

THE BERLIN STORY

By David and Marie Yoder

Brother Joe Roth considered this project with AMA to be a breath of fresh air from the responsibilities at Bodensiek Haus. He looked forward to helping them pioneer this venture of faith, and spent much time doing the legal work to make it possible. At the end of his diary in 1957 he wrote, "One who is afraid to make mistakes will never accomplish much that is worthwhile" and then quoted someone who said, "...the right amount of humility will cure any fear."

The Building of Friedensheim

In April, 1958, Brother Simon and Sister Elsie Schrock from Grantsville, Maryland arrived to replace the Roths when their term would expire in August, 1958. A week after the Schrocks arrival six volunteers from The States (see names in the appendix) came to help with the building project. MCC also provided some PAX fellows to help before the building was completed. They added a 30' X 80' "Nachbarschaftsheim" with a basement, adjacent to the Hesse house, while giving careful adherence to government building regulations. This large addition included a spacious living room with a seating capacity of 100-150 people [later used for the chapel], a kitchen, and rooms for sewing, reading, and storage.

The mission center was located in the American Sector of West Berlin in a southwestern district called Lankwitz. Its location was three miles from the borders that separated West Berlin from East Germany; and five miles from the wall (that was build in 1961) that divided East and West Berlin. West Berlin was like an island in a "Red Sea" surrounded with 90 miles of barbed wire.

Out of 45 suggested names for the neighborhood center, "Friedensheim" (House of Peace) was chosen. Some refugees scoffed at the name, regarding it as western propoganda, saying there is no real peace today. The local police department evaluated that an undertaking of this nature, in this community, is liable to be anything except peaceful. However, on April 6, 1959 various speakers and visitors participated in the official opening and dedication of Friedensheim.

Several churches in the area were not so sure that a project of this nature would be desirable. A meeting was called with these church leaders to openly discuss goals the mission hoped to achieve. It was concluded that the differences were not so much in doctrine as in the interpretation of love.

The original purpose of the work at Friedensheim was to give relief to the refugees. Marienfelder Lager, which was a large refugee camp within a mile of Friedensheim, provided housing for hundreds of refugees who fled from the East. A large number of these came to Friedensheim for their clothing needs, where they could "buy without money."

German is a beautiful language, which is different from Pennsylvania Dutch, yet has many similarities. AMA made the wise decision to send new workers to language school for three months after they arrived in Berlin. This was a tremendous help. Some Germans admitted they never completely mastered their own language, yet they were willing to help the Americans learn how to speak German properly.

The government had built apartment houses for refugee families, with the project beginning one block

from Friedensheim. These apartments were allotted to families with up to twelve or more children. Hundreds of children roamed the streets near the apartments where they lived, with no place to go during the day. Friedensheim soon provided a playground adjacent to the chapel, an area approximately 60' X 100', and fenced it in. There the children could play on swings, teeter - totters, monkey bars, a slide, or in a sand box. Several scooters were available to ride, and ping - pong equipment for youth was available in the garage. In the basement a large play room provided toys and activities for the smaller children. In the sewing room children eight years old and older had the opportunity to embroider ready stamped items they could claim upon completion. The first day Friedensheim opened the playground facilities 35 children came to play. The second day 70 came, and the third day well over 100 came. In a short time they had contact with 500 - 600 children in the area.

In order to accommodate these children the workers at Friedensheim planned a schedule. In the forenoon the preschool children could come while the older children attended school. For the afternoon activities children were divided into three different groups. Each group was allowed to come two afternoons a week on their designated day. Those whose family names began with A - H received a red card attached to a string they were to wear around their neck. Family names beginning with I -R received blue cards and those names beginnings with S - Z received a green card. On each card was the child's name, address, date of birth, age, and name of parents. This system worked well and remained in tact for future years.

With political pressures increasing in 1961, the flow of refugees also stepped up. July 30, 1,800 registered in the West Berlin camps, bringing the July 16-30 total to 17,000. During the week ending August 13, 1961 approximately 13,000 refugees registered in the Marienfelder Lager alone. By that date the total number of refugees who fled to freedom figured 4,000,000.

The Berlin Wall

On August 13, 1961, starting at 2:00 A.M. on a Sunday morning barbed wire was strung along the border, dividing the eastern and western section of the world's fifth largest city in area. More horrible than having the city divided, were the divisions it brought to families, relatives, friends, students, employees, and churches, as well as many other organizations. The coming of the Berlin Wall brought a sharp and sudden drop in the flow of refugees. In a few weeks the count was down to a very small number. Within one and a half years the relief clothing distribution was discontinued. During this time, material aid went mostly to needy families in the community, and to individuals who sent clothing into the East, plus to a few rare escapees.

Sunday School

In April, 1959 the first Sunday School for children was held on a Sunday afternoon, and attended by four children and one adult. The second Sunday three children came, but by November the average attendance was 100 with a peak attendance of 120. During the fall of 1967 the Sunday School Hour was changed to 11:00 A.M. (church services 9:30-10:30). The greatest number of attendees came before and during the Christmas and Easter seasons. The Sunday School was recognized as an important part of the program, especially for young Christians. At Christmas time the Sunday School classes presented a program for the parents and friends.

Bible School

Summer Bible School was held each year, using Herald Press materials translated by Agape Verlag in Basel, Switzerland. In the spring of 1965 it was decided to have Bible School during the childrens' three week Easter vacation instead of during the summer when many children went to West Germany. This worked well and the attendance became more stable.

Bible Study

Beginning in August, 1959 the adults who came to Friedensheim for clothing were invited to attend a Bible study every Thursday evening, after which they were offered a cup of coffee or tea and cookies. At first people hesitated to come, but gradually the attendance rose to forty and seldom fell below 20. John R. Friesen, a former PAX pastor, evaluated the work at Friedensheim in a personal letter to AMA by saying: "Some of the people there related that their churches have never given them as much spiritual food as had Friedensheim, and that they had not experienced Christian fellowship like they had at Friedensheim. My own conclusion is that Friedensheim is doing a very important service. We of the MCC family regard very highly the fine working relationship we have with your AMA in Berlin."

The Developing Church

The church developed and grew as a result of the weekly Bible Study. Strange as it may sound, there were two Christians, Anna and Herbert Acksel (mother and son) who became members before there was a church. They were both received as members on September 24, 1961 with the understanding that they are a part of the Brotherhood of the future church, should one be established. Sister Anna had received adult baptism earlier in life and those who knew her felt her faith in God was genuine. Therefore, she was accepted as a member by her testimony, consistent life, and witness. Brother Herbert was baptized upon his confession of faith by Brother Harvey Miller from Luxembourg. Brother Herbert came to know Christ through the reading of a gospel tract and the Bible. Sister Anna (better known as "Mutti") was a widow, whose husband fell under Hitler's regime. They were both eager to share their faith in Jesus Christ with others.

Brother Harvey Miller and wife Mildred (who served with the Conservative Mennonite mission in Luxembourg) frequently visited Friedensheim, and while there he served as a guest speaker in Bible Study, church and special services. In evaluating the work at the center, he wrote: "We were encouraged by our six day stay at Friedensheim. Coming in time for 'Bibelstunde' [Bible Study] we also shared in a Sunday evening service and youth meeting on Tuesday evening. The two Berlin members are growing spiritually and have a concern to point others to Christ. Many others have found spiritual food and fellowship, even though they are not members. The workers at Friedensheim are aware of the challenge before them and they keenly feel the need for your prayers."

A Minister for Friedensheim

The work grew to the point that a layman no longer felt comfortable leading out. The Beachy congregations agreed on and approved the ordaining of a minister for Berlin. Three brethren, all with experience in the work at Friedensheim, were nominated by the AMA committee, and approved of by the churches. These three committed themselves to the use of the lot to determine God's will in choosing a minister for Berlin. The ordination took place on January 23, 1963 at the Mountain View A.M. Church, Salisbury, Pa., where Brother Lewis Overholt was given the charge. Brother Edwin Weaver and Brother Simon Schrock shared the lot with him. Brother Lewis did not hold the office of bishop, but was given the right to baptize and

administer communion. He was the first minister ordained by the Beachy Churches for foreign service. Gradually a church became established, and more Christians were baptized and received into the membership.

Mission Conferences

Mission conferences became channels through which contact with other missionaries in Europe was maintained. The Conservative and Beachy workers held an annual missionary conference to stimulate communication and goodwill among themselves. As “iron sharpens iron” so they encouraged each others spiritual progress. The conference was highlighted by an efficient speaker experienced in missions.

Children and youth Activities

Activities for the children and youth included Sunday School, craft classes, Bible School, birthday parties, youth meetings, and youth retreats. Any of these meetings always included a Bible story or devotional period and prayer, as well as singing. “Gott ist die Liebe” was probably sung oftener than any other song.

Quite a few children and youth came to craft classes who did not attend Sunday School. During craft classes they were taught to be creative, to do neat work, to be fair and courteous, to share supplies with others in the class, and to work independently if possible. During this interaction they noticed if the workers “walk the talk,” and when things became unruly, it gave workers the opportunity to demonstrate godly virtues.

The Christian youth and VSer's joined for chorus practice and sometimes sang in church services as well as at street meetings. At the latter, they shared the gospel through songs, testimonies, and sermonettes at the Kaiser Wilhelm Gedachtnis Kirche on Kurfurstendamm (the main and most modern street in West Berlin); and also distributed gospel tracts. Sometimes this generated serious dialogue, and inspired people to attend services at Friedensheim to learn more about the Gospel.

Children, youth and adults were encouraged to avail themselves of sound reading material by checking out books from the library at Friedensheim. Many expressed their appreciation for wholesome reading material. Christian books were not found on the common market, but were available from Christian publishers.

The church at Friedensheim became a haven for many seeking souls. The concept of belonging to the state church was deeply ingrained in the adults. Many found it difficult to leave the security of belonging to the state church and all it provided for them, and commit themselves to becoming members at Friedensheim. However, many came to Friedensheim for the spiritual food they did not find in the state churches. Christian youth who attended hoped that in years to come the same spiritual haven would be available for their children and on-coming generations.

Frohnau

Nestled in a slightly wooded area, twenty miles north of Friedensheim, and only 500 yards from the East German border, was a home called Prince Donnersmarck Foundation where forty-five to fifty handicapped children were well cared for. In 1964 a group of non-conference Conservative Mennonite churches sponsored two voluntary service boys to serve there (see appendix for names.) During that time they

participated in many of the spiritual and social activities at Friedensheim. At the children's home they worked in maintenance, lawn care, and occasionally chauffeured children to appointments. After two years the sponsoring churches discontinued their involvement, and AMA provided two workers a year until 1970. At that time AMA considered its original objective, and concluded it may be better stewardship of its resources to minister to those who have no one to help them.

Friedenshafen

During 1970 a few of the Friedensheim staff reached out to street youth during the "hippie and anti-establishment movement." Many of these youth came from situations that breed hate, rebellion, drug and alcohol abuse, moral abuse, no sense of accountability, and lack of purpose in life. Many were no longer welcome in their parental homes and became outcasts who found themselves together on the streets. Numerous ones showed an interest in purposeful living and came to Friedensheim to live. However, the building was not designed to accommodate them, neither did the schedule at Friedensheim offer sufficient time to work through the problems of the street youth.

In January, 1971 AMA purchased a three story house in Lichterfelde (southern Berlin), three miles from Friedensheim. That spring the building was renovated to provide private living quarters for one married couple, two single staff, plus bedrooms for at least six fellows on the third floor. In April, 1971 approximately one hundred people from eight different organizations gathered to dedicate Friedenshafen (Haven of Peace) to the Lord, and for ministering to Berlin's outcasts.

In August, 1971 the staff at Friedenshafen compiled the following stipulations for boys who came to live with them:

1. We expect them to be open to belief in Jesus Christ, even when they don't understand much or have doubts. They are to participate in devotions and discussions, including Bible studies, and church services at Friedensheim.
2. The use of drugs won't be tolerated.
3. The residents must participate in the family fellowship of the house and adhere to the household rules.
4. The first 14 days are probationary. During this time the "guest" is to decide whether he will accept these stipulations.

Many youth came for a short time, glimpsed at what it would cost them to stay, then moved on. The youth who chose to stay and allowed God to change them found the forgiveness, peace, and joy they were longing for. This ministry made a lasting difference and helped those who were faithful to the Lord to lead productive lives.

Friedensheim Becomes Independent

During 1973 and 1974 the church at Friedensheim ran into conflicting views with AMA. During that time the leadership at Friedensheim agreed to 1) extend membership to those active in the fellowship, 2) offer open communion, 3) baptize by immersion, and 4) omit the practice of non-conformity. Sufficient debate followed as the two schools of thought between AMA and Friedensheim drifted farther apart. The church at Friedensheim desired to become independent of AMA's support. In 1975 AMA offered to sell them the Friedensheim property at half the market value. They accepted the proposition, and began organizing ways to pay for their commitment. The year following, the people associated with Friedensheim worked hard to pay the financial needs of Friedensheim. Six months later they became self-supporting. Sometime during

1977 they became an independent church and no longer received financial support from AMA. Four years later AMA received its last payment for the property.

Today there is still an active church at Friedensheim which is comparable to the Free Evangelical Churches in Europe.

In May, 1979 AMA made the decision to discontinue the work at Friedenshafen. The church at Friedensheim became interested in purchasing the property and AMA offered it to them at half the market value. The church bought Friedenshafen, but ran into financial difficulty, needed to close the work, sell the property, and sent AMA the last payment in 1987. Thus AMA closed its last chapter in Berlin, Germany; confident that God's Word, which was sown through the years, will accomplish its purpose.

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Workers, Addresses, and Time Served in Berlin, Germany:

Joe and Salome Roth, Corfu, N. Y.; April, 1956 - September, 1958

Anna Mary Stoltzfus, Lancaster, Pa.; April, 1956 - August, 1959

Simon and Elsie Schrock, Grantsville, Md; April 1958 - March, 1961

Louis Yoder, Roman Beiler, Naaman Stoltzfus, Jesse Yoder, Lloyd Hershberger, and Harold Overholt: Helped to construct Friedensheim; April, 1958 - July, 1958

Melvin Bontrager; Middlebury, Ind.; June, 1958 - August, 1960

Iva Burkholder, Middlebury, Ind.; February, 1959 - April, 1962

Alta Marie Miller, Va. Beach, Va.; September, 1959 - October, 1962

Second term: February, 1965 - April, 1968

Third term: June, 1971 - November, 1976

Raymond Smoker, Drumore, Pa.; May, 1960 - July, 1963

Roman and Fannie Beiler, Paradise, Pa.; September, 1960 - October, 1963

Lewis and Mary Ellen Overholt; Va. Beach, Va.; February, 1961- January, 1978

Viola Mast; Goshen, Ind.; January, 1962 - February, 1965

Marie Yoder, Orange Va.; August, 1962 - August, 1965

Second term: July, 1968 - December, 1971

David Yoder, Belleville, Pa.; July, 1963 - January, 1967

Second term: June, 1968 - December, 1971

James and Ruth Yoder, Sugarcreek, Ohio; September, 1963 - September, 1966

Second term: December, 1966 - October, 1968

Merlin Hershberger, Amelia, Va., at Frohnau: May, 1964 - May, 1966

Lloyd Beachy, Hartville, Ohio, at Frohnau: May, 1964 - May, 1966

Eunice Miller, Kalona, Iowa; July, 1965 - July, 1968

Short term: May, 1972 - August, 1972

Albert Yoder, Sugarcreek, Ohio: September, 1965 - October, 1968

Paul Yoder, Hutchinson, Kan., at Frohnau: June, 1966 - October, 1968

Lawrence Gingerich, Plain City, Ohio, at Frohnau: June, 1966 - July, 1968

Rudy Overholt, Auburn, Ky.; February, 1967 - April, 1970

Esther Helmuth, Grove City, Minn.; February, 1968 - April, 1979

Eli and Mary Jane Miller, Staunton, Va.; September, 1968 - August, 1973

Noah and Anna Mae Yoder, Aroda, Va, at Frohnau: September, 1968 - September, 1970

Served at Friedensheim: October, 1970 - May, 1975

James Miller, Tenn.; May, 1970 - April, 1979

Leon Miller, Hutchinson, Kan.; January, 1971 - May, 1974

Samuel Kauffman, Bird-in-Hand, Pa.; June, 1971 - July, 1973

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