

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BWB-11
Communal Living in Berlin

Im Rosental 96
53 Bonn
West Germany
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, N. Y. 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

It seemed curious afterward to remember that the first discussion began when Reinhardt mentioned that he and Ruth were thinking of getting a dog. Curious because in three hours of earnest, soul-searching conversation among the six members (plus one semi-permanent guest who took part in the discussion) of a Berlin communal apartment, the dog question remained unsolved and the personal needs and desires of each participant had been examined from every side, probed gently at the most tender spots, yet the wounds and indecisions left open for time and further discussion to heal.

This early morning session (from midnight to three a.m.) was the most revealing portion of three days I spent in Berlin as a guest of a student Wohngemeinschaft, a communal apartment shared by four political science students and two students of law at the Free University. It was an impromptu discussion that delved into the tensions which had arisen since the six students (now seven) began their experiment in community living a few weeks before, and one in which I took no part. But the students' gradual acceptance of me as at least a friendly observer, their freedom of expression in front of an outsider, prompted me to return for a deliberately-planned interview which allowed a more thorough probe of the trials and joys in a modern revival of the communal living concept.

Sharing an apartment, even for both sexes, is not a new idea for university students. It's foreign to me, a member of the "silent" generation of students, because at my small-town Alma Mater only a few male students lived off campus. Although I haven't returned to Tennessee Tech in a decade, letters from a former professor lead me to doubt whether the permissive (or liberated?) society has made enough impact there to allow boy and girl students to live together without benefit of wedlock. I don't think it would be tolerated by the townspeople or the in loco parentis university administration. To be fair, one could not expect all small-town American college students to jump from high school into a European university atmosphere, where independent study and a general "live and let live" tradition prevails. European students are also older than their American counterparts. I understand, however, that off-campus apartments for both sexes (mixed and separately) raise hardly an eyebrow at the larger, more liberal American universities.

I believe this shared-apartment living among American students, however, has neither the communal nor political emphasis that Berlin's leftist students place on their Kommunen and Wohngemeinschaften. Despite historic failures of the

commune idea, such as the Russian Sorokin Commune of the 1930's, and the contemporary bad example of Berlin's so-called "Horror Commune," Kommune I, whose members were expelled by the SDS for their shock tactics, many German students who subscribe to a socialist ideology are striving to practice radical socialism in their daily lives.

Convinced that our affluent society nurtures greed and selfishness, they contribute to a common household kitty--from each according to his stipend, to each according to his needs--from which the apartment rent, food and entertainment are paid. Influenced by Freud and Marxist sexologist Wilhelm Reich, they seek to break away from the rigid, hypocritical mores of their middle-class upbringing by forthright discussion of their personal relationships. Disillusioned by the stagnation and seeming inability to reform of a parliamentary system (at both the university and national level), they strive to work together toward a socialist revolution.

It isn't easy, because these students are trying to subordinate individual needs for the common good while allowing each person to expand his individual existential development. In a society whose warts they see, they're trying to burn out their own warts and form a political cadre for future operations on society.

Before pursuing the discussions, I'll introduce the cast of characters and set the scene: Wieland, 25, a soft-spoken, spade-bearded 8th semester political science student; Reinhardt, 20, blond, clean-shaven 4th semester political science; Ruth, 19, a brunette with close-cropped hair and cheerful, little-girl mien, 2nd semester political science; Michael, 21, dark-bearded and slight with thick glasses, a 4th semester law student; Barbara, 24, slim, pretty 9th semester student of law; Birgit, 21, blonde-maned, coltish, a 6th semester sociology and political science student who had an unhappy earlier commune experience; long-term guest Lutz, 28, political science student and former student government officer.

The communal apartment is in a middle-class section of Berlin, Nollendorfstrasse 28, on the fourth and top floor of a once-handsome turn of the century building which originally housed officers of the Reichswehr. A marble entrance staircase leads up to spacious apartments with 13-foot stucco-trimmed ceilings. These provide the proper setting for the students' furniture collection of massive wooden wardrobes, desks, couches, tables and chairs--in American terms the furnishings qualify as late attic or early Salvation Army. The apartment has four large bedrooms, a broad hall, a common room some 16 by 30 feet (still sparsely furnished with a dining table, chairs, well-filled bookshelves and two couches for overnight guests), a kitchen, bath and separate toilet.

Bedrooms are divided according to the sexual relationships--the two couples (Reinhardt and Ruth, Michael and Barbara) each have a bedroom, and the two singles (Wieland and Birgit) have the other two. The current sexual attachments are considered long-term and accepted by the six students. Socialization of sex is not a burning issue here, as in some communes where free love among

all occupants is obligatory. On the other hand, the couples profess a liberal attitude in sexual matters, and would discuss in group sessions any change in the present setup.

An emphasis on couple instead of community communication, however, is a problem that cropped up dramatically in both discussion evenings at the Wohngemeinschaft. The dog issue, introduced casually by Reinhardt and Ruth on the first evening, prompted some aggressive responses from other members. "Ruth and I are thinking of getting a dog," said Reinhardt. "We were talking to someone at OSI (the Otto Suhr Institute for political science studies at the Free University) who has one to give away, and since we both grew up with dogs, we'd like to have one here."

"What do we need with a dog?" responded Wieland. "Isn't that just a crying towel for Ruth, something she can tell her problems to instead of talking to us? I've always been suspicious of animal attachments."

"If you need something else to take care of and love, something to cement the relationship you two have, why don't you make a baby?" added Barbara angrily, a remark for which she later apologized. Somewhat later someone accused Ruth and Reinhardt of puppy-love, a charge they warded off only half-successfully.

Such brutal exchanges, from my observation, seem more the exception than the rule among the Wohngemeinschaft members. Although these students recognize no arbitrary limits on topics of discussion, I sensed a certain tenderness and genuine spirit of helpfulness among the seven which seemed to bridge those moments when a vital nerve was struck. Frank comments, yes, but not the viciousness of a forced "lemon squeeze" which unfortunately poses as psychological group therapy in some student communes. On the second evening, Michael pointed out the danger of such psychoanalysis--"with group psychoanalysis you can talk yourself into problems. It's dilettante and destroying."

Group therapy, and the wish to combat loneliness and share stimulation, can be the primary purpose for establishing a student communal apartment. Other communes are founded purely for collective political and scientific work. Still others are formed by students and workers for economic reasons.

The Nollendorfstrasse Wohngemeinschaft is a mixture of the three types, as are most of the Kommunen and Wohngemeinschaften in Berlin. Including all varieties, "and if you count any student group above four who live together, there must be almost 150 communes in Berlin now," Wieland told me. In the Federal Republic there are dozens more. And the group living concept is spreading across Europe--in Milan the Italian magazine Kent counted ten communes, in Scandinavia five young Swedish married couples began the "group family" experiment (generally non-political) in spring 1967, and some twenty group families of married and unmarried, couples and singles, with and without children, now exist in Denmark.

The commune idea is two to three years old in Berlin, explained Wieland. "At OSI the leftist students first began thinking about an anti-authoritarian criticism of the university structure, society in general and the Vietnam war in

particular. For a while it was just theory--how we could develop a science different from what is practiced here, something that would dissolve the isolated individualism for a collectivization." One of the theoretical topics then was whether a collective scientific process would influence the scientific goal.

Berlin's Kommune I, formed in 1966, translated theory into practice so radically that subsequent communal living attempts have been penalized by the original commune's shenanigans. Free love, luridly described in the West German press, was required of all members, and hours were spent in de rigueur group sessions on orgasm difficulties. Paying the rent was problematical, until the group began to publish pornographic pictures from Sweden and then cashed in on fame by charging for interviews. One K-1 member garnered headlines last year by a crudely explicit show of contempt for the German judicial system--called to court for disorderly conduct, he defecated on the lawyers' table and wiped himself with pages from the trial proceedings.

"The K-1 was organized in another existential situation," said Wieland, "and I don't know whether they were criminalized before the commune or after. At any rate they tried to build an anti-society within this society to provoke and jeopardize the society."

Because of K-1's reputation, most Berlin landlords conjure up visions of sexual orgies, filthy rooms and unpaid rent when they hear the word "commune." "There's no theoretical difference between a commune and a Wohngemeinschaft," said Wieland, "except that the commune is so tarnished through K-1." Unfortunately, the landlords are leery of any student communal living arrangements. "There are plenty of large old apartments like this standing empty in Berlin," Wieland said, "but I looked for six weeks before I found a landlord who would rent to students."

To alleviate such problems, Wieland and other students are trying to set up an intermediary rental agency which will provide insurance against property damage and overdue rent payments. "This could serve a political function too because then one could organize all the communes for political action. The leftist movement is in a phase of political showdown with the Establishment. We need to create a political organization that won't be vulnerable to attack, so that if the leaders are in jail, we can still coordinate the political work. We're also seeking to move away from the authoritarian organization to a group identity." (Jailing of the leftist leaders is no idle concern--in West Berlin 1,878 legal proceedings have been taken out in the past 15 months against members of the leftist Ausserparlamentarischen Opposition.)

Wieland said he had thought about a communal experiment since the theoretical discussion began, "but I couldn't imagine the collective life then, and I didn't know the people with whom I would live." During the winter semester, however, as his work with the socialist students at the Otto Suhr Institute brought him into frequent contact with Ruth and Reinhardt, he decided to put his socialist theories into practice.

"I decided I could organize my time better if I lived with the people I was working with...we could communicate more intensively and work more intensively." Wieland, Reinhardt and Ruth then began to look for like-minded companions. "We had to have a certain sympathy for each other...not just for the political work, but a sympathy so that the work and discussion mean something, so that the importance evolves not just from the work together but because we are doing it."

Through the Sozialdemokratische Hochschulbund (the student group which is supported by, but stands to the left of, or against, the Social Democratic party) they met Michael and invited him to join. Michael asked fellow law student Barbara. Birgit, on Wieland's invitation, completed the group. Lutz declined an earlier invitation because he preferred his privacy in a student dormitory and because the girl with whom he planned to move in refused to join. After his dormitory room accidentally burned, he moved in as a paying guest until his own room is refurbished.

"The six of us decided that our political and personal goals were the same, and we moved in in mid-March," said Wieland. "Since then we've found that our mode of living is not as similar as we thought."

Housecleaning habits, for example, had to be gradually adjusted to a communal schedule. For the first weeks, there were no definite assignments for cooking meals, washing dishes and cleaning the apartment. Whoever thought the apartment should be cleaned was free to do it--which usually meant that Wieland, a well-organized and industrious type who likes a neat home, wielded the broom. His compulsive busy-ness irked the others, and they teasingly called him "Vati." Ruth took over most of the cooking, until Lutz protested that she was playing the housewife role, and developing a martyr complex besides. Recently Lutz has been doing much of the cooking.

For a while the dishwashing chores were assigned to couples, but Barbara objects to a permanent separation into chores-by-twos, because that emphasizes the already too-strong tendency toward couples, not group, communication. "I think we're playing up the kitchen too much as an area of communications anyway," she explained on the second discussion evening. "When Birgit and I were washing dishes together one day, we couldn't talk about sexual problems there--that's bizarre."

After six weeks of laissez-faire housework, the group assigned Barbara the task of working out a schedule. In alphabetical order, one person will be responsible daily for washing dishes, carrying out the garbage, cleaning up the kitchen. The weekly chores of shopping, cleaning the bathrooms, cleaning the hall and common room will be done by two persons together, but not according to the couple attachments. There's no definite assignment for cooking, since not all can cook equally well. And each is responsible for cleaning his own room.

Budgetary problems also cause temporary flareups on the domestic scene. Each member of the Wohngemeinschaft contributes two-thirds of his monthly scholarship to the communal treasury (the members' stipends range from \$80 to

\$112.50 per month), and keeps a third for personal pocket money and clothes. The rent (\$150), food, household supplies and furniture, even cigarettes, are paid out of the common treasury. Until recently cosmetics for the girls were in the private category (Reinhardt joked: "The women are still repressed.") but that has now been socialized. Since Michael and Barbara seldom have the use of the communal car (a small Renault which was a gift from Reinhardt's father, driven only by Reinhardt for insurance reasons), Reinhardt is working out a plan to reduce their share of the gasoline expenses.

When the kitty gets low, Barbara and Ruth attack Lutz (who did much of the grocery shopping before the new schedule went into effect) for buying too extravagantly. "He's like a father who buys something for his children and demands that they're happy with it," wailed Barbara. "If we were millionnaires, I wouldn't care, but we don't have to eat as grandly as he does. He needs to lose weight anyway." The canned goods in the kitchen should also be used up, Ruth pointed out, before new supplies are bought.

Guest Lutz contributes more for food than the others (but no rent) because he has an outside job and also because he eats more, but he admits his appetite is an occasional disturbing factor. "I feel awfully limited in the standard of living here. The stress of turning around a penny six times before you can spend it is more than I could stand indefinitely. I think it would be a good idea if two or three always had a part-time job."

Living in a collective also requires some transition of study habits, said Barbara, who was fiercely independent and had always lived alone until this semester. "I used to spend seven hours in succession studying at the Technical University, where no one knew me. But now I look forward to coming home, I talk, and don't get so much done. If you have iron self-discipline, that's fine... but I have to fight with myself."

The Wohngemeinschaft has increased Wieland's study effectiveness. "I used to spend more time at the university too--because my room was cold in the winter and it cost so much to heat. But I lost time there, the work I did was irrelevant. Of five work-groups that I'm involved in this semester, four of them meet here in the apartment."

Like Birgit, who seeks emotional stability within the communal apartment, Barbara moved into the Wohngemeinschaft for personal as well as political reasons. "I will have a year of hard study as a junior barrister after I finish my law exams, but I don't want to be totally removed from the political discussion. I know how much I like to be alone--I'm afraid I like it too much." Although she has been engaged twice, Barbara admits she has a horror of couple relationships. "Such a relationship is only possible for me within the group. I think isolation for a couple is dangerous."

Michael and Barbara established their relationship after they joined the Wohngemeinschaft, but the relationship that Wieland hoped to establish with Birgit has not materialized, so he seeks sexual satisfaction outside the group. On the first discussion evening, the six members frankly admitted to each other

that Wieland's disappointed hopes created tension within the group, and I was impressed with the gentleness and maturity with which they handled the emotional subject. Baring one's sorrows, of course, is difficult even among friends--Wieland admitted the next day that "I almost howled a couple of times."

Birgit's guilt about her promiscuous tendencies--which prompted her to leave the free love atmosphere of a commune in a West German university town--has not yet been resolved. "I have a strong aversion to psychoanalysis," she confessed at the second discussion evening, "but I've decided to see a psychoanalyst now, using the group as an emotional backstop." Timidly voicing the dilemma which must face many an emotionally-insecure leftist, she added, "I have no desire to be integrated."

All the members of the collective expected to intensify their political activity by living together, but the mixture of political science and law has not yet provided the stimulation and information exchange they expected. Michael now works four hours daily in the office of Berlin leftist attorney and student defender Horst Mahler, and seldom has time from studies and work to devote to group discussions or group political projects. Within a politically-motivated collective, however, Michael has been able to join his political and personal life. "The relationships I had with girls before now were always ruined because of my political work," he said.

Despite the initial problems, the students anticipate a continuing improvement in the communal relationships and political productivity. At the second discussion evening, when another political science student and leftist friend dropped by and, listening to the conversation, scoffed at the "middle-class, inquisitional questions," the Wohngemeinschaft members defended the examination of their motives and relationships. "You can't say it was idealistic at first when we now are trying to tie together the realities and our demands," Reinhardt said. "In the last few weeks, we've had longer conversations, and things are going better." Lutz added later, "we don't dwell on an anti-bourgeois or anti-middle-class kind of life. We all know how difficult it is when we go home to our families. It's accepted...we don't need to remind ourselves all the time."

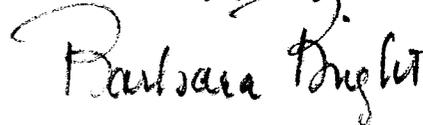
Establishing an anti-society commune would be merely negative, Wieland said, and their idea is to create a positive atmosphere. Like Barbara, he expects to use the Wohngemeinschaft as a means of keeping up with the political movement while finishing his university studies, and to stabilize his revolutionary beliefs after he enters society. Now active at the Otto Suhr Institute as vice-chairman of the tri-partite governing council, Wieland said, "I realize I have to get out of university politics in order to get my diploma. But by living with others who are still active, even when I begin my career, I hope to avoid becoming resigned to the society or becoming a cynic. We can't get rid of the difficulties in entering an integrated profession, but we can be more protected in a group than as individuals alone against the society."

It is too early to judge the political value of such communal living experiments as this Berlin Wohngemeinschaft, or to judge whether the students will be able to retain their revolutionary ideals when confronted with society

outside the university. But psychologist Helmut Kentler, director of the department for social and adult education at Berlin's Education Center, had this to say in an article on group living in the May issue of *Pardon*: "It is no wonder that such experiments up to now have been made primarily by intellectuals, for the resulting problems demand a high level of introspection. Naturally new constraints and frustrations appear, but these are happily borne by socially communicative persons who find group life more satisfactory than the couple arrangements. In the long run these groups, if they increase substantially, could bring about a basic change in our societal order, because the acclimation of numerous persons to non-authoritarian communication, to cooperation and to introspection even in public life can set in motion anti-authoritarian processes which, in the last instance, must have a democratic effect."

Members of the older generation may be shocked, but such experiments are surely superior to the shallow movie dates, hamburgers at the drive-in, automobile petting, early marriage and later divorce that covers the range of experience for many young Americans.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barbara Bright". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Barbara Bright

Received in New York May 21, 1969.