Classrooms of Democracy

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WITZENHAUSEN County—one of the six Hessian counties bordering on the Soviet Zone—has put films of the United States Information Service (USIS) to work in a way that has exceeded even the fondest predictions of the German and American sponsors.

As in most rural German counties, it is the task of the Adult Education Association of Witzenhausen to bring to the many towns and villages of the county an important part of the American cultural and educational programs that reach these outlying communities. The person primarily responsible for furthering the use of the USIS films in Witzenhausen is Werner Grosskopf, director of the county association.

In Witzenhausen County, under Mr. Grosskopf's leadership and with the cooperation of a sympathetic state administrator, school superintendent and other county officials, adult education has been creating citizen interest with USIS films in matters that traditionally have been left to the government official and professional politician.

SEVERAL months ago this first concerted effort by the Adult Education Association to promote a better understanding of the way democracy functions in 28 groups throughout the county came to an end. Let's take a look at the program to see how it worked and how USIS films contributed to its success.

The program lasted eight weeks and included six different courses on various phases of civic education. Each of the 28 communities received the six training courses during the eight-week period. Taking one of these communities, Bad Sooden-Allendorf, only three miles from the Soviet Zone, as an example, the program worked as follows.

The first evening meeting was devoted to the topic "The Democratic System." A short talk was given by either Mr. Grosskopf or a qualified alternate on the responsibilities of the citizen in a democratic state, the differences between a democratic and authoritarian state, and the government of the Federal Republic of Germany. This was followed by three film slide series on the subjects "Basic Rights of the Citizen," "The Structure of the Federal Government," and "The Making of a Law."

Following this was the film "Democracy in Danger," which the Association had borrowed from the nearby Eschwege America House. The subject of the film then became the subject of discussion among the farmers, local officials, workers and youth who were present. At the end of this first seminar, a small pamphlet, "The Individual and the State," also obtained from the America House, was handed to each participant.

ABOUT A week later the second course was presented in Bad Sooden-Allendorf. The subject: "The Role of the Community in the State." At this meeting the USIS film "A Town Helps Itself" was shown and discussed and the pamphlet "What is the Meaning of Self-Government" was given out. The third program some days later had as its theme "The Community Council" and again a USIS film "German Youth Administer a Community" was appropriate to the subject. And so the program went until the sixth evening when the subject "The Citizen and His Community" was discussed and the film "Public Opinion" ended the group's series of evening meetings about their most cherished possession—democracy.
This same program was repeated in 27 other communities with groups of farmers, women, local officials and youth.

The role that USIS films played in making these courses a popular success was pointed out by Mr. Grosskopf. In the first place, he said, one picture was worth many words. Secondly, the subjects covered by the films were exactly those picked by the Association as being most valuable to stimulating the citizen's interest in his government, both local and national. And thirdly, the films were more effective in arousing fruitful discussion than lectures on the same subjects.

THE USE of USIS films in Witzenhausen County has not been limited to the eight-week course which the Adult Education Association carried out recently. For the past several years, first under the sponsorship of the US Resident Office, which was located in Witzenhausen, and after January 1952 under the sponsorship of the Association, the USIS film program has been a daily feature in the lives of the Witzenhausen population. Thus, although the Resident Officer closed up shop about one year ago, the film program has continued to reach the schools, youth groups and adults in the county.

This same development has been repeated in 12 of the 17 counties in northern Hesse and in scores of the counties throughout the entire US Zone of Germany. More recently the USIS film program has been extended into the British and French zones with such success that film attendance figures in these areas of Germany approximate those in the US Zone.

Aside from the more immediate objective of preparing village groups in Witzenhausen County to accept their responsibilities as citizens during the community elections, the continuing purpose of the Adult Education Association's program is to activate the groups that participated in the courses to interest others in the community to take part in public affairs.

THE ASSOCIATION believes that the "classroom of democracy" is to be found in the town hall meeting of the villages and hopes that the persons who have participated in the civics seminars during the past several months will be the leaders in helping the village mayors plan and carry out town hall meetings during the winter months. Despite the fact that some mayors do not look with favor upon citizen's "meddling" in local government and that tradition does not often support the citizens in such efforts, there are signs that the Association's program has made headway.

The Association has found that many of the groups were enthusiastic about the "lecture-film-discussion" method of civics training and has therefore planned a new series of courses for the winter. These courses cover subjects on purely local matters, such as "Our Community and its School," and also those concerned with international affairs, such as "The Schuman Plan" and "The United States of Europe." For these and the other subjects planned, Mr. Grosskopf is selecting from among several hundred USIS films those that will contribute to an understanding of the topic under discussion.

In addition to employing USIS films in Witzenhausen's regular adult education program and civics training courses, the 40 youth forums in the county are steady customers of the film program, integrating the film evenings into their regular forum activities.

Mr. Grosskopf's outstanding work in Witzenhausen's adult education program has not gone unnoticed. His civics training course and use of USIS films was explained fully in a recent edition of the State of Hesse Adult Education publication. Also the North Hesse district government, which is located in Kassel and performs a number of governmental functions for the 18 counties of North Hesse, recently distributed copies of Witzenhausen's civic training course to all the county adult education associations in North Hesse.

THERE HAVE been many evidences of the effectiveness of the USIS films used in Witzenhausen's various programs. Perhaps one of the most concrete examples is that of a youth group in the county which witnessed the film "German Youth Administer a Community." The film told how boys and girls took over the reins of their government for several days to acquaint themselves with local government problems. Several days after the youth group saw the film the members asked the local mayor to let them run their local government for a day. The mayor consented.

Another USIS film, "Man and the State," is credited by an organization leader with increasing attendance at the organization's meetings. The film tells the story of an average citizen who never attends meetings, where local problems are discussed but who always criticizes the action taken during the meetings, pointing out that every citizen has the opportunity to help improve his government. There are many similar stories of how USIS films have stimulated local action for the betterment of the community.

In brief, this is the story of the USIS film at work in one county of Germany today. In Witzenhausen, as in many other German counties, an adult education or youth program would be difficult without the help of USIS films. It should be a source of satisfaction to the American to know that he has contributed so much to giving the men and women in Germany active in educational and youth work a helping hand in building the foundations of a new democratic Germany.

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