

Berlin's Neighborhood Centers

By WILMER FROISTAD

Chief, Public Health and Welfare Branch, Berlin Element-HICOG

BERLIN'S SIX NEIGHBORHOOD CENTERS represent a unique undertaking in the field of community welfare. Other communities in Germany have neighborhood centers (for example, Frankfurt, Darmstadt, Ludwigshafen, Munich, Cologne, Wuppertal, Goettingen, Freiburg and Brunswick), but Berlin has gone farthest in trying to provide under one roof a community-welfare program for children, youths, adults, aged and blind.

The first of the Berlin neighborhood centers, Mittelhof, was established by the American Friends Service Committee* in June 1947 in the beautiful Nikolassee section of the borough of Zehlendorf in the US Sector. It was planned primarily as a citywide conference center for youth groups, as there was at that time no building available which could be used for all types of democratically organized conferences and meetings. However, from the very first the Mittelhof program included many neighborly services, such as a shoe repairshop, a workshop for furniture repair, and some family aid undertakings.

Later there was added a guest program which made it possible for approximately 10 social workers, teachers and nurses to spend from 10 days to three weeks "convalescing" in the pleasant surroundings of Mittelhof. This program was adopted during the Berlin Blockade and proved a great boon for people of modest income, who could not get away for a vacation. Later, a kindergarten was added, and gradually study and discussion groups were built up around various interests.

Mittelhof had not been in existence long before the local mothers were meeting there each week to do sewing for welfare families. The clothing on which they worked came largely from packages shipped by interested persons in the United States. To provide a further opportunity for active participation by the neighborhood, Mittelhof established a weekly open-house evening — Wednesday night — when a general program was arranged. These programs took a variety of forms: classical music, lectures, community singing and social games. These evenings have been extremely popular.

FROM THE FIRST Mittelhof has been striving for better understanding between various groups within Berlin, and also to establish contact between youth in Berlin and in western Germany. The Mittelhof station wagon has made innumerable trips to western Germany with groups of young people so that they might participate in conferences in neighborhood centers there. Mittelhof has also been the scene of several international youth conferences. For example, last year there was a three-week conference at Mittelhof with 30 students

representing 14 countries, and a four-day conference in October on problems of education today, led by a group of five Swiss educators and psychiatrists. This conference was open to all teachers and social workers in Berlin.

For those who know how Quakers work, it hardly seems necessary to state that they never try to impose upon others their own religious and social views, but endeavor to bring about an understanding among all elements.

Leadership in the Mittelhof Neighborhood Center has been provided by volunteer American workers recruited and maintained by the American Friends Service Committee. These workers usually serve for one year without pay. Many are not Quakers themselves, but are sympathetic to the Quakers' ideal of service.

The American Friends Service Committee also supports Mittelhof by a yearly grant of funds and by the shipment of food and clothing from AFSC headquarters in Philadelphia. However, the plan has always been to make Mittelhof an indigenous self-supporting project, and to

The Mennonite Service Committee established this neighborhood center in Kreuzberg in 1949. Shown with two local youngsters are the Lester Hostettlers, home managers.



* See "Friends in Germany" in Information Bulletin, Issue No. 115, Oct. 20, 1947.



Charlottenburg home holds special entertainment for blind.

that end a representative German committee was set up which acts as the governing group holding official title to all property belonging to Mittelhof. This administrative body is organized under German law.

Furthermore, from the very first Mittelhof had many more paid Germans on its staff than American volunteer workers. Of course, much of the work at Mittelhof is done by volunteers, but the size of the program makes necessary a staff of paid workers. At present the center's staff is made up of three American volunteers, 10 paid German workers and six volunteers giving practically full time. The rest of the work in the neighborhood center is carried on by committee chairmen and other workers who spend from a few hours to several days a week, helping carry on the extensive program at Mittelhof.

MITTELHOF HAD BEEN underway only for a short time when another organization, the American YWCA, sent an American group worker to Berlin to work with the German "YW" and help organize a youth center. This worker decided to develop a program in the densely populated and rather badly damaged borough of Berlin known as Neukoelln. The worker recruited several groups of young Germans to do volunteer work, using several badly damaged rooms in a church building. Later, through Military Government, the group secured several old barracks which were moved to a large vacant lot in Neukoelln where the young people themselves began to construct a semi-permanent barracks neighborhood center.

During the summer of 1948 the local German youths who were working on the neighborhood center, were joined by an international work camp group, recruited by the International Voluntary Service for Peace. These young people came from a number of foreign countries and volunteered their services as a demonstration of

their good will toward the youth of Germany. The buildings were completed and dedicated in August of 1949. There again, as at Mittelhof, the program has gradually expanded to include a variety of activities, although the emphasis continues to be on youth work.

Known as *Nachbarschaftsheim* (neighborhood center) *Neukoelln*, it provides a consultation and referral service for families with special welfare problems, a program of repair and distribution of clothing, four mothers' clubs which meet for discussions, social affairs, or sewing, a discussion group for returned prisoners of war, and a playroom for small children. The small libraries at Neukoelln and at the other centers are being expanded through a special grant from HICOG for purchase of books.

These neighborhood centers did more than provide welfare and general community services for groups and individuals. They became training centers for group leaders, and through the working relationship between American workers and the German professional people, a better understanding developed concerning the special problems in the field of welfare and youth work. Democratically organized committees, which were gradually given full responsibility for the control of these centers, brought together German leaders from many fields of activity: education, health, welfare and the like, and gave many of the members a new conception of community services which is bound to be carried over into the fields which they represent.

THE SUCCESS OF THESE PROJECTS convinced the Public Health and Welfare staff in Berlin Element that the neighborhood centers were a very useful social instrument for bringing the people in the various districts together in a more friendly relationship. It was evident that there was a rather sharp division, first between public and private welfare organizations, and then between the various private welfare agencies on religious and political grounds. The feeling of antagonism which existed among the welfare agencies was a reflection of the general antagonism between various groups within the communities, which the great cities of Germany had developed after

In part this situation is to be explained by the way in which the great cities of Germany had developed after 1870, and the problem was not very different from that faced by social welfare leaders in the United States as a result of the tremendous growth of cities after the Civil

Grandmother tries newly-finished sweaters on grandsons. Wool was supplied to Steglitz center by welfare agencies. Sweaters will be given to needy in all sectors of Berlin.





Women visitors knitting socks for UNICEF at Steglitz center are served hot chocolate. (Photos by Jacoby, PRD HICOG)

War. The social organization of the larger boroughs in a city like Berlin in the postwar period called for somewhat the same kind of neighborhood programs as had worked so successfully in England and the United States in bringing about a better community spirit. The immediate response which the people of Berlin showed towards the *Nachbarschaftsheim Neukoelln* project and the *Mittelhof* undertaking, proved this to be true.

Accordingly, the members of the Welfare staff in Berlin Element began to look for sponsoring groups to help create identical centers. The American Women's Club gave some help in starting the neighborhood center in Steglitz, but this later became entirely an undertaking of the Steglitz Youth Office. The chief social worker in that borough had the social vision to see how a small neighborhood center could help to provide services for children and mothers and could also provide a very much needed meeting place for groups of elderly people living alone in dark, cold rooms.

About the same time, several groups of church women in Schoeneberg got together on a sewing project for the most needy families in that borough, and out of their efforts, strongly supported by the Welfare office, grew the neighborhood center now located in Friedenau. The project, like each of the others, grew out of local needs and differed somewhat from previous undertakings. However, there the program had been largely built around the need of small children for play facilities, and the needs of the old people. Friedenau, and indeed all of Schoeneberg, has an unusually high percentage of "*alleinstehende Alte*," a phrase which much better describes them than the more accurate English phrase of "old people living alone."

BECAUSE OF THE SUCCESSFUL WAY in which the *Mittelhof* and *Neukoelln* projects functioned under joint leadership of German and American welfare workers, it seemed desirable, if possible, to create additional projects of that type. The German social workers had as

yet very little experience in working with community groups and encouraging individual expression and in this way developing leadership within the groups themselves. So, when the Mennonite Service Committee, an American welfare agency working with CRALOG, expressed an interest in helping establish a neighborhood center in Berlin, they were assured of fullest possible support from Military Government.

A building formerly belonging to a singing group, known as the *Liedertafel*, in Kreuzberg, seemed to be an ideal place for establishing a large neighborhood center to serve the badly damaged and densely populated Kreuzberg areas. Through the co-operation of the health authorities in Kreuzberg, the aged sick living in this building were moved to other, more suitable nursing homes, and the work of preparing *Liedertafel* for its new role as a community center began. A grant was made from Berlin Sector funds to help with the renovation, and the Mennonites sent a young couple to Berlin to organize the work. The Mennonites also sent a large amount of equipment, such as sewing machines and furniture, and also provided part of the funds needed for rehabilitating the building which had become dingy through years of neglect. The *Nachbarschaftsheim Kreuzberg* was dedicated on Aug. 3, 1949, at a ceremony attended by leading German officials.

Today, Kreuzberg has a staff of four American Mennonite volunteers and four paid German workers plus 10 volunteers who give considerable time. It is governed by a representative committee which includes church and labor groups and members of the various political parties in Kreuzberg. This center is on the way to becoming a permanent community institution. In a few years the Mennonites plan to withdraw their support, and the program will then be carried entirely by German leaders.

ALTHOUGH THE NEIGHBORHOOD CENTERS have found a ready response from the community, and participation shows that programs are meeting a great need, there is still the problem of providing top-flight leadership for the future. In the United States a special group of social workers and community leaders have developed, but as yet there are no comparably trained

Women train to teach kindergarten at Mittelhof Center.





Woodcarving lessons are kids' specialty at Schoeneberg.

workers in Germany. The training of good leaders must be one of the next steps for making the program thoroughly a German project, and to assure their continuing operation free from factionalism and authoritarianism.

The extent of participation and the variety of programs offered in the neighborhood centers is shown in the following table:

Mittelhof

Rest Home for six social workers (since 1947: about 500 persons).

Ten groups of children (two groups of each type meeting once a week): singing, folk dancing, sports, crafts, reading — 200 persons a week.

Five groups of adults: social workers (two), teachers (one), old ladies (two) — 100 persons a week. Thirteen groups of youths: discussion, sports, folk dancing, games, drawing, theater, music, English, one class kindergarten training — 200 persons a week.

Steglitz

Four groups weekly: sewing, knitting, music, singing — 140 persons a week.

Four groups meeting monthly: blind, social workers, disabled and workmen's relief society — 160 persons a week.

During summer: kindergarten for 50 children.

During winter: warming center for 80 old and invalid persons.

Kreuzberg

Library—1,800 books, 1,300 volumes circulating monthly.

Sewing Center — about 280 women a month.

Concerts (on phonograph), open to everybody.

Ten groups, primarily adults: sewing, knitting, singing, mothers — 130 persons a week.

Nineteen groups, primarily youths: handicraft, music, singing, sports, cooking, photography, history, English (six classes) — 300 persons a week.

Neukoelln

Thirty youth groups, girls and boys: handicraft, sports, music, singing, games, discussion, shorthand, reading — 450 persons a week.

Six groups for women: knitting, reading, mending, English, aged women — 100 persons a week.

One group for men and women: PW rehabilitation (every other week) — 50 persons a week.

Schoeneberg

Fourteen groups primarily for women: aged, sewing, knitting — 150 persons a week.

Eight groups for children and youths: handicraft, book-binding, singing, music, games — 130 persons a week.

Charlottenburg

Every afternoon: aged women — 60 persons a week.

Twice a month: entertaining blind people — 30 persons a week.

Once a month: entertaining mothers — 20 persons a week.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD CENTERS have developed through their work a group of loyal supporters who are convinced that bringing the various programs for youth, aged and children together under one roof promotes healthy community life. The neighborhood centers hope to develop additional services, such as family and marriage counseling (a McCloy Special Projects Fund grant has recently been approved for the purpose), and a gradual expansion of the programs already existing, so as to draw in more young people.

Recently a group in Charlottenburg, in the British Sector of Berlin, asked help from the High Commission in expanding their welfare program, now mainly directed toward aid for the aged and blind, into something more nearly like a neighborhood center program. This project was inspired by the neighborhood programs, which up to now have centered in the US Sector.

In that way, it is hoped, the neighborhood program in Berlin which started with the Quaker project in 1947, will gradually be extended to other densely populated parts of the city. There have already been several efforts made to link up the neighborhood center activities in Berlin with the various groups doing similar work in other parts of Germany. So the movement has shown healthy signs of growth. +END

Young flutists, teacher hold concert at Kreuzberg Home.

