



### **Marthashof – a retreat and refuge, in the past as today**

Rapid growth, limited space and considerable social differences characterised the city of Berlin which had an annual growth of around 50,000 inhabitants. Servants and maids who were usually employed in well-off families defined the social and economic life here. There were around 12,000 and this figure increased continually; in the early 1880s there were around 40,000 female maidservants.

At this time the deaconesses of the Kaiserswerther Diakonie (a social welfare organisation) noticed that a growing number of young, inexperienced and innocent girls, who had come to Berlin to look for work, were being hospitalised in the “Department for female patients suffering from syphilis” at the Berlin Charité hospital. Their reports to the Kaiserswerther Diakonie in Kaiserswerth prompted its founder, Minister Theodor Fliedner, (1800–1864), to provide “a Christian hostel and assistance in finding employment for all decent Christian girls who were new in Berlin, and living here, and who had lost their work.”

### **Founding of the maidservants’ hostel**

During a conversation with a nun, the minister learnt about the maidservants’ hostels in Paris which he subsequently used as a model for the Berlin hostel. Fliedner rented two small buildings on the Nickelshof on the “Verlorene” Weg” (the “Lost Road”), north of Berlin, and furnished these with twelve beds and a few furnishings. After a lengthy authorisation process for opening such an establishment for servants, the simple hostel was opened on 31st October 1854 under the management of three deaconesses.

Hardly anyone gave this refuge on the edge of the Voigtland a chance “as no cabmen would come to this remote area if it was raining – not for money or kind words.” These would have to be prepared for their “coaches becoming stuck in the dung as had happened to the coach of Queen Elizabeth, despite her brave horse.” There were no street lanterns, not for a long time to come. “During the winter, a dark night would lie over the “Lost Road”, already from 4 or 5 o’clock.”

Despite this, the hostel became a good address, already in its first year, for young maidservants. Other hostels for maidservants, according to this model, followed in Berlin, for example the Amalienhaus



on the Nollendorfplatz and the Mägdehaus on the Zwirnsgraben. In the years which followed, the hostel developed into a popular training place for female maidservants.

Maidservants who were suitable as nannies were trained at the school for small children, founded at the time, which had 120 children. This helped single mothers, in particular, and children were also entrusted to the deaconesses for educational reasons.

In late autumn 1855, Fliedner brought the entire Nickelshof for 21,000 silver coins which came from private donations.

#### **Home economics lessons in Marthashof**

A school for home economics had, meanwhile, been established here where maidservants were able to receive practical lessons in the laundry room, drying parlour and in the kitchen. The first year curriculum at Marthashof (the hostel received this name, after the maidservant Martha in the Bible, in 1861) included cookery with theory and practice as well as other subjects related to running a household such as washing, ironing, mending clothes and tending to these. Materials science, health studies (including baby care and nursing), bookkeeping and many general subjects completed the training in the second year. The girls even learnt gardening in the kitchen garden and how to keep the cows which were kept in the hostel yard.

After their training, the girls were placed in households in which they had clear rights with their employees, for example an afternoon off during the week which they could spend in the hostel. The girls were, after all, still in close contact with the deaconesses during their training. Furthermore, the employees were also asked to give the girls Sundays off and also the necessary free-time, during workdays, for them to mend and take care of their personal clothing. This was, apparently, not matter of course. The girls also had the opportunity to save some of their earnings in a type of savings book for a “nest egg” later in life which represented, for women in particular, a great support in the development of their independence.

After the surroundings were first developed, a bigger school was necessary. A teaching deacony began teaching at the private girls' elementary school with 14 pupils. Ten years later, the number of pupils had already increased to 105 with three deaconesses as teachers. Director of the school was the minister of the Saint Elizabeth Church as no women were allowed to hold such a position at this time.



The 19th annual report for 1872/1873 states: "The immense trust placed in the institution, on the one hand, and the lack of suitable female maidservants, on the other, is shown in the conditions of the last year (1871) when 2,577 employees looked for girls from Marthashof and only 539 were able to start a job with a Berlin employee."

Marthashof took in not only future maidservants. From 1874, single female workers who worked in factories during the day as washwomen, cleaners and carers were also able to stay here. For bed, breakfast and supper they paid 3 silver coins a month.

### **Teaching continues**

Marthashof continued for 20 years and around 15,000 girls attended the various institutions during this time. At the end of the 1870s, a modern, four-storey school building was built. There were now six classes with five further deaconesses as teachers and this grew to 13 as the years progressed and more subjects were introduced.

The school for small children also received a new building which, from 1889, provided space for eight classes with up to 450 pupils. Subjects taught included religious studies, German, music, mathematics, geography, history, nature, writing, drawing, crafts and, in the upper classes, also home economics. All subjects were guaranteed by the deaconesses, excluding sport, which was introduced in 1885 with the building of the sports hall.

From 1903 teaching was according to the curriculum of the Berlin parish schools. Marthashof was recognised by the state as a school for home economics in 1925. In the meantime, more than 600 girls attended the institute daily and they all benefited from the meals provided here and other social activities.

### **The end of the work of the Kaiserswerther Diakonie**

After the end of the First World War there was no longer such a need for the maidservants' hostel and it was dissolved, as was the home economics school which was closed, due to financial reasons, in 1937. This was replaced by a kindergarten and a nursery, the latter of which brought boys to Marthashof for the first time.

In 1938 all buildings and furnishings were handed over to the Inner Mission. As all private and confessional schools were dissolved, so was Marthashof and its institutes and the girls were sent to the surrounding state schools.



This brought an end to the 76-year-long social and training work of the Kaiserswerther Diakonie in Berlin.

In the annual report of the Kaiserswerther Diakonie of 1939 it says: "On 1st April 1938 Marthashof in Berlin, which belongs to the Kaiserswerther Diakonie, was fully converted and is now managed by the general association for the Inner Mission of Greater Berlin and serves as an old people's home and hospice. The kindergarten continues its work under new management."

#### **Destruction – only memories remain**

During the nights of the 22nd and 23rd November 1943, Marthashof and the surroundings were destroyed by bombs. Only memories remained. Former pupils of the girls' school enthusiastically tell of the warmth and kindness of the deaconesses. Even today they enthuse about the wonderful school garden with its chestnut trees, the nice school outings, the school choir and the small animals which they were able to help raise in the yard. With orderliness and discipline, they were best prepared at Marthashof for later life.

#### **Marthashof today**

With Marthashof Urban Village, STOFANEL is continuing the social orientation of the historic lodgings and school. In the 21st century Marthashof is, once again, offering, with a family-friendly concept which aims to promote social interaction with a great deal of light, fresh air and nature, a place of refuge and a retreat of calm and harmony – right in the heart of the city of Berlin.

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