I told you so" when Bonn plumbing rebels or the streetcars are jammed, most Germans have come to accept Bonn, at least for the duration.

When they refer to it as Bundestag (National Village), it is more in affection than in anger.

For their part, the natives of Bonn have made their peace with the new arrivals without actually taking them in. Accustomed to garrisons over the centuries, the Bonn-ers seem to look on the federal officials and their families, the lobbyists and hangers-on, as something akin to a new garrison. It would be wrong to suggest that they dislike the new arrivals; rather, like Wilhelm Busch's St. Antonius, they seem to say, "Du störst mich nicht in meiner himmlischen Ruhe." (You don't disturb me in my heavenly calm.)

The relationship is purely one of proximity - like soap-suds floating on oil. A local reporter told me that the Bonn-ers accepted the news that their city had become the federal capital with indifference. "The out-of-town reporters who had come to describe the scenes of wild rejoicing had to invent the scenes themselves," he said. In order to understand this remarkable indifference it is necessary to understand the Bonner, and to do that, it is first necessary to understand the city and its history.

Bauedeker Bonn

Bonn lies at a sort of hinge in the landscape of the Rhine, just at the point where the vineyards, the hills and the castles cease, and the flat plain, stretching north to Holland, begins. The city itself is set between the broad ribbons of the Rhine and a high ridge bearing the romantic name of the Vetsenberg (Venus' Mount). In present-day Bonn, the Vetsenberg is a nice residential district, and it is possible to enjoy a fanciful moment of Tannhauserish unreality by closing one's eyes and hearing an elderly gentleman with derby and cane ask the streetcar conductor for "Venusberg round trip."

The Venusberg is climatically important to Bonn as well as to Wagner admirers, because it lends off the cold northerly and westerly winds. The resulting climate is mild, moist and somewhat stuffy, with a good deal of fog.

Visitors to pre-parliamentary Bonn were most often interested in catching a glimpse of the romanesque Munster (minster) and the house where Beethoven was born, before catching a steamer for Cologne or Mainz. A 1933 guidebook still ranks those sights above the government buildings. It reports as follows:

Bonn (130,000 inhabitants), also capital of the Federal Republic, enjoys world fame as the home of Beethoven and a famous university. The birthplace of the great composer is visited by thousands every year. The romanque Minster, the ducal palace (now university), the Poppenburg palace, the Bundeshaus (government house) on the Rhine, the government building and the famous museums (Zoological Museum, Kunsthalle) - until recently Federal Chancellery - etc., etc., all contribute to the character of the city.

The cemetery is also interesting, though not, as one disgruntled outsider assured me, "the most interesting thing in Bonn." Composer Robert Schumann is buried there and also Mathilde Wesendonk, who was one of Wagner's girl friends. Beethoven, of course, is buried in Vienna.

Bonn's History

Over the years, Bonn has been a garrison for Roman legions, Prussian regiments and the Grenzschutzpolizei. Left, large sections of Bonn were destroyed during war, creating a serious housing problem which has been tremendously aggravated since Federal Republic's capital was established there three years ago. Center, bicentric Catholic Church atop Kreuzberg contains 28 holy steps which processions are made every Friday. Right, towering cathedral in heart of city.
Old gun, one of many historic monuments in Bonn, is located in beautiful park overlooking the Rhine River. On opposite side is small town of Beuel, stretched along the river bank.

Row of typical turn-of-the-century houses built when Bonn was quiet university town and home of retired professors and civil servants drawn there by property-tax exemptions.

Group of Bonners out to enjoy sunny day sit beneath statue of famed German poet, Ernst Moritz Arndt, who is among German greats buried in Bonn's carefully-kept cemetery.

(Border Police). The Romans built forts; the Prussians, the University of Bonn; and the Grenzschutzpolizei has built a bridge over the Sieg River on the other side of the Rhine.

Probably the most important influence on the city was that exercised by Prussia in the century between Napoleon's fall and the last Kaiser's. As subjects of the Prussian Rhine Province, Bonn's comfortable, Catholic, wine-drinking citizens were ruled by the stern and Protestant Prussians. One of the palaces of the dukes, the Palais Schaumburg, has been done over as the Federal Chancellery; another, the Poppelsdorf palace, is still empty.

The most important contribution of the Prussians to Bonn was the university. Another heritage of Prussian rule is the proverb: "The Prussian cow grazed on the Rhine, was milked in Berlin and fertilized East Prussia."

From the collapse of the Prussian empire in 1918 until the coming of the Federal Government, Bonn sank back in a 30-year Rip van Winkle sleep.

The University

Even today, the university overshadows — in the minds of true Bonners — the importance of the government, and is, as a matter of fact, the principal industry of Bonn. Founded in 1818 by King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia, the "Uni," as Bonners abbreviate it, has thrived in the moist, Catholic air of the Rhine valley, to become the largest university in Germany, with approximately 6,500 students and nearly 300 professors and instructors.

Although it has the reputation of being a strongly Catholic school, Bonn University can count among its distinguished sons such eminent and dissimilar free thinkers as Carl Schurz and Friedrich Nietzsche. Neither of these stayed in Bonn, however. Schurz went on to America and Nietzsche to Switzerland. Perhaps for this reason there is no monument to either of them in the halls of the university.

Indeed, the only monument at all, if one excepts portraits of King Friedrich Wilhelm and his chancellor, is a handsome bronze of Karl Duisberg, who founded IG Farbenindustrie. The people of Bonn never really took to either Schurz or Nietzsche: Schurz could get no support for his revolution in 1848, and a man who studied at Bonn told me that a friend advised him to remove a reference to Nietzsche from his thesis on the ground that "they don't go for him around here."

Before the first World War, Bonn was a stronghold of the student societies, known to the world through Lehr's "Student Prince" as young men who spent the greater part of their time dressing up in funny uniforms, drinking protean quantities of beer and scarring each other's faces stylishly with sabers. This sort of rare bird has largely disappeared from the present-day Bonn campus, mourned by no one except the old society members and the breweries. In his place, is the postwar German student: earnest, threadbare and old beyond his years.

One professor praised the work habits of Bonn's present student body but criticized the tendency "to work for the diploma alone" and a certain academic snobbishness.
still directed at those who cannot enjoy the benefits of higher education.

A group of pleasantly non-snobbish students can be found a stone's throw from the university, living in an abandoned underground air raid shelter. Medical student Wilhelm Koehler, elected administrator of the shelter by the other tenants, explained to me the life underground.

"This is the third bunker I've lived in while going to school," said Koehler cheerfully, as he led us down into the cement depths and pointed out the workings of the ventilating system. Koehler and three other students discovered the bunker and moved in during the summer vacation of 1950. They organized the shelter as a dormitory and were joined by 125 other students, who found the Bonn room rents (DM 40 or $9.52 a month is average) too high.

In the bunker each student pays DM 5 ($1.19) a month for his room, which leaves, after rent to the city of DM 400 ($95.20) has been paid, about DM 250 ($59.50) a month for heat, light and improvements. The administration is democratic. Koehler gets only his room free for handling the administrative work.

Pity at this mole-like existence evaporates at the sight of the rooms, small, but tasteful and homey as wicker furniture, colored prints and ingenuity can make them.

"Just like your dormitories in the United States," said Wilhelm, as we ascended again past a row of potted plants growing bravely under the cold, subterranean glow of a naked electric light. "We take only students who are working their way," he added. "About half are refugees from the Soviet Zone."

Bonn Today

From a population of 110,000 in 1949, Bonn has boomed as capital to a present population of 124,000 or an increase of about 12 percent over two years. These newcomers have overcrowded the slow-moving streetcars, consumed 12-15 percent more water, electricity and public services, caused a rise of 20 percent in retail sales, pushed and elbowed at the Rathaus, Stadthaus, Landratsamt, Arbeitsamt, Wohnungsamt, Verkehrssamt and Oberbergamt,* crowded the 49 hotels and boardinghouses, and, to a certain extent, the 17 hospitals, and caused traffic jams. Their children cram the 20 schools.

On Sunday morning, the 90,000 Bonner Catholics have a choice of 16 churches to attend, while the 30,000 Protestants have only one. In the afternoon, however, all can walk together in the five parks and may even be joined there by the 4,000 inhabitants who profess no confession, although these, if they are of a scientific turn, might while away a Sunday afternoon in one of the three museums.

The Bonner at Work

A large number of Bonners do not work at all. Like parts of southern California, Bonn is a place full of elderly retired persons, living out their last years among petunias, tea cups and others of their kind. In the year before the first World War, the German government granted to all former government employees special property-tax exemp-

* Respectively, city hall, municipal hall, county supervisor's office, labor office, housing office, travel office and mining industry office.

Holgarten park, in front of the university, is favorite playground for Bonn children. Mothers accompany the little ones, chat while keeping watchful eyes on tots.

New modern clinic atop the wooded Venusberg, overlooking the city, is connected with Bonn University's School of Medicine. It has been in operation more than two years.

A new cale, one of a chain of cafe-restaurants found in many large German cities, was constructed recently near capital's "Hauptbahnhof" (main railroad station).
tions if they settled in the Bonn area. The result was a
great influx of retired tax collectors, railroad officials,
college professors and infantry officers, who built and
lived in respectable Victorian apartment houses with
hedges in front and tiny gardens behind and who enter-
tained at tea and went walking on Sundays.

This retired group fitted easily into the quiet, striped-
grey pattern established by the university and its satel-
lette social groups. Beside the retired group and the uni-
versity group were only the merchants and the white-
collar workers. Even today, Bonn is a city without in-
dustrial workers.

... and Play

One might look toward Cologne for entertainment but
the true Bonner never goes to Cologne. The spiritual
distance is much greater than the 25 miles that the train
whisks off in half an hour. The atmosphere of Cologne
is foreign to the Bonner. Cologne was, after all, a member
of the Hanseatic League; it breathes the air of the North
Sea, of oceans and continents. The Bonner prefers his
friendly fog.

Actually, Bonn is not so devoid of entertainment as
strangers would have one believe, nor as lacking in
charm as one new arrival contended, when he asserted:
"The only good things about this town are that it has
nice trees and that you can get out of it by walking for
five minutes in any direction."

Statistically, the visitor has his choice of an opera-
operetta, a small civic theater which presents Shaw and
Schiller, a smaller avant-garde theater in a cellar, 12
movie theaters (some showing cowboy pictures) and 10
more expensive and fashionable restaurants and bars.

According to a Bonn rule of thumb, you can find the
intelligentsia at the opera, the merchants at the operetta
and the white-collar workers at the movies. The real
center of Bonn entertainment, however, is the university
with its lecture programs. It is no trick at all to bring
200 persons out for a lecture on the "Geological History
of the Provence." "If a Bonner goes out for the evening,
he expects to come away bored and edified," a local
reporter explained.

While the Bonner never complains that his town is
dull, the federal officials and members of the Federal
Parliament will drive incredible distances to avoid hav-
ing to spend the weekend there. When forced to spend
leisure in Bonn, the government people gather in places
like the Cafe Kranzler or the Tabu, which have big-city
atmosphere.

The Kranzler is a somewhat self-conscious version of
a famous Berlin cafe—something like El Morocco trans-
planted to Sioux City—and makes one almost think the
Berlin owners closed their eyes, swallowed hard and said
to themselves, "Well, after all, it IS the capital."

The Tabu, on the other hand, is an inky cellar, purport-
ing to be a bit of Montmartre on the banks of the Rhine.
It is supposed to be an existentialist den, though prices
are such that the average working Paris existentialist
would be hard put to muster the price of a vin ordinaire
(ordinary wine).

True Bonners ignore these haunts of the mighty to
frequent pleasant cellars like the "Kerze," where etchings
and watercolors instead of celebrities line the walls, or
taverns like the "Stiezel," where the popping noise is
not champagne but a fresh beer keg being tapped.

In general, however, the Bonner has little money to
spend and stays home most evenings. Since so many
Bonners belong to more or less fixed income groups which
are hardest hit by postwar price rises, they have had
to cut corners—while still doing their best to keep up
the old appearance of bourgeois well-being. Typical for
all is the elderly matron overheard in a bakery asking
for five tea rolls, two white and three half-white (baked
from cheaper flour). The budget would not reach for all
white rolls, nor could the matron reconcile herself to
giving them up altogether.

Bonn in Germany

That, then, is the city which has become the provisional
federal capital and came to that dignity. The Bonners
have accepted the dignity with equanimity. Perhaps this
attitude could be salutary for those who transact the busi-
ness of state. A Bonn editor phrased it thus: "I think," he
said, "that in spite of all the inconveniences, the atmos-
phere of Bonn could be good for the government. Bonn
is still a city where government cars have to drive out
around the hay wagons. And the Bonner, the Rhinelaender,
while he may not be a world-beater when it comes to
work, is at least good-natured—and clean."