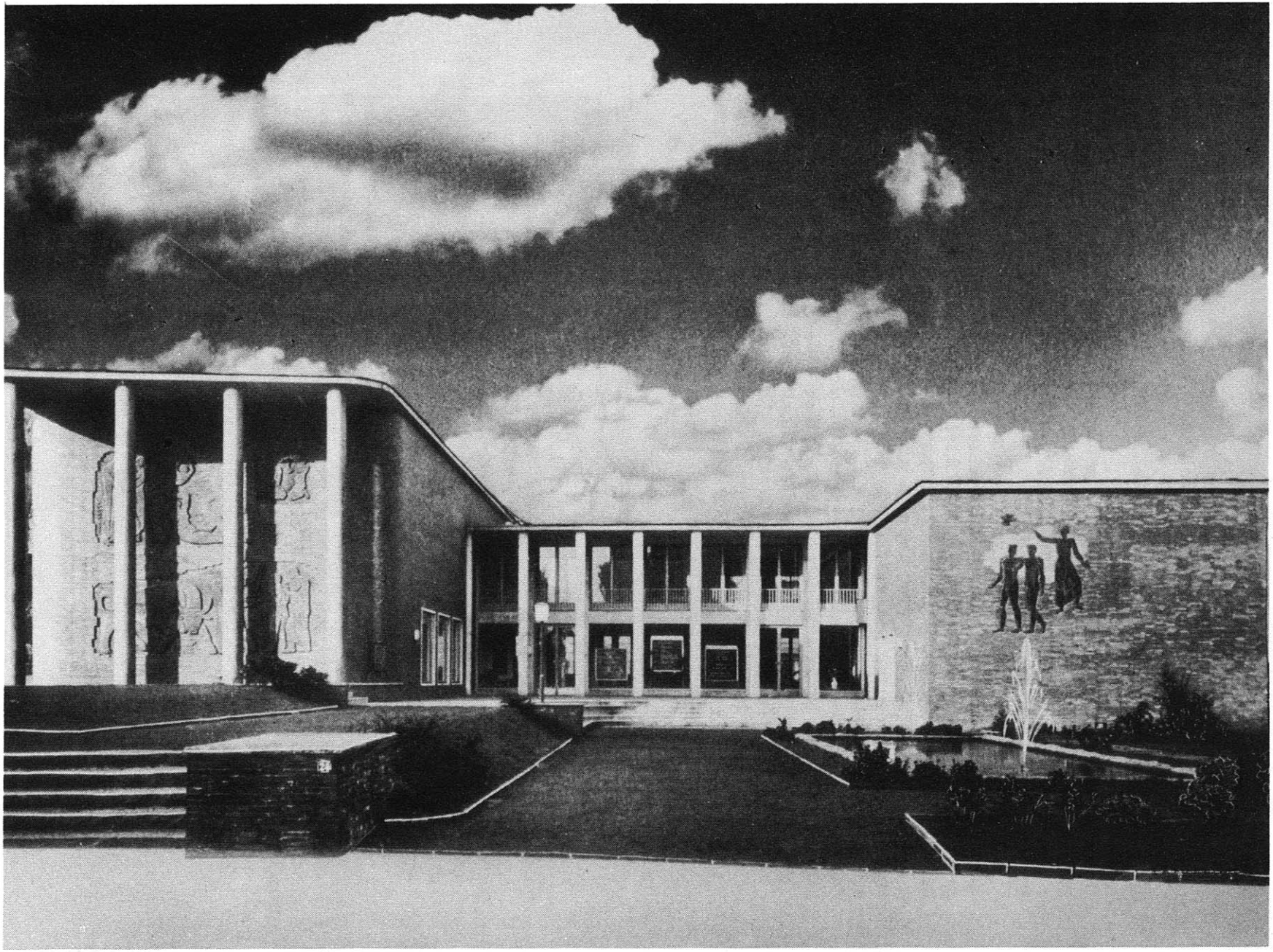

II. COMPOSITE PICTURE

During 1952, more than a million adult Germans in 47 cities made 14,000,000 visits to 47 cultural institutions sponsored by a foreign nation. Probably another million youngsters and adults have, during the same period, attended motion picture shows, participated in youth activities, or otherwise utilized the extension, bookmobile, or children's services offered by this unique organization.

"America House" is the name given to the United States Information Centers in Germany by the Germans themselves, and now officially adopted by HICOG as the correct designation for these cultural and information centers. It is a unique phenomenon in the relationship between victor and vanquished, which may herald a new era of cultural exchange between the people of the United States and the peoples of other countries throughout the world.

Enter any one of the German cities with an America House and it will soon be apparent that "something new has been added" to its composite community life. Step up to a Litfassaeule (cylindrical billboard), the omnipresent German advertising pillar, and you will discover between the announcements of the latest billings at the Opernhaus (opera house) and the courses offered at the Volkshochschule (adult education classes) the current program of the local America House.

Two women with market baskets on their arms are examining the week's offerings. "We must go on Thursday," says one, "color slides and a talk on the Great Lakes area." Three boys scurry past, needing no reminder that the children's film hour starts at four in the afternoon and that only early arrival guarantees a seat. Follow them, if you can keep up. A few minutes up the street and they turn and disappear into the renovated building which houses the United States Information Center. Staff members hope that in the future there will be especially-planned, architecturally-sound, community-centered libraries and information centers in all of the larger cities in Germany.

In the meantime, however, the majority of the America Houses are refurbished buildings: some ancient, a few modern. The Marburg America House, an historic inn loaned under the trusteeship of the German Monuments Protective Organization, is one of the oldest structures in that university town. A former Gestapo interrogation center housed the Augsburg operation. The Passau America House boasts of a shot hole in its side made at the time of the Napoleonic wars, while Kassel shares an old, partially ruined Bibliothek (library) with three other German libraries.

In several towns, shells of buildings formerly housing retail merchandising establishments have been rebuilt or renovated into library centers. In Munich, the marble halls of the building, where in 1938 Hitler, Daladier, and Chamberlain signed the pact which put the name Munich into the dictionaries as a synonym of betrayal, have been converted into a center of American culture. The Frankfurt America House was once a palatial residence of the Rothschild family.

Outside a typical America House, a row of neat showcases containing colorful display panels tells a picture story of the United States: its flora and fauna, its economic strength, its technological "know-how", its democratic philosophy -- all the aspects of its cultural growth, its mores and customs, its people, and its way of life.

Inside most of these typical America Houses, the curious gingerbread effects of yesteryear have been removed, or covered up and modernized; but even so, in many of the renovated Houses the ornate stairways and other reminders of lavish yesterdays manage to remain. That homes of ex-Nazis and Party headquarters buildings should be requisitioned early in the occupation is understandable; but that they should in so few years serve as bridges of cultural understanding is a surprising achievement.

As the lads in the Lederhosen (leather pants) and pig-tailed girls with Schulranzen (school bags) over their shoulders rush happily past toward the afternoon movie showing, we can see a cross-section of the German citizenry which gravitates toward the America House at four in the afternoon. There are a mother and her teenage daughter on their way to English class. Two tie-less students from the local university arguing a debatable point of economics. A commercial man on his way to the reference room to seek out the address of an import-export firm in New York. A teacher in search of some colorful pictures of the American Southwest to liven up her class. Two elderly ladies with a half dozen American novels under their arms, making full use of the opportunity to keep their school-learned King's English alive without danger of contamination by association with those who speak that foreign-sounding American English in the English discussion group.

In the entrance of most America Houses one finds a large bulletin board with neat announcements of the weekly program. The evening schedule shows a variety of attractions: on Monday, a German professor speaks on "Ernest Hemingway and His Short Stories"; on Tuesday, a returned exchangee talks about an "American Miracle - Television for Everyman"; on Wednesday, a young American singer and a German singer will do excerpts from "Porgy and Bess"; on Thursday, a lecture on "The Friendly Border" is scheduled with color slides of Canada and the Great Lakes States; and on Friday, a three-man panel discussion on European economic integration entitled "Benelux Leads the Way" will be led by an American Fulbright exchange professor teaching in Holland.

At the head of the staircase leading to the library in one large America House is a handsome picture of the President of the United States. Nearby is a large photograph of the United States High Commissioner for Germany flanked by two large maps of the United States. As we pass, two small boys have discovered Death Valley, the locale of the Wild West film they had seen in a downtown German theater the night before.

As we move up toward the charge-out desk in this particular America House, the assistant finishes checking out two books on American personnel practices to a distinguished-looking gentleman, looks up at us with a smile, and says, "May I help you?"

"Yes," we answer, "Is your director in?"

"No, he has a conference with someone at the university, but he should be back around five. Would you like to see his secretary or our house manager?"

"No," we reply, "but we'd like to look around, if we may."

"Of course ... but if you need any special information, please come back. Here are some pamphlets about our America House that may interest you."

One booklet explains the magic of the Dewey Decimal System, the public card catalogue, and the open shelf, those "open sesames" so infrequently used in German libraries, but which bring to every man the riches of the recorded word. The other booklet details the various services and activities offered by the House.

We thank the girl at the desk for the brochures and move on into what was formerly the drawing room, where both economic and aristocratic royalty were entertained. It now serves a double purpose. Its walls are lined with open bookshelves, while the center area is utilized for small exhibits. This week, "The Negro in the U.S.A." is on display here, a subject of great interest to the Germans who have heard many conflicting stories about the lot of minority groups in America today. It is an exhibit beautifully and intelligently conceived by artists having a real understanding of the problem.

The shelves contain American fiction, most of it in English. These books have a slower turnover than the German translations which circulate with remarkable velocity. Gone with the Wind, even after these many years, rarely stays on the shelf more than a few hours. Many other German translations of American books are available to those who are lucky enough to be near the German shelves when they are brought in. These include Percy Marks' A Tree Grows Straight, Katharyn Forbes' Mama's Bank Account, E. B. White's One Man's Meat, and many others which in their varying ways interpret, in fiction, aspects of American life.

Meisterwerke der TECHNIK
STAUDÄMME
KRAFTWERKE

In the non-fiction room, too, German and English language books can be found side by side. Here we find both original and translation of John Foster Dulles' War and Peace, Reinhold Niebuhr's Faith and History, David Lilienthal's TVA - Democracy on the March, Eleanor Roosevelt's This I Remember ..., James Robinson's The Mind in the Making, and scores of others.

"Look," whispers one exited youth to another, "books on television." And so there are, as well as on theology, psychology, fine arts, medicine, music, theater, and the entire Dewey classification range from general reference works to books on American history.

The reference room is the heart of the United States Information Center. The librarian is answering a question by telephone as we enter. "I believe I've found what you need," she says. "The Detroit firm which makes those auto accessories is called Mobile Products, Inc. and not Automobile Products. Their address is 47964 Couzens Boulevard, Detroit, 16, Michigan .... And, if you're interested, their cable code name is MORPROD .... Is there anything else we can do for you? .... You're welcome. Goodbye."

Here in this small room, lined with the best reference books that America produces, is the core of the information function of the America House. Many millions of bits of information are here on record to give answers to the thousands of questions which Germans in all walks of life have about America: its commercial firms, its industrial processes, its ecology, its statistics, and data in scores of other subject areas.

In the periodical room Die Neue Zeitung and the New York Herald Tribune vie for attention with Life, Newsweek, and Look; medical journals, sociological quarterlies, pedagogical and scientific journals are in close juxtaposition with the more popular periodicals dealing with fashions, fine arts, or home economics.

We elect to sit beside a young man who has just laid down a businessman's weekly to stare off into space. We introduce ourselves and after some casual conversation ask, "Why do you come to the America House? What do you find particularly useful in this magazine room?"

"That's easy," the young man answers as he pushes the weekly he had been reading toward us. "I like the way most American magazines try to give both sides of the s tory. Few continental periodicals do this. I've just been reading this analysis of your tidelands oil controversy. This magazine lists in one, two, three order the arguments, good and bad, on each side. Last week, they ran an article on 'Trade-Not Aid' giving the points of view of both the high tariff protectionists and those of the people who want a freer flow of trade. By reading articles like this one, I can better understand the America which so confuses most people who read German or other European newspapers."

On the stairway wall leading to the second floor of this America House a series of modern pictures is hung. It is a selection of advertisements representing each State in the Union, made by a contemporary artist in each State for the Container Corporation of America. An interesting example of how private industry can encourage and subsidize new trends in art, help relatively unknown painters gain some recognition, and publicize its products through this remarkable series of attention-getting layouts.

After the children's film program has ended and the boys and girls have noisily avalanched toward the children's library on a lower floor, their places in the film room are taken by a mixed crowd of students, retired pensioners, elderly ladies, and gesticulating salesmen, with a sprinkling of housewives and businessmen. They are assembling to see a German-language film "package" on the theme of Western unity.

It opens with a cartoon, "Mr. Shoemaker and Mr. Hatmaker", a whimsical color film, which points up the nonsense of high tariff walls in Europe. Our time is limited so we tiptoe out between films and explore the rest of the house.

In one conference room an advanced English class grouped around a large round table is busily throwing questions at two Texas soldiers, one a negro, who are guests for the day. We find that the teacher often invites Americans to participate in order that her class may obtain firsthand information about various States, along with some authentic regional dialect. The questions which pop from all directions range from serious queries about race relations and off-shore oil to lighter ones concerned with the mortality of the bison and one in which a smart-aleck student shows off his erudition and wit by querying, "Is it true that some Texans are so poor they have to wash and polish their own Cadillacs?" The negro soldier responds with a broad smile and then points out that there are many in his home state who cannot afford large automobiles, adding that those who do wash cars for a living earn enough to be able to ride in Fords and Chevrolets.

The adjacent music room, its somewhat imperfect soundproofing leaking through a bit of symphonic music, next catches our attention. A small circle of music lovers is relaxing in comfortable chairs listening to the American Forces Network's Outpost Concert program. The walls are lined with cabinets filled with recordings of American folk pieces and classical music performed by American artists as well as recordings of contemporary poetry and drama read by Carl Sandburg, Eleanor Roosevelt, Charles Laughton, and others. These are played at regularly scheduled "Listening Hours" three times each week or, when requested by music lovers or drama teachers, for special performances to interested groups at other period during the week.

As we step into the hallway we note that the discussion group has disbanded and a circle of men and women surround the American soldiers to ask a few last minute questions. In the conference room, the audio-visual technician is helping the English teacher set up a slide projector which she uses with beginner classes to project pictures of American life. She finds this apparatus useful as a visual aid in vocabulary building and as a device to explain the United States.

A trim young woman, the director's secretary, approaches and informs us that he has returned. In reverse protocol, having seen most of his Information Center, we walk into the office of the American in charge of this many-sided operation.

The directors are used to having American visitors drop in un-announced, be they Congressmen, inspectors, journalists, or ordinary touring taxpayers bent on seeing what is done with their money. They have confidence that their staff will be courteous, efficient, and fully able to answer most of the queries put to them.

"Sorry I was out," he apologized. "Had to see the head of the medical school at the university. But I'm glad you had a chance to look around the place ... although you should have had the chief librarian or our house manager explain the finer points of our operation. We're proud of our staff ... from the cleaning woman to our top professional people .... They know their jobs and what is equally important ... they work together as a team."

The director is a typical American in his early thirties. He has his liberal arts degree with a major in sociology and political science, he tells us. He has nearly finished his master's degree in international relations but took this overseas assignment before he could wind up his thesis. He dreams of the day he can "stay put" long enough to earn a doctorate.

His background of interests and activities is broader than his college specialization would indicate. On the campus he edited the semi-weekly paper, sang in the glee club, and took small parts in school plays. He worked in the college library to help pay expenses and thus picked up enough understanding of library practices to be conscious of how little he knows about the craft. He has several hobbies and is devoted to his wife and four year-old son.

As he explains the many phases of the surprisingly complex operation, he livens up his explanation with numerous pertinent anecdotes.

"This afternoon," he says, "we worked out a plan with Dr. Sprecher ... he's head of the medical school here ... to tie into the big cancer conference which will be held here next fall. We are going to borrow the latest American films on this subject for them. Of course ... they'll have English sound tracks ... and it would be too expensive and

unprofitable to dub them in German. However, we've faced this problem before. Our audio-visual man and Dr. Sprecher will put their translation on tape ... and we can cut out the English track when the doctors see the films. Of course, these will be closed performances. We don't want any curious laymen or hypochondriacs in on this.

"Some people may wonder what cancer research has to do with selling democracy. Well ... cooperation of this sort impresses German professional people with American "know-how" and lets them know we want to share this knowledge for the betterment of mankind. Working with these professional groups ... which Washington agrees are good 'targets' ... brings them into the America House where they learn about our technical books, periodicals, and other services.

"The fruits of this kind of cooperation can't be anticipated in advance. About two months ago a returned exchangee talked on the United States Employment Service. We sent special invitations to personnel directors and government employment office chiefs. About three out of five who came had never been in the America House before. What was more revealing was that most of the personnel men hadn't met before. During the discussion, the exchangee mentioned that in many American cities personnel men with similar problems met once a month for a luncheon meeting to discuss matters of mutual interest. The personnel man in one of the machine tool plants here in town ... a real gogetter ... suggested that they try this luncheon club idea. Understand that twenty-two showed up at their first meeting."

We hear about his community advisory committee, his relationships with the Landesbibliothek (state library), the Volkshochschule (adult education classes), and the Landesbildstelle (state audio-visual association). We learn how some years ago he solved the problem of breaking up a group of black-marketeering loafers who were using the America House fo their rendezvous through the simple expedient of having plain-clothes detectives (who looked like brother bookworms to the other patrons) wander through the House at irregular intervals.

He shows us a map of the eight counties surrounding the city and points out the location of six former America House Reading Rooms which have been converted into German-American libraries, where he still runs extension activities. He indicates the public libraries, universities, and public schools where book deposits are on long-term loan; the meandering back-country route of his American-made bookmobile; and the 27 communities which, with the cooperation of local film committees, are enjoying regular informational and cultural film showings. He is thoroughly acquainted with the community, its leaders, its problems, and its place in the world. He knows the operation in detail. We have known many of these men; they are sold on their jobs and convinced of their value. In composite they would probably describe their tasks and impact this way:

"Besides these book and film activities, our extension people schedule speakers and artists into adult education centers and community libraries wherever possible. This area of our activity is not as well known as the work inside the America House, but people in the hinterland seem to be more appreciative of our cultural offerings than folks in the larger cities, where the healthy and stimulating competition of other foreign and local German cultural activities exists.

"The people feel that the America House is and should remain a part of their community life. They always refer to it as 'our America House'. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer has repeatedly given public praise to the program and is said to have told President Eisenhower personally that the America Houses were one of the finest activities Americans had undertaken in Germany and urged him to continue or even to expand the program.

"You probably know from reading the papers that the announcement of plans to close America Houses in Bavaria caused a cascade of letters and petitions of protest. This has happened elsewhere in the past in other sections of Germany. I can remember one sad letter from a refugee who had found spiritual refuge in a small House we had to close two years ago. He wrote, 'I am bewildered. In Roumania, in Hungary, in Poland, in Bulgaria, in China, in Czechoslovakia, the communists have closed the America Houses. But here in Germany you Americans are closing our America House. Why? Why?'

"This warm, possessive feeling so many Germans have toward the America House is easy to understand when one looks at our beginnings. Spontaneously, in many parts of Germany, many understanding occupation officers, recognizing how starved Germans were for knowledge about the outside world, put together small collections of books from Special Services, army orientation, and other sources and lent them to their local employees and other townspeople.

"The idea grew and so did the collections. At least ten centers as widely separated as Ulm, Regensburg, and Kassel were in operation in 1946, and by 1947 there were 17 major houses and a tremendous number of branch reading rooms in operation. It is true that these were not professionally-run libraries or true community centers, but they were operated by people of good will and imagination. What did it matter if in some Bavarian city the local women left their bomb-cracked coal-less homes to gather around the pot-bellied stove in the America House where they could knit and gossip in comfort while their unemployed menfolk sat around in some corner to bandy about politics, reconstruction, and the good old days. From this 'country-stove', democratic atmosphere grew many a town meeting and forum after the local town hall was rebuilt, and many of those who learned to enjoy the exchange of opinion in those desperate food-rationed and fuel-starved days are now participating in roundtable discussions in their local Volkshochschule.

"We have been successful, I think, because we have never broken faith with our German patrons. At first, they were suspicious that we were operating propaganda centers like Goebbels and that we would feed them a monotonous, unrelenting, Americans-are-the-chosen-people line. But we have not sledge-hammered them. We have tried to give them a full and fair picture of the American way of life and the advantages of democratically cooperating with freedom-loving, freedom-understanding, and freedom-practicing peoples of the world.

"Most of us in this program have a sense of mission and we know what we are trying to do. We try to interpret and implement American policy in every reasonable way. But the foundation on which we work can best be summed up in the succinct words of Warren Austin in the United Nations: 'Our policy is to keep the free world big.' Or, if we can extend this thought in an evangelical sense, the basic policy of the America House is to make the free world bigger. Maybe," he said, "we'll be able to send our bookmobiles into other parts of Germany some day and even reopen those Centers in Poland and Czechoslovakia!

"This program of translating United States foreign policy into the practical development of American-German relationships on a basis of mutual understanding has made friends, and this friendship and trust have been manifested in many ways. The civic fathers in a number of cities have set aside some of the choicest sites in their communities on a long-term, rent-free basis for our use in building modern America Houses. In Frankfurt, for example, the city planning commissioner, the Buergermeister (mayor), and the Stadtrat (city council), have given the American government a 99-year agreement to build and operate a United States Information Center on a site which would be the envy of any library commission back in the United States. It is on the foremost north-south artery in town, a three-minute walk to the main traffic circulation point, is in one corner of a large green park, and is within strolling distance of nearly all of the worthwhile cultural institutions in town.

"Several years ago at a conference, a HICOG official laid down the rule, 'The America House should be the kind of institution we want the Germans to emulate.' The wisdom of this policy has been proved by the fact that scores of German libraries are adopting the open shelf system and are offering their public such cultural activities as Great Books discussions. And perhaps the most subtle and flattering evidence of our effectiveness is the desire of many Bonn cultural leaders some day to establish reciprocal Germany Houses in the United States, thereby anchoring this cultural bridge on both sides of the Atlantic."

Our director looks at his watch. "It's way after six," he says, "I've talked far too long and my little son will be waiting for me .... But why don't you come to our 'Porgy and Bess' program tonight? Then we can continue this talk at my place over a cup of coffee. We've invited our artists ... Miss Aye and Herr Neugebauer and the director of our opera house. Like to have you meet my wife, too."

We agree to this arrangement and walk down the stairs together. From the not-too-well insulated music room come saxophonic moans of a Dixieland band. "Our local Hot Club's weekly session," the director says. "But they're a cool bunch of boys -- the intellectual type -- no tapping feet -- silent listening with lots of cool talk between discs. This group has a long history. Went underground and ran a clandestine jazz resistance group when Hitler tried to ban modern music as degenerate. Smuggled in records from France and England."

A marginal activity, this, we thought, but just one of the hundreds taking place during an America House week. We look at the young director as he personally greets passing patrons with a "Guten Abend, Herr Doktor Schmidt", "Guten Abend, Herr Landrat". What a many-sided operation this United States Information Center is!

A good director must have an aptitude for and an interest in music, literature, politics, philology, library service, cinema, fine arts, group discussions, and a dozen other fields. He must be able to take time out for visitors like us, Congressmen, taxpayers, German officials, and for the little old lady who insists on his personal advice on which book she should borrow. He must be practically bilingual, entertain speakers and artists, confer with school teachers and city officials. He must plan publicity campaigns, write reports, keep time sheets, sign papers. He is responsible for an inventory of many thousands of dollars worth of furniture, office equipment, books, audio-visual apparatus, and other equipment. He is a Public Affairs officer representing the Consul General and the United States of America in his eight-county province. Indeed, he is America's local attache in adult education, press, radio, the arts, exchange of persons, and is, upon occasion, even called upon to give unofficial advice to United States Army brides in search of visa and other migratory facts of life. He must administer and wisely delegate authority to the professional staff of librarians, teachers, audio-visual technicians, program manager, exhibits artists, and others, all Germans, who are charged with the responsibility of conducting the scores of activities within the House and in the vast extension area in the adjacent counties. He must run effective staff meetings, be an understanding supervisor, build a cooperating team, and maintain high organizational morale.

We walk together toward the lot where our cars are parked. As he drives away in his 1949 Ford, we realize that men like this, working day and night to further American policy through these America Houses, are in the front lines of the never ending American campaign to "make the free world bigger".