

# The "Palme" Urban Shelter

## An example of urban welfare

Popularly known as the "Palme", Berlin's urban shelter was housed in this building until 1940. Built in 1886/87 from designs by the architect and at the time Berlin Planning Commissioner Hermann Blankenstein (1829-1910), it had to be expanded extensively between 1892/93 and 1895 as a result of continually increasing occupancy rates. In addition to the enlarged main building, where the administration rooms, the apartments for officials and accommodation for homeless families were located, the architectural complex now also included 40 dormitories for single nightly homeless people, a washhouse and disinfection facilities, as well as a house for the disinfector. On account of its hygienic facilities and modern technical equipment, the shelter in Frobelsstrasse was long considered an exemplary model of urban welfare.

Support for nightly homeless people was limited to the bare necessities: accommodation in one of the dormitories for no longer than five consecutive nights, disinfection of clothing, access to personal hygiene facilities and a plate of gruel both mornings and evenings with a piece of bread. Breaches of the strict house rules resulted in the homeless being transferred to police headquarters and possibly referral to the municipal workhouse. Homeless families were at least granted longer-term accommodation, school lessons for the children as well as a one-off financial allowance in order to rent a new apartment. Nevertheless the principle also applied here, of only providing those affected with the basic necessities.

## View of the urban shelter and surrounding area

The Magistrat and the Berlin City Assembly also allowed a hospital and infirmary to be erected at the same time alongside the asylum for homeless people, in an area along Prenzlauer Allee which had previously only been built upon sporadically, post 1895 © Landesarchiv Berlin

## Building for the nightly homeless

The large number of dormitories for single nightly homeless people were in the courtyard of the main building, 1906-08. © Bildarchiv Foto Marburg

## Classroom in the family shelter

Shortly after the "Palme" was opened, the Berlin City Assembly decided to introduce lessons for children of school age, as most of the schools were too far away from the shelter, before 1914. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum Europäischer Kulturen /

## Exterior view of the urban shelter (below)

The origin of the popular name "Palme" remains unclear, but references have often been made to a palm tree that was probably in the foyer, 1906-08. © Bildarchiv Foto Marburg

## Empty dormitory (Hall 3)

The buildings for the nightly homeless were originally intended for 50 people per dormitory, however due to ever-increasing numbers were later used to accommodate up to 100 people, before 1914. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum Europäischer Kulturen / Ute Franz-Scarciglia

## Ground plan – technical drawing

Following extensive expansions between 1892/93 and 1895 the entire complex was essentially complete, post 1895. © bpk

## The "Palme" Urban Shelter

### Crisis and end of a supposedly model institution

Regardless of the asylum's modern facilities, there was soon criticism of the police checks and day-to-day practice in the urban shelter. Physical assaults by supervisory staff on the homeless as well as the constant overcrowding of the dormitories substantiated the bad reputation of this supposedly model institution.

What was an unacceptable situation within the "Palme" in many respects became apparent to the general public during the 1911 Christmas holidays when large numbers of the homeless suffered from poisoning. According to the official investigation, this could be ascribed to the consumption of adulterated alcohol, probably served in the pubs near the shelter. Around 70 people had died by the New Year as a result of the poisoning, more than 100 had to be admitted to local hospitals suffering from the symptoms of poisoning.

Regular overcrowding, and in part the dreadful conditions within the shelter at the turn of the century, yet particularly in the 1920s, as a result of inflation, economic crisis and mass unemployment, turned the "Palme" into a symbol of grinding poverty. In times of greatest need, well over 5,000 people per night were admitted.

The coming to power of the National Socialists in 1933 radically changed public welfare: beggars, vagrants and homeless people were stigmatised as "antisocial" and "alien to the community" in countless cases, then systematically persecuted and taken off in large numbers to workhouses and concentration camps. These and other repressive measures by the NS regime against the unemployed and homeless led to rapid drops in the occupancy rates in the "Palme". The ultimate conversion of the building into a hospital in 1940 finally concluded the history of the building as an urban shelter in Berlin.

### Large crowds at urban shelter

Large crowds were a common sight in front of the shelter, especially in the cold winter months and in times of economic crisis, around 1920. © bpk

### Women's dormitory

Male persons were in the majority in the night shelter as a rule, but there were always also a number of dormitories reserved for homeless women, around 1920. © bpk

### Waiting room (Hall 20)

After admittance to the "Palme", a number of homeless people were first gathered in a room and then gradually assigned to the individual dormitories, around 1920. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum Europäischer Kulturen / Ute Franz-Scarciglia

### Men cutting wood

As a part of the reforms introduced in the urban shelter in 1924, a work area was set up opposite the "Palme", where homeless men were enlisted to chop wood, around 1925. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum Europäischer Kulturen / Ute Franz-Scarciglia

### Exterior view of the urban shelter (below)

Also as a result of the numerous and in part strict reforms in the urban shelter, the number of homeless people in the "Palme" gradually declined towards the end of the 1920s, around 1932. © bpk / Carl Weinrother