

RICHARD SCHIRRMANN

A biographical sketch

1962

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RICHARD SCHIRRMANN



J. J. Wirmann.

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The first youth hosteller

A biographical sketch

by

Graham Heath

Published by the

INTERNATIONAL YOUTH HOSTEL FEDERATION

COPENHAGEN

1962

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B2046

INTRODUCTION

This is not a history of the youth hostel movement, either in Germany or in the world. It is the story of a single individual, a great man but a man who had the faults as well as the virtues of greatness; and I have tried to present a picture of him as he really was. This is not an easy task, because for certain parts of his life the only sources of information are to be found in what he told or wrote in old age, looking back on events in which he had been passionately involved many years previously.

Richard Schirrmann lived through a stormy period of German — and world — history and was repeatedly caught up in events which taxed the judgment of the most far-sighted politicians. And he was not a politician. He was an idealist who had a simple faith in the goodness of human nature and was only truly happy in the company of the young.

Schirrmann's greatness lies in the tenacity with which he pursued a single purpose — the establishment of youth hostels — and in his capacity for transmitting to others the enthusiasm which inspired him.

It is seldom granted to pioneers to live to see the full fruit of their work. Schirrmann did so. When he died the youth hostel movement had already spread to every continent of the world, a visible memorial to one man's vision and determination.

Little is said in this book about Schirrmann's friend and colleague, Wilhelm Münker. But it must be recorded that without his sober judgment and gift for organisation Schirrmann's task would never have been accomplished. Perhaps one day his story will also be written.

I have drawn on such written sources of information about Schirrmann as are available, and these are listed at the end of this book. Particular mention must be made, however, of the excellent history of the German youth hostel movement by Karl Götz, to which I am indebted for a large proportion of my factual material. But any opinions or judgments are my own.

CHAPTER 1

THE SCHOOLMASTER'S SON

The village school of Grunenfeld in East Prussia was like many others in the 1870's — a single class-room in which a single teacher taught up to a hundred boys and girls of all ages. The teacher, who was in charge of the school for forty years, was a sturdy East Prussian of peasant stock, who combined his teaching with the care of a smallholding: cows, pigs, hens and bees. His name was August Schirrmann.

His eldest child, Richard, born on May 15th 1874, grew up in these rural surroundings, helping his father with the livestock, running barefoot in the woods, sitting on one of the crowded school benches among the other village children.

At the age of 13 he was sent to a school at Eisenberg which boasted two classes and was in charge of his mother's father, also a schoolmaster. What more natural for Richard, when the time came to choose a career, than to train for the teaching profession? And so he passed on to a pre-training college and finally, at the age of 17, to a teacher's training college near Königsberg.

Discipline here was strict, and Richard would have been unhappy had it not been for the inspiration provided by the geography teacher, Herr Fischer. The geography lessons were brought to life by Fischer's descriptions of his own journeyings, by excursions on foot in the surroundings and, above all, by a school journey, under Fischer's leadership, to the distant Erzgebirge (the mountain range bordering Bohemia).

"This single walking tour", Richard Schirrmann writes, "assumed such importance in our life as eighteen-year-olds, that we dreamed of it for a year beforehand and talked about it for years afterwards". They had saved up for it since they entered the training college, in order to meet the cost of fares and of accommodation in village inns, the only form of shelter available to them. The party

CHAPTER 2

TO THE LAND OF SMOKE

Much as he loved his native countryside, however, Schirrmann could not be happy to stay for ever in East Prussia. The wanderlust was in his blood. And in 1901, at the age of twenty-seven, he took a decisive step. He left East Prussia for ever and took a teaching appointment at Gelsenkirchen, in the heart of the Ruhr district. His new home and his school lay among the giant pitheads, slag heaps and coke ovens of the sprawling industrial area which had sprung up in the course of Germany's rapid industrial development. Here, in new surroundings, he hoped to find an opportunity to try out new teaching methods and perhaps to try to improve the unhappy lot of the children of Germany's 'Black Country'.

"A great part of our people", Schirrmann wrote later, "lives huddled together in big towns and industrial areas . . . places bearing the pestilential reek of the grave. They are a death-dealing sea of stone". Here were pale-faced children, who had never heard the song of the lark, never seen a green field.

Needless to say, his first step was to take his class out for excursions into the Westphalian hill countryside which still lay only a few miles from the town. "The way goes up a steep hillside", he writes. "Then their lungs are filled full with clear mountain air, completely different from the stale air of the gymnasium and school in the town. And their eyes, which have been tortured almost to myopia by tiny print, are focussed again on distant things, luxuriate on the deep green of meadow and wood . . . Their cheeks glow, their bare arms grow tanned. Gaiety and bravado flash from their bright young eyes . . ."

It was an unforgettable moment for Schirrmann when his class stood for the first time before a mountain stream and saw fish swimming in its pools. "Real fish", one of the boys exclaimed, "real, genuine, living fish!"

In 1903 Schirrmann was married. It was a marriage "made out



Altena and its castle

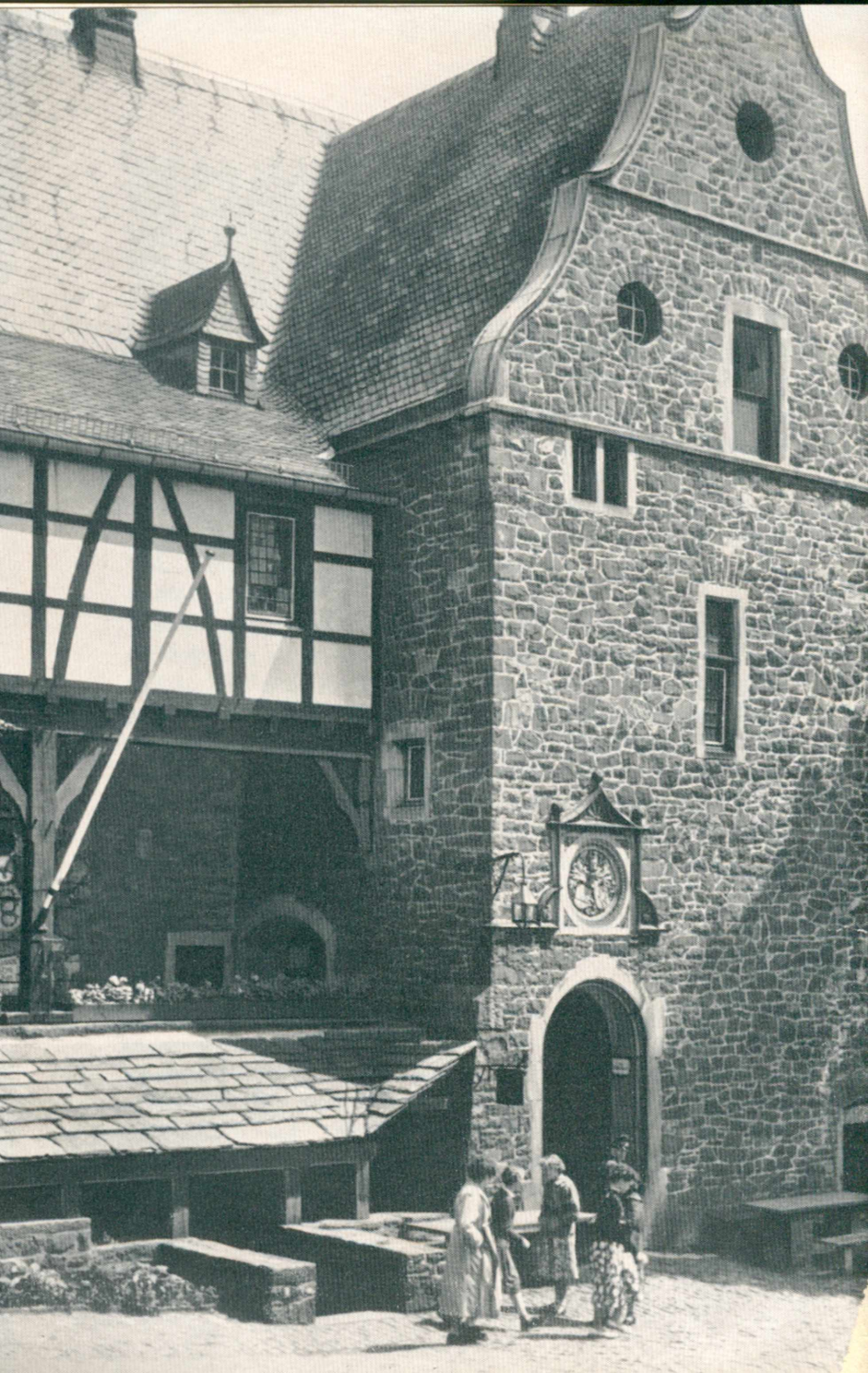
CHAPTER 3

THE WANDERVÖGEL — AND THE FIRST YOUTH HOSTEL

Before taking our story further, we must glance at the social background in Germany at the turn of the century, the fruitful soil in which Schirrmann's idea of 'youth hostels' was planted.

There is a German word for which no exact equivalent exists in English: *das Wandern*; it covers walking, tramping, rambling, roaming, even (in modern times) cycling; moving from place to place at a leisurely tempo with no purpose other than to explore the world; there is an element of the Romantic in it, too, recalling the wandering scholars of the middle ages, the apprentices and skilled workers who moved from city to city to ply their trade. (As early as 1500 there were 30 German printers working in Rome alone). The *Wanderlust*, or 'urge to roam' is recalled in countless German folk songs and ballads, of which Schubert's "Wandering Miller" is probably the best known outside Germany, and it finds its place in German literature in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* and Eichendorff's *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts*.

But during the second half of the 19th century, an 'economic miracle' in the recently united German Empire brought an abrupt change in German social conditions: industrialisation, a spreading railway system, unprecedented prosperity, an ominous spirit of nationalism and militarism. The old carefree spirit of *das Wandern* seemed to be threatened with extinction by the rising tide of comfortable bourgeois materialism. There were, it is true, some hopeful signs: from 1860 onwards a number of touring and mountaineering clubs were established to promote a love of Germany's mountain and hill country, to construct simple mountain huts for the accommodation of walkers and to mark out the many long-distance footpaths which now span the Black Forest, the Swabian uplands, the Taunus and every other hill and forest region in Germany. In 1885 Guido Rotter, an industrialist in the Erzgebirge (Austrian Bohemia) founded the first of a series of "Students' and Secondary School Pupils' Hostels" which gradually



CHAPTER 4

AN IDEA BECOMES REALITY

Soon after settling in Altena, Schirrmann had joined the Sauerland Mountain Club (*Sauerländischer Gebirgsverein*) one of the most active of the German regional associations for the encouragement of walking and mountaineering. Although he preferred to walk alone, or with his pupils, he had accepted the office of 'tour leader' in the Altena group of the club, and had led a number of trips. A report on one of these trips came into the hands of the chairman of another group of the Club in Hilchenbach, a small town some 40 miles from Altena. His name was Wilhelm Münker, and he had been born in the same year as Schirrmann. He was the owner of a small metal working factory, but his all-absorbing passion was walking and the open-air life. Münker read Schirrmann's report with interest. "In Altena", he wrote to a colleague, "there is a new 'wanderer' who would be very useful to us in our way-marking commission". And on the following Sunday, at crack of dawn, two members of the commission appeared on Schirrmann's doorstep wearing heavy rucksacks and carrying pots of paint in their hand. He was invited to join them in marking one of the new long-distance footpaths through the Sauerland, applying the discreet little coloured flashes to tree-trunks and stones which would guide subsequent travellers.

In July, 1906, Schirrmann met Münker personally at a meeting of the way-marking commission in Finnentrop. It was the beginning of a life-long friendship. Münker was attracted by the vision and enthusiasm of the young schoolmaster, Schirrmann by the quiet determination and organising ability of the young man of business. When Schirrmann's plans for youth hostels developed he discussed them with Münker, and found in him a devoted ally. In 1910 the two men submitted a proposal to the annual meeting of the Sauerland Mountain Club for the establishment of elementary school children's hostels throughout the Sauerland area. The

◀ Altena castle — the entrance to the youth hostel



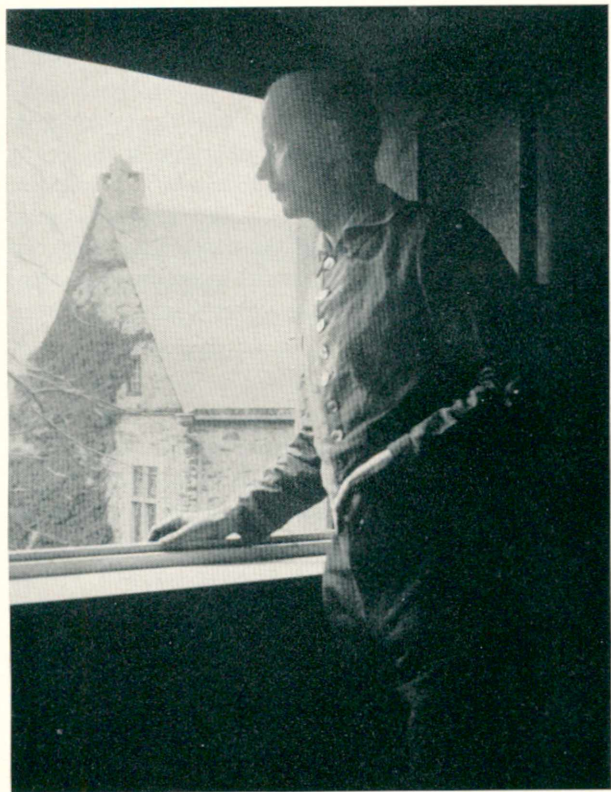
Two photographs of Schirrmann, around 1912

CHAPTER 5

THE MAKINGS OF A MAN OF PEACE

In August 1914 Schirrmann — again like many others — appears to have had no inkling of what was in store for his country and for Europe. He had done his normal military service as a young man of 21, and again two years later, and he was a reservist in the *Landsturm* (Territorial Army). On the outbreak of war he at once volunteered for service and was posted to the Western Front.

He survived four years of active service, was promoted (in 1915) to be a non-commissioned officer, and was awarded the Cross of Merit for Front-Line Fighters. But these four years brought about a profound change in his outlook on world affairs. One incident which made a particularly deep impression on him took place in December 1915, when his regiment was holding a position on the Bernhardstein, one of the mountains of the Vosges. It was separated from the French troops by a narrow no-man's-land "strewn with shattered trees, the ground ploughed up by shell-fire, a wilderness of earth, tree-roots and tattered uniforms . . . When the Christmas bells sounded in the villages of the Vosges behind the lines" (Schirrmann's account continues) "something fantastically unmilitary occurred. German and French troops spontaneously made peace and ceased hostilities; they visited each other, through disused trench tunnels, and exchanged wine, cognac and cigarettes for Westphalian black bread, biscuits and ham. This suited them so well that they remained good friends even after Christmas was over". Military discipline was soon restored, but Schirrmann found himself pondering over the incident. "Why", he writes, "did the soldiers on the Bernhardstein not want to fight each other any more after celebrating Christmas together? Certainly not out of cowardice, but because they had come to know each other as human beings . . . Suppose that the thoughtful young people of all countries could be provided with suitable



Schirrmann at Altana, after the First World War

CHAPTER 6

THE AFTERMATH OF WAR

But the homeland to which he and his colleagues returned at the end of the War was a very different place from the Germany of 1914. It was a defeated and impoverished country, partly occupied by foreign troops, racked by bitter political dissension, standing on the verge of a fantastic currency inflation. To establish a vast network of well-equipped youth hostels, open to the entire youth of the country, was a formidable task. But the enthusiasts set to work. On 2 November, 1919, the 'Central Committee for German Youth Hostels' (now quite independent of the Sauerland Mountain Club) was established at Altena, with Schirrmann as Chairman and Wilhelm Münker as Honorary Secretary. Münker had made the decision to withdraw from active management of his factory and devote himself entirely to youth hostel work, giving up the greater part of his own home in Hilchenbach for use as offices. Schirrmann had returned to full-time teaching, and into his leisure hours he had to crowd the wardenship of Altena youth hostel and the duties of chairman of the youth hostel organisation. He was overwhelmed with visitors, correspondence, conferences.

"Well, now I've had a break for an hour's sleep", he wrote to Münker one day. "It's just 3 a. m. Now I can get going again". Münker sent this letter to the district school inspector, and shortly afterwards Schirrmann was freed from his teaching duties for three hours a day. He was overjoyed, but it was not until some years later that he learned who was responsible. (Münker never advertised his good deeds).

In August, 1920, the first full handbook of youth hostels was published, containing 700 addresses. On the front page stood a message to the youth of Germany, written by a member of the youth hostel committee: "In your travels, think of the seriousness of the times, and avoid making yourselves conspicuous in your conduct and attire! Avoid alcohol and tobacco on your journeys! Give up cheerfully everything which is not essential . . ."



Addressing a youth rally — Early 1920's



On a speaking tour, in the 1930's

CHAPTER 7

THE CHILDREN'S VILLAGE

In 1925 the German Youth Hostels Association had been offered — and accepted — the rent-free occupation of a former army camp at Staumühle, in the Paderborn heath country. It was a vast place with 25 barracks and 1,000 beds, too big for a normal youth hostel, but ideal for the accommodation of large numbers of children. Under Schirrmann's inspiration Staumühle was turned into a "children's village", to which complete school classes, with their teachers, could be sent from the industrial towns for a month's inexpensive stay in the country.

"The great cities", Schirrmann wrote in a pamphlet describing the project, "have made their miserable children hungry for sun and fresh air. Gloomy tenements and back yards are the home of the majority of children. . . It was when looking for inexpensive equipment for youth hostels in disused military camps that I found our children's village of Staumühle. . . When I saw the magic garden in which it lay, among woods, heather, streams, meadows, broad fields, sand-dunes and near-by hills, with such an unusual and rich fauna and flora, I summoned not only groups of individual children needing rest and recreation, but entire school classes. . . It does not merely serve one school; it opens its hospitable gates to all schools, without distinction; protestant and catholic elementary schools, grammar schools — all live together in harmony".

The 'village' was equipped with a swimming bath, sports grounds, work-shops; progressive educational methods could be tried out; the children themselves painted the buildings and kept the camp tidy. The city of Hagen, under its enlightened burgo-master Cuno, was the first to respond to Schirrmann's appeal, sending a complete contingent of 1,000 children for a month. Other cities followed suit. From May to October relays of children came pale and listless and left ruddy and sunburned. All this for 1,50 Marks a day (about ls. 6d)!



Schirrmann at the time of the Children's Village

in damages. The law-suit dragged on for years, until finally the German Teachers' Association settled the claim.

In 1932 the children's village was closed, and the symbol of Staumühle — 'birds of peace nesting in a disused soldier's helmet' was removed. The Schirrmanns returned to Altena with their own two children. The number was soon to increase to six — three boys and three girls.



The Schirrmann family at Altena, Christmas 1936

CHAPTER 8

INTERNATIONALISM — AND NATIONALISM

The outlook would have been gloomy indeed, had it not been for a new and encouraging development in the youth hostel movement. Throughout the post-war years young people from other countries had been using the German youth hostels in steadily increasing numbers and taking home with them glowing accounts of this new style of travel. Towards the end of the 1920's youth hostel associations were established in a number of European countries in quick succession: Switzerland, Poland, Holland, France, England. . . and in December, 1931, the Secretaries of the Dutch, English and Scottish youth hostel associations came to Hilchenbach to meet Schirrmann and Münker. The idea was conceived of calling an international conference, and on 20 October, 1932, the representatives of 11 associations met in Amsterdam, at the invitation of the Dutch Youth Hostel Association. Schirrmann was elected chairman of the meeting, which was conducted in German, and which led to the establishment of an International Youth Hostel Federation.

Despite his dreams of world brotherhood following the first World War, Schirrmann had hitherto concentrated almost all his attention on the development of youth hostels in his own country. He was not a linguist (he never learned to speak a word of any language but his own) and it seems doubtful if he himself would ever have taken the initiative in carrying the 'gospel' of youth hostels to other countries. But he was delighted to find that his idea had taken root spontaneously in other countries, and he found his new colleagues from abroad very congenial. He was only too pleased to invite representatives of the other associations to a full-scale Conference in Germany, to be held in the following year — 1933.

Profound political changes were taking place in Germany at this time. Three years of mounting unemployment, despair and political strife had brought a majority of Germans to a point

PERSONAL INTERLUDE

It was a hot August day in 1939. I had left the Rhine Valley, where the restless flags were fluttering over columns of marching, uniformed children and the youth hostels were full of their staccato singing. I had come to a small village hidden away in a fold of the Taunus Hills, among cornfields and apple orchards. It was quiet here, quiet enough to think and reflect.

I found Richard Schirrmann in a modest house on the outskirts of the village. A tall, spare figure, holding himself erect and walking with a springy step. A face tanned by the open air, with clear, friendly eyes behind spectacles and a mouth which was constantly ready to smile. Still extraordinarily young and boy-like for a man of sixty-five. And the house seemed full of young children.

Frau Schirrmann offered me a meal, and we talked. Talked of the youth hostels in Germany at which I had stayed on so many cycling tours as a student, and of the spread of the movement to other lands. He spoke a vivid, pithy German, full of unusual turns of phrase, and with an infectious enthusiasm which made his whole face light up. Only when the conversation approached the question of politics did the light leave his face, giving place to the puzzled anxiety of a boy who has woken from a bad dream.

When I left I promised to bring messages to some of his friends abroad, whom he feared he might not see again for a long time. His fears were justified, for a few weeks later war broke out.

For the duration of the War, Schirrmann was allowed to resume work as a teacher (he had been on pension since June, 1934) in the village school at Grävenwiesbach, and this eased the financial situation for his large family. And of course he continued his 'wandering', exploring the idyllic Taunus countryside with his elder children.

"I set out on a trip", he wrote to Munker in 1943, "with some of the village children and my eldest boy, now aged 14. During

the week we saw no sign of anyone on foot. On Sunday there were some trippers — families and young couples — but no youth groups. . . All the schools have given up walking. . . My teacher colleagues simply couldn't understand how I could go walking, at the age of 69, with a group of boys, and carrying a heavy tent, with blankets and equipment, into the bargain. . .”

Again, in January, 1944, he wrote:

“On Sunday a ski tour with my four elder children, aged 10 to 15, on the Feldberg — 22 miles. Not a skier or walker to be seen, young or old. The Hitler Youth have almost completely exterminated ‘wandering’ ”

On May 5th, 1944, Schirrmann reached the age of 70, and his old friends, led by Münker, arranged a celebration. The War was at its climax (a month before the Allied landings in France) and the Nazi authorities were too busy to remember their feud of a decade before. So the celebration was held in Altena Castle, attended by as many of Schirrmann's old friends as could make the journey in the chaotic travelling conditions of the time. Münker was there, and Schomburg. Fritz Thomée (the restorer of Altena Castle), Otto Remmert, the former ‘mayor’ of the children's village, old colleagues from the Sauerland mountain club and the German youth hostels association; messages of congratulation came in from all over Germany. . .

A year later the War was over.



Schirrmann and his family, after the Second World War

CHAPTER 9

THE GRAND OLD MAN

Germany lay defeated and occupied for the second time in Schirrmann's lifetime. Her cities were smoking ruins. Her people on the verge of starvation, demoralised and humiliated by the crimes which had been committed in their name. Twelve million German refugees from Eastern Europe poured into truncated Germany on top of the millions of 'displaced persons' from other lands who had been brought in as forced labour for the Nazi war machine. As for the youth hostels, they were either in ruins or requisitioned as emergency housing. Travel of any kind was out of the question. It seemed impossible that anything could be salvaged from the wreckage of the German youth hostel movement for many years to come.

But within a year Schirrmann und Münker were in contact with each other and with former colleagues. By May, 1946, Schirrmann was able to lead a training course for leaders of walking groups at a youth hostel at Kirchheim, part of which had been freed from requisition. In July of the same year Monroe Smith, of the American youth hostel association, arrived in Germany, having successfully overcome all the administrative hurdles of the Military Government, and set out with his old friend, Schirrmann, on a tour through the whole of Germany to urge on the military and civil authorities the need to re-establish youth hostels. Not content with this, he chartered an aircraft and brought Schirrmann and Münker, dazed and overwhelmed, to attend the first post-war conference of the International Youth Hostel Federation, in Scotland.

It was a dramatic moment, on that September day in 1946, when the two veterans — both aged over 70 — appeared in the Conference Hall to greet former colleagues. Barely fifteen months had passed since the end of the War, and the majority of delegates came from 'enemy' countries, many of which had suffered from years of German occupation. But personal affection over-



Schirrmann on his eightieth
birthday



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Association), 1962 No. 1.
- Verbal and documentary material kindly placed at my disposal
by Frau Elisabeth Schirrmann, Dr. Burkhardt Schom-
burg, Wilhelm Münker and others.

Photographs

Page 2: Flemish Y. H. A. *Page 11:* Städt. Verkehrsamt, Altena.
Page 21: Ruth Hallensleben. *Page 30:* Wilhelm Opladen. *Other
photographs:* German Youth Hostel archives and Frau Schirrmann.





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