Salzgitter

A Tinderbox in Lower Saxony

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INTO THE hardship area of Salzgitter in eastern Lower Saxony has moved US Public Affairs with its informational and cultural program to help alleviate the widespread apathy and misery resulting from wartime boom, postwar chaos, influx of refugees and constant threat of being engulfed in a new totalitarianism, either Communism or neo-Nazism.

From the regional Public Affairs Field Center in nearby Hanover has come the advice, assistance and encouragement to make the people more intelligent, more respectful of their individual responsibilities and relationship to their fellowman and better qualified to help their country to win its place among the free nations of the world.

Conferences and activities have been sponsored especially for the youth and the women. Money has been contributed to the building of a vocation school and the initiating of social projects. The bookmobile of the America House, in Hanover tours the area. Films and printed material of a democratic, as well as anti-Communist, nature have been widely distributed. Persons have been carefully selected to visit the United States under the Exchanges Program.

Salzgitter, an area of more than 75 square miles south of Brunswick and a short distance from the border of the Soviet Zone, is as strange a hodge-podge as ever to be governed as a communal administration. It is an agglomeration of modern city blocks, mammoth factory buildings, interspersed farms and rural villages. Its 120,000 inhabitants include only some 20,000 natives, the rest being those remaining from the wartime labor force and thousands expelled or seeking refuge from the East.

Its wartime boom sprung from its mineral deposits, for below the surface are an estimated 2,000,000,000 tons of workable iron ore. German industrialists in the late thirties built there one of the world’s most modern steel mills, known then as the Hermann Goering Steel Works. Utilizing the latest methods to dress rather poor quality ore, millions of tons of first-class pig iron were produced to feed into the German war machine.

The Mittelland Canal, which runs through the district, eliminated otherwise higher land transportation costs and made the mills more advantageous than the Ruhr in filling orders from northern and eastern Germany. Despite the tremendous exploitation to satiate a driving war machine, the bountiful deposits have barely been touched.

THE POPULATION is so heterogeneous as to present a very delicate problem. The native inhabitants numbered about 20,000 in separate villages and hamlets. When the steel works were built, 40,000 workers were conscripted or came voluntarily from other parts of the country. During the war years, thousands of foreign slave laborers and prisoners of war doubled this figure and many remained to be absorbed into the community. Then after the war came first thousands of ethnic Germans expelled from the eastern countries and later, because of its proximity to the Soviet Zone border, the refugees fleeing from the intolerable life under Communism in eastern Germany. Curiously enough, one does not find the discrimination between natives and refugees which is so prevalent in other parts of Germany.

The many idle mills, closed as the result of war destruction and postwar controls, have been disastrous for these people. Large-scale unemployment, stagnation and poverty are typical of the area. Housing is pitifully inadequate and sanitary facilities are lacking. Many residents barely exist in crude pasteboard shacks and Niessen huts. One of the few adequate apartment buildings has been taken over by the local German authorities for use as a town hall. There are no hospitals or office buildings, the school facilities are sorely insufficient and the 250 miles of streets and roads are badly in need of repair. The destruction of the war also has left its mark. This setting has produced lawlessness and violence.

PROXIMITY to the Soviet Zone has contributed to the demoralization, which has been discouraging not only to the residents but also to business interests in their plans to utilize Salzgitter’s resources. Communist
elements press their attempts to infiltrate the area and create unrest, citing Salzgitter as an example of Marxist contention that capitalism seeks to oppress the working classes. Recently left-wing efforts have been brought under control by local enforcement officers and the Federal border police.

A new danger now appears to come from the extreme right and neo-Nazi groups who have scored initial successes in the area. The formerly strong Social Democratic segments, which rose in 1946 out of the laboring elements, are voicing fears that they are being encircled by right-wing coalitions. Neo-Nazi political machinations, which have made some headway in other parts of Lower Saxony, have had reverberations in Salzgitter, increasing political instability.

Early this year, as a result of tripartite agreement, an American Public Affairs Field Center was opened in Hanover to serve the eastern part of the state of Lower Saxony. Using the projects begun by the former office of the HICOG’s state observer for Lower Saxony and the Hanover America House as the base, a coordinated effort was initiated to implement an informational and cultural program to foster the development of democratic concepts in the Salzgitter area.

The Young people of Salzgitter, many of whom had become apathetic toward their seemingly hopeless future, were viewed with much concern. To assist them in finding their rightful place in society they are encouraged to engage in numerous activities, such as youth meetings and work camps. In August, for example, under the auspices of the Youth Council, the Public Affairs Center held a series of six conferences on "Citizenship: Its Privileges and Its Responsibilities." Special emphasis was laid upon the selecting of young people prominent in church work, labor unions and other local organizations to attend these sessions, so that they would be able to apply the results of the conference upon returning to their hapless community.

Attention was also focused on the problem of inadequate educational facilities. The municipal government, though laboring under a deficit of DM 4,500,000 (equivalent to $1,071,000) managed to build several new schools. As the need to train youth for productive positions still existed, DM 275,000 ($65,450) was contributed by the HICOG Special Projects Fund toward the building of a large trade school. Hundreds of young men and women are now preparing themselves to become electricians, metalworkers, tailors, or specialists in other skills. This spacious structure has many rooms, including laboratories, library, auditorium and student cafeteria. The equipment, ranging from dynamos to microscopes, has already earned for this establishment a reputation as the best equipped institution in the region.

The women, comprising two-thirds of Salzgitter’s unemployed, are another segment of the population meriting consideration. Special courses are held to dispel their feelings of frustration and despair, and to direct their energies into constructive paths. In conjunction with the eight local women’s organizations, classes designed to create interest in public life are conducted. Seven courses have been initiated to date. Steps are also being taken to integrate the individual women’s groups into one major council, which will assist in carrying out civic measures.

By means of more general projects, the entire community is being reached. Cooperation with a number of German groups, such as Work and Life, administered by the German labor unions, Public Affairs has rendered assistance to the adult education schools in the form of lectures and donations of necessary materials. Moreover, an intensified film program, sponsored by a public-spirited committee, is supplied by the Public Affairs Film Office with projectors and selection of documentaries from a library of over 2,000 films. Continuous showings on a wide variety of subjects are given in the 29 individual localities in the Salzgitter area. The attendance at a single performance has been as high as 1,100 persons.

Typical of the citizenry’s enthusiastic response was the reception to a showing on June 9. Fifteen minutes

Steel factory, once booming to supply German war machine, stands silent and idle. Former workers, many destitute, live in shacks and eke out bare existence in shadow of mills. (photos by Public Affairs Center, Hanover)
With the assistance of a grant of DM 275,000 ($65,450) from the HICOG Special Projects Fund, this modern building was erected as a new vocational school to teach the youth of Salzgitter better means of making a living.

Before the scheduled time, the hall was filled to capacity with more than 850 spectators. Outside, an impatient milling throng of 200 waited to enter. When it was announced that it was physically impossible to accommodate even one more person, cries of disappointment rang out. In the confusion which followed the crowd forced its way into the theater, literally breaking down the door. When the police was summoned, tempers were soothed and reparations made. Afterwards, many apologies were received from inhabitants, who were extremely embarrassed by the unfortunate incident.

Basic to the information campaign is the circulation of reading material. An America House library service has been arranged, to loan large quantities of books and magazines to educational institutions and other groups in Salzgitter. A new bookmobile, which carries 4,000 books, has extended the program into sectors as yet untouched by other activities. As this giant library-on-wheels travels throughout the factory districts and hamlets of this strange township, it is greeted by clusters of eager children and adults.

In addition, the three Salzgitter newspapers are utilized to keep the citizens informed. The Public Affairs Information Office supplies them with feature articles on a variety of subjects. With the cooperation of the editorial staffs, a special effort has also been made to carry out an information program by supplying tens of thousands of pamphlets and booklets to combat Communist and neo-Nazi propaganda.

To guarantee the viability of worthwhile cultural institutions fostering the principles of democracy, the Office of the US High Commissioner has allocated funds for a series of projects totaling DM 10,000 ($2,380). One project was a conference on the theory and practice of self-government, held in conjunction with the adult education schools and attended by representatives of many different interests. Another part of the cultural program includes scheduled concerts and lectures given by visiting guest artists under the sponsorship of the Public Affairs Office and the Hanover America House.

These evenings have met with overwhelming approval. Letters of appreciation such as the following have been received: “You have shown us that you really share our troubles and sorrows. We feel that you have come to give us a human contact, which sometimes means even more than material help.”

Recently, a group of Germans from the Salzgitter area was selected to be sent to the United States under the State Department Exchanges Program. Three are teen-age students, who will live with American families for one year. The others comprise a team consisting of the mayor, a newspaper editor, youth leader, businessman, teacher, city councilman, political party leader, social worker, church delegate and labor union official. Traveling in the United States for three months, this team will observe the operation of citizens’ groups in American cities. It is hoped that this experience will enable them to aid in Salzgitter’s regeneration, by stimulating their fellow townsman to solve their civic problems through democratic community action.

Much has been accomplished in this step-child of the state of Lower Saxony, but the Hanover Public Affairs Field Center is aware of the magnitude of the even greater task that lies ahead. In the final analysis, the prosperity of the area is dependent upon the reopening of the steel mills and the return to normal operations. Three of the former twelve plants are already functioning under government control and produce yearly 250,000 tons of quality pig iron, which is DM 20 ($4.76) cheaper per ton than that of the Ruhr.

Salzgitter officials appear optimistic about the reconstruction of the badly needed equipment as a natural consequence of the vigorous recovery of western Germany and its new significance for European integration. Steps are being taken to secure assistance for agriculture and to utilize new techniques and mechanization in cultivating the surrounding fertile soil. These are hopes within realization in the not too distant future. +END