



America House Nuremberg - Northern Bavaria's direct line to the United States



Willy Brandt delivering his speech at the Nuremberg America House 1963

(photo: DAI Nuremberg)

On September 25, 1963, three months after John F. Kennedy's legendary visit to Berlin, the ruling mayor of the city Willy Brandt opened the *Berlin Weeks* in Nuremberg. Remarkably enough, he had not been invited by a German institution but by the Nuremberg America House.

Today's director of the German-American Institute, William Sheldon finds it hard to date the article correctly which had been published prior to the event in a local newspaper. What the writer outlined then still could be the motto of his work: *The program says: "The City of Nuremberg and the German-American Institute present ..."* Printed strikingly next to this is the city's coat of arms. *The coat of arms - that's literally all what the City of Nuremberg contributes to these "Berlin Weeks"! The rest has to be done by the America House. The rest - this is almost everything.*

The America House, founded in November 1946 as *American Library* in the building of the local Military Government, is an institution with a long tradition in Nuremberg, but it could do better without some of the continuities, for example the same number of staff members (4) as in the forties, which is completely insufficient for a modern service facility.

The US Army liberated Nuremberg on April 20, 1945, ironically the *Führer's* birthday. The population of the largely destroyed city was in need of almost everything: housing, food, water, electricity. But in this dreary situation particularly young people also were eager to learn about the culture of the United States. They felt betrayed by the German authorities and rejected the values of the adults which brought so much misery to the world. Despite of twelve years of Nazi propaganda and in contrary to the initial expectations of the US officials in charge

of the reeducation and reorientation programs the vast majority of German youth had not become fanatical *Werewolves*, but found herself a new role model in the American way of life.



In the sixties: German teenage girls in the reading room of the America House

(photo: DAI Nuremberg)

Under these circumstances the first decade of the Nuremberg America House was a German-American success story. Northern Bavarians gobbled up the steadily growing stocks of books and periodicals at the America House and its many branches between Würzburg and Regensburg, Hof and Ansbach. After the move to a fancy villa in 1947 2,000 readers a week stormed the shelves of the Nuremberg library, trying to catch glimpses at a new glamorous and fascinating world, which for them living in one of Germany's most heavily destroyed cities, seemed to be on a planet far away. The America Houses were popular, their courses and lectures attracted huge attendances. Their work required no theoretical superstructure designed in Washington DC. The activities simply matched the hunger of young Germans for every aspect of the life in the United States.

Even after the Western Allies allowed their zones of occupation to become a sovereign state, Nuremberg's German-American Institute experienced a new highlight in its history. In 1956, ten years after the foundation, its then 44 employees packed the 18,000 books, 3,000 music records and 400 spools of film in large boxes and moved to the facility's new home at Gleißbühlstraße 11. During the solemn opening ceremony the present dignitaries from both nations agreed on the statement of the American ambassador James B. Conant, that the successful work of the Nuremberg America House in the field of education was crowned by moving into this modern building.



The America House at Gleißbühlstraße 11 until 2007

(photo: Susanne Rieger)

Today, the America House still breathes the spirit of those years, because the interior scarcely has changed. This impression of an architectural museum conserving many details of the 50s' taste paradoxically is the result of radical changes. The building's bricks could tell the story of the shut-down of the institute's branches in Northern Bavaria, the cut-backs in the American share in funding and the stagnation of German payments. They saw the Anti-American Vietnam demonstrations in the sixties and seventies as well as the retreat of the US Army from the region in the nineties and today's omnipresence of the set pieces which the advertising industry praises as *American culture*.

The fact that the America House despite of these negative developments became no *Jurassic Park* of German-American relations is the achievement of William Sheldon and his untiring staff. Besides running Northern Bavaria's largest American library and the impressing variety of events organized by the America House, his institute arranges transatlantic contacts such as city partnerships and exchange programs for students. Sheldon was also substantially involved in the foundation of the *Franconian International School* at Herzogenaurach, a neighboring town of Nuremberg.

Until the summer of 1998 the employees and the members of the supporting society at best reaped warm words from city officials for their efforts. Only by a spectacular fundraising campaign Sheldon could draw the public's attention to the desolate financial situation of the America House and was able to continue its activities for the time being by donations. The promise of the City of Nuremberg to double her subsidies to a total of DM 80,000 a year gives him hope for the future.

Sheldon's anticipations for the future are coined both by his typical American optimism and experiences as the long-standing head of the Nuremberg German-American Institute: *We are no anachronism. In my opinion it wouldn't be wise to cut off the direct line between the Franconian region and the USA in an era of increasing international networking and to ignore the opportunities offered by the Nuremberg America House. It pleases me that people here seem to share my opinion.*

Epilogue 2003

After 22 years in this position, the director of Nuremberg's America House Dr. William Sheldon has retired in July 2003.

In our interview in 1999 he said: *Retrospectively in a certain way my life was one of taking opportunities, adapting to and growing into new tasks.* One of these opportunities, the directorship of the German-American Institute, became his life's work for the Salina (Kansas) born.

The beginnings were not very promising though: In his interview he was asked by the head of the GAI Dr. Alexander Meier whether he knows Hans Sachs. Since Dr. Sheldon had well prepared, he could tell much about the famous shoemaker and poet. The question however referred not to him but the public prosecutor of same name who as a team member of the then popular TV quiz show *Was bin ich?* has been well known also beyond the city's boundaries. As a member of GAI's executive board Sachs was very committed to the institution's cause.

During his years of service Dr. Sheldon sailed successfully around this and other cliffs of the changeable German-American relationships and kept his America House on course, though the diminishing financial and personnel resources made it more and more difficult to create a high quality program of lectures and exchanges between the two countries.

Since his family and he are feeling comfortable in Franconia, Dr. Sheldon will stay in Nuremberg also after his active time because: *Probably I became an American only since I live in Nuremberg.*

We wish him a meaningful retirement and the GAI continuing success in its work.

Epi-Epilogue 2007

In September 2007 another chapter was added to the story of Nuremberg's German-American Institute: It had to move two house numbers, from Gleißbühlstraße 11 to 9. This does not seem much of a change but means a substantial reduction of the room available for activities from 856 to 240 square meters in order to save 30,000 Euro of the annual rent.

Despite the moving to less spacious premises the staff and its part-time head Andreas Falke keep their optimism still to be up to their mission by intensifying the cooperation with other cultural and educational institutions in Nuremberg.

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