

Das Buddhistische Haus



Edelhofdamm 54
13465 Berlin
Telefon 030 401 5580
Fax 030 401 03227
<http://das-buddhistische-haus.de>
eMail: mail@das-buddhistische-haus.de

Das Buddhistische Haus and the German Dharmaduta Society by Senaka Weeraratna

**Senaka Weeraratna
(Hony. Secretary, German Dharmaduta Society), 2002**

Of the many and varied figures who have left their indelible mark in making Das Buddhistische Haus in Berlin – Frohnau, the beacon for the propagation of Buddhism in Germany during the last eighty years, two outstanding figures rise high above the rest.

They are Dr. Paul Dahlke, founder of Das Buddhistische Haus and one of the ‘ most efficient and able pens’ for the Buddhist cause in Europe, and Asoka Weeraratna, founder of the German Dharmaduta Society and indefatigable Buddhist missionary who pioneered the establishment of the first Buddhist Vihara in continental Europe and the entry of the Venerable members of the Maha Sangha to propagate Buddhism in Germany and other European countries on a continuing footing. Both these figures further contributed in their own distinctive ways in opening new vistas for the strengthening of links between the people and the cultures of Germany and Sri Lanka.

It is around the efforts of these two remarkable men that the story of Das Buddhistische Haus unfolds.

Dr. Paul Dahlke

Dr. Paul Dahlke (1865 – 1928), a physician, was an original thinker and one of the most profound among a number of reputed German writers such as Karl Eugen Neumann, Oldenburg, Karl Seidenstucker, Georg Grimm, Ven. Nyanatiloka Mahathera and Ven Nyanaponika whose literary efforts have drawn worldwide attention to Buddhist teachings and meditation. Dr. Dahlke visited Sri Lanka eight times and studied Pali Buddhism. He wrote Buddhist books, translated Buddhist texts, and published Buddhist Journals. He met Ven. Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Nayake Thera and other leading Bhikkus. Dr. Dahlke wanted to join the Sangha, but his feeble health did not permit him to do so. Therefore he returned to his country determined to establish a home for Buddhism in Germany and lead the life of an Upasaka.

Dr. Dahlke realized his dream in founding a Buddhist House (Das Buddhistische Haus) in Frohnau, Berlin on a beautifully situated plot of land - 6 acres in extent, in 1924.

In the words of his close friend and Secretary, Kurt Fischer:

“ It was his intention that the House should be a monument, a visible expression, of the teaching: and new plans constantly issued from his fertile brain, for expanding the first lay out. Besides the House proper, containing the living quarters and a library, a meeting Hall was built close by, and separate rooms and cells for accommodating guests who wished to stay there some time for quiet contemplation and for receiving instruction in the Buddhist teachings.

The Buddhist House was conceived as a place devoted to inner purification, as far as this could be achieved in a life of compromise between the life of a Buddhist Monk and western conditions. It could not well be a monastery since both the material and spiritual requirements were lacking. Therefore, it was to be a mid-way solution between a monastery and a layman's habitation. The Five Precepts were to be the basic rules of conduct for the residents, and their further endeavours for inner purification was to bestow a characteristic atmosphere to the House. Only those who have tried it can appreciate the difficulty of doing this under western conditions. In a world where the lusts of life and a brutal struggle for existence were dominant, the courageous attempt of Dr. Dahlke and the small band of his followers, was like the struggle of a small boat against the mountainous waves of a stormy sea. “

Before long Dr. Dahlke had a group of reputed thinkers around him prepared to live according to the Dhamma, and the Buddhist House soon became the center of German Buddhism.

Anagarika Dharmapala

It drew people from abroad and one such enthusiastic visitor was the world-renowned Sri Lankan Buddhist missionary, Anagarika Dharmapala. In an article published in the ‘Maha Bodhi’ Journal (1925), Anagarika Dharmapala gracefully recounts his visit to the Buddhist House as the guest of his good friend Dr. Paul Dahlke whom he had befriended earlier on one of Dr. Dahlke’s several visits to Sri Lanka in the early part of the 20th Century. On his way to England in 1925, Anagarika Dharmapala spent 10 days in the Buddhist House.

Dr. Dahlke’s Buddhist Group in Frohnau – Berlin (‘Das Buddhistische Haus’) had another strong link in Sri Lanka i.e. The International Buddhist Union (Jatyantara Bauddha Samagama) with its headquarters in the Island Hermitage (Polgasduwa – Tapasrama) in Sri Lanka, which was under the leadership of the German - born monk Ven. Nyanatiloka Maha Nayaka Thera. The Island Hermitage was a picturesque little island near the palm - bordered Ratgama Lake near Dodanduwa, Southern Province, Sri Lanka that gradually became the seat of a small band of European and Asian Buddhist monks. One of the principal tasks of the I.B.U. was the publishing and distribution of Buddhist literature. The Publication Centre and Headquarters of the I.B.U. for Europe was the Buddhist Publishing House: “Benares Verlag”, Muenchen – Neubiberg, Germany. Dr. Dahlke was one of the leading contributors to its publications.

At Das Buddhistische Haus, Dr. Dahlke was instrumental in publishing two Buddhist Periodicals namely “ Neu Buddhist ” and “ Brockensammlung ” or “ Scrap Collection”. Some of his books are: ‘ Buddhism Essays’, ‘ Buddhism and Science’, ‘ Buddhism and its place in the Mental Life of Mankind ’, and ‘ Buddhism as a Doctrine of Actuality and Way of Life’.

Dr. Dahlke died on February 29, 1928 having spent the last few years in frail health largely due to his energies being consumed by matters connected with Das Buddhistisches Haus. With his death the Buddhistisches Haus ceased to be a Centre for Theravada Buddhist activities. His work was continued in a small house called ‘Holzhaus’ close to the premises of the Das Buddhistisches Haus,

built by Kurt Fischer, Secretary of Dahlke and Editor of the Magazine called ‘ The Buddhist Life and Thought’. The Nazi German Government (1933 - 1945) began to frown on Buddhist activities. After the flight of Rudolf Hess to England in May, 1941, Buddhist publications and Buddhist group activities were prohibited.

In 1942, the ‘Gestapo’ Police summoned several Buddhist groups and publishers of Buddhist publications for interrogation. Among them was Dr. Kurt Fischer, Secretary of Dr. Dahlke, who died soon after receiving a Gestapo summons.

Dr. Wolfgang Schumacher, Herr Guido Auster, Dr. Helmuth Klar and other prominent German Buddhists thereafter continued Herr Fischer’s activities. Some of the German Buddhist groups had continued to hold meetings in secret during the latter stages of the war notwithstanding the risk to their life and limb. This was done with a view to providing the solace of the Dhamma at a time when their fellow members needed it most and the level of suffering from the ravages of war had become almost unbearable.

At the end of the Second World War, the Buddhistisches Haus was in the hands of Dr. Dahlke’s relatives. They were not Buddhists.

Asoka Weeraratna and the German Dharmaduta Society

Asoka Weeraratna was born on 12th December, 1918 as the youngest son of P.J.Weeraratna, the proprietor of a reputed jewellery establishment in Galle. He was named Alfred by his parents who followed the general trend in colonial Sri Lanka in naming their children after members of the British Royalty. In his adult life he renounced the name Alfred and adopted the name Asoka – an apt name for the Buddhist Dharmaduta work he was to undertake later. He was exposed to a strong Buddhist influence particularly from his mother’s side of the family. His mother’s younger sister was a Buddhist nun. He attended Mahinda College, Galle. (a leading Buddhist School in South Sri Lanka).

Upon the death of his father, both Asoka and his elder brother, Dharmasena became partners of the family business. In 1948 they re-located their business to Colombo. The business expanded rapidly after they had diversified it to become importers and dealers in watches. Asoka made a number of business trips to Europe in the 1950’s and imported a range of well-known Swiss watches such as Paul Buhre, Boilat, Henry Sandoz, Roamer and Enicar, and the German pen ‘ Reform ’. In the late fifties, P.J.Weeraratna and Sons became the leading importers of Swiss watches to Sri Lanka.

Though Asoka energetically developed the family business as it was the source of his income, his main interest lay in work associated with the dissemination of the Buddha Dhamma and strict cultivation of the spiritual life through meditation and abstinence. In fact the life he led, it could be said, was fashioned in response to two fundamental questions that he would have asked himself, very early in his adult life:

- a) What is the life worth leading?, and
- b) How can one best serve the Buddha Sasana ?

First visit to West Germany

On his first business visit to West Germany in 1951, Asoka became aware of the growing hunger in that country, which was slowly recovering from total devastation in the Second World War, for an alternative moral and spiritual philosophy, that placed a very high emphasis on peace and non-violence. War weary Germans failing to find answers to their personal and their country's political problems, in their own Western religious traditions, without resorting to violence, were anxiously seeking to experiment with moral and ethical ideas emanating from the East.

About the same time in post-independent Sri Lanka, Lankans for the first time after 450 years of colonial rule were beginning to dream of new vistas unfettered by the restrictions of the foreign dominated past. They were acquiring a new sense of historical destiny and a growing confidence that they were capable of playing a larger role in world affairs than hitherto was thought possible. Taking Buddhism to the West was one of these ambitious ideas which fired the energy and imagination of the public, particularly that of the Buddhist Sangha.

It was the convergence of these factors i.e. the upsurge in interest 'to look towards the East' of the Germans and 'take Buddhism to the West' spirit of the Sri Lankans that led to the events that were to follow.

Founding of the Lanka Dhammaduta Society

On his return from West Germany and convinced of the potential for growth of Buddhism in that country, Asoka Weeraratna founded the Lanka Dhammaduta Society, on September 21, 1952 which was later re-named the German Dharmaduta Society on May 8, 1957. The idea of forming this Society was conceived by Asoka when visiting Europe in 1951.

The first Organising Committee meeting to consider establishing a Society was held on July 19, 1952 commencing at 5.00 p.m. at the premises of Messrs. P.J.Weeraratna & Sons, 592, 2nd Division, Maradana, Colombo 10. The German born – monk Ven. Nyanaponika of the Island Hermitage, Dodanduwa, presided at this meeting.

Others present were:

Ven. Galle Anuruddha Thera, Messrs. J.L.E. Fernando, Dr. R.P. Wijeratne, Albert Thenuwara, C.T. Perera, Henry de Silva, Dr. Jayadeva Tilakasiri, T. Liyanage, Dharmasena Weeraratna and Asoka Weeraratna.

Inaugural Meeting of the Society

The Inaugural Meeting of the Lanka Dhammaduta Society was held on September 21, 1952 commencing at 5.00 P.M. at the Woodward College Hall, Maradana, Colombo 10. Mr. J.L.E. Fernando presided. Ven. Pandit Akuretiye Amarawansa Thero administered pansil. Altogether a total of twenty - one (21) persons attended this meeting.

The meeting adopted the name 'Lanka Dhammaduta Society' in place of the 'Lanka Dhammaduta Sabha' as proposed by Mr. D.D. Dewasirinarayana, by a majority of 13 votes to 8 votes.

The meeting adopted unanimously the draft Constitution that was tabled subject to a few changes.

The Board of Management

The following persons were elected unanimously to the first Board of Management of the Lanka Dhammaduta Society at the inaugural meeting:

Patron – Ven. Nyanatiloka Maha Thera

- 1) President – J.L E. Fernando (C.C.S)
- 2) Vice – Presidents
 - a) M.J. Perera (C.C.S.)
 - b) Dr. H.K.T. De Silva
 - c) Austin De Silva (Chief Sub –Editor, Daily News)
 - d) D.C. Lawris (Principal, Nalanda College)
- 3) Hony. Secretary – Asoka Weeraratna
- 4) Hony. Assistant Secretary - U.D.W. Samarasekera
- 5) Hony. Treasurer – Dr. R. P. Wijeratne, M.D.
- 6) Committee:
 - a) Henry de Silva
 - b) C.T. Perera (I.S.O.)
 - c) Dr. Jayadeva Tilakasiri, Ph. D.
 - d) Albert Thenuwara (Proctor, S.C.)
 - e) U.S. Karunaratne
 - f) J.H. Ratnayake
 - g) D.D.Dewasirinarayana
 - h) Dharmasena Weeraratna

First Donation

Asoka Weeraratna made a donation of Rs. 1000 (one thousand rupees) towards the funds of the Society at this Meeting. This was the first donation received by the Society.

Objectives

The Society had a number of objectives, the principal one being to send a Buddhist Mission to Germany in 1956 to co-incide with the universal Buddha Jayanti celebrations. The other aims were:

- a) to erect a vihara, library and a preaching hall in Germany,
- b) translate and publish the Tripitaka in German, and
- c) permanently establish the Buddha Sasana in Germany as the Arahant Mahinda had done it in Sri Lanka.

Ven. Galle Anuruddha Thera

Ven. Galle Anuruddha Thera was a key figure in the initial stages of the newly formed Society. He was elected as a Committee Member of the Board of Management. His contributions in terms of ideas, proposals concerning the further progress of the Society and organizational work, have been recorded with deep appreciation in the Minutes Book of the Board of Management of the Society.

Second Visit to West Germany

On the 20th of February, 1953, Asoka Weeraratna left Sri Lanka for West Germany. He was requested by the newly formed Lanka Dhammaduta Society to survey and report on the existing conditions of Buddhism in Germany, and the ways and means that should be adopted to establish the Sambuddha Sasana in Germany. He was also urged to convey the goodwill of the Society to the Buddhists of Germany.

Among those who arrived at the Ratmalana Airport to bid Asoka 'farewell' on the trip were a number of Buddhist monks including Ven. Pandit Akuretiye Amarawansa Thero

and Ven. Nyanaponika Thera. The latter handed over a Buddha Statue and Ola Leaf Manuscript to Asoka to be given as tokens of goodwill and appreciation from the Lanka Dhammaduta Society to German Buddhist Societies.

On this trip Asoka travelled widely all over Germany, meeting leaders of Buddhist organizations in various German cities and enlisting their support for the cause of establishing the Buddha Sasana in Germany. He was also asked to inspect a suitable site for a Buddhist Centre and Vihara, and a Settlement for lay Buddhists and Upasakas.

Asoka visited a series of German cities and towns i.e., Hamburg, Munich, Berlin, Stuttgart, Bremen, Frankfurt, Bonn, Cologne among others. In Hamburg, he met Dr. Helmut Palmie, President of the Hamburg Buddhist Society. Dr. Palmie was a Pali Scholar and an ardent Buddhist. Dr. Palmie convened a special meeting of the Hamburg Buddhist Society on 10th March, 1953, on the occasion of Asoka's visit. About 200 German Buddhists attended the meeting. Asoka presented an ola-leaf book on the Buddha Dhamma to Dr. Palmie as a token of good will from the Lanka Dhammaduta Society.

In Munich, Asoka met Dr. Von Meng, the President of the Munich Buddhist Society and attended a meeting of this Society. Asoka presented a small Buddha statue to Dr. Von Meng. This Society published a monthly journal devoted to the propagation of Buddhism called 'Indische Welt' (or 'Indian World').

In Berlin, there were two Buddhist Societies in 1953. One was called 'Gesellschaft Fur Freunde Des Buddhismus' or 'Society of the Friends of Buddhism'. Herr. F. Knobloch led this Society. The other Society was called 'Buddhistische Gemeinde' Herr Lionel Stutzer was the head of this Society. Asoka attended a meeting of this Society held at Stutzer's house. In Berlin, Asoka also met Dr. K. Schmidt, a Pali Scholar and lecturer on Buddhism.

In Stuttgart, Asoka called on Georg Krauskopf, the leader of the Buddhist Group and brother of the late Ven. Nyanasiri Thera of Polgasduwa Island Hermitage, Dodanduwa. Krauskopf was the author of a popular work on Buddhism called 'Die Heilslehre Des Buddha'. Mr. and Mrs. Ankenbrand were two other prominent Buddhists that Asoka met in Stuttgart. They were extremely devout and well read. They had one of the largest Buddhist libraries that Asoka had seen in Germany.

In Bremen, Asoka Weeraratna met Severloh Mohr at the latter's house in Hemelingen Bahnhofstr. 10. Severloh Mohr had led the life of a Bhikkhu for sometime in Siam (now called 'Thailand'). In Germany, though Mohr was mostly dressed in a layman's attire, he was living the life of a monk. Mohr's house had a fine Buddhist shrine that appeared like the inside of a Buddhist Temple. The King of Siam had gifted one image of the Buddha in Mohr's house to him. Mohr conducted classes on Buddhism in his house.

On his return to Sri Lanka in early May 1953, Asoka Weeraratna prepared a report under the heading '**Buddhism in Germany**' giving his impressions of his visit to Germany and the details of his meetings with German Buddhists. This Report was subsequently published by the Society in both English and Sinhala and thousands of copies were distributed to the public all over the country.

German Outlook on Buddhism

In this Report, Asoka Weeraratna says:

“ The general outlook of Germans has greatly changed after the war. The bitter experiences of two great wars have taught them but one lesson, that “ All conditioned things are impermanent ”. If you stop to ask about the past war, a German would have nothing else to add but the words ‘ Alles kaput ‘, which mean ‘ All destroyed ’.

Buddhism with its elucidation of the Four Noble Truths and the Three Signs of ‘ Impermanence, Suffering and Soul-lessness ’ as the characteristic feature of all things, has appeared to them as the most perfect teaching ever made known to mankind ’.

Public Meeting at Ananda College, Colombo on May 30, 1953

The main purpose of this meeting was to make public the findings of the survey carried out by Asoka Weeraratna on the current state of Buddhist activities in Germany and the prospects for a Buddhist Mission to Germany before the Buddha Jayanthi celebrations in 1956, and to embark on a membership drive.

Hon. Dr. C.W.W. Kannangara, Minister of Local Government presided at the Meeting, which was largely attended and comprised a very representative gathering of leading Buddhists.

Ven. Baddegama Piyaratana Maha Nayake Thera, Principal of Vidyodaya Pirivena, administered ‘ Pansil’.

Mr. Asoka Weeraratna in welcoming those present explained the object of the meeting and presented a detailed account of his survey of the present state of Buddhism in Germany made during his recent visit. He pointed out the importance of Germany and the unique contribution it has made towards the enrichment of European thought, culture and science. He stated that Germany was the pulse of the European continent, and that the largest number of Theravada Buddhists of Europe was at present found in Germany.

At the end of Asoka's detailed presentation, Hon. C.W.W. Kannangara moved the following Motion:

“ This House is of the opinion that the public of Ceylon should fully support the efforts of the Lanka Dhammaduta Society for the establishment of the Sambuddhasasana in Germany and propagate Buddhism in Europe ”

Ven. Pandit D. Revata Thera seconded the Motion, which was unanimously adopted by the House.

Next, Mr. C.D.A. Gunawardena moved the following Motion:

“ This House is of the opinion that the Lanka Dhammaduta Society should take immediate steps to send a Buddhist Mission to Germany before 1956 in order to commemorate the 2500th year of the birth of the Buddha and further that the Society should take immediate steps to establish a permanent Buddhist Centre in Germany comprising a Vihara, Preaching Hall, Library, and Settlement for Upasakas ”.

Ven. Pandit Akuretiye Amarawansa Thero seconded the Motion, which was unanimously adopted by the House.

Ven. Baddegama Piyaratana Maha Nayake Thera, Principal of Vidyodaya Pirivena, Ven. Kirivattaduwa Pannasara Nayaka Thera, Principal of Vidyalankara Pirivena, Ven. Nyanatiloka Maha Thera (the German monk) and Mudaliyar P.D. Ratnatunga and Mr. H.L. Caldera all spoke in support of the work of the Society and the great importance of sending a Buddhist Mission to Germany before the Buddha Jayanthi celebrations in B.E. 2500 (1956 AD).

Ven. Balangoda Ananda Maitreya Maha Thera added that one of the greatest services that one can do to the Sasana is to help the Society to establish the Buddhist Dispensation in Europe with Germany as its center.

Hon. C.W.W. Kannangara, Minister of Local Government, speaking from the Chair said that he had known the Hon. Secretary of the Society, Mr. Asoka Weeraratna from his boyhood and that he could vouch for his integrity. The Hon. Minister added that the Society was going to serve one of the greatest causes of Buddhism launched after the Great Emperor Asoka of India. He therefore urged that all Buddhists should back the Society in every way in order to help it to establish the Buddhasasana firmly in Germany before the Buddha Jayanthi of 1956.

Friedrich Möller

One significant outcome of Asoka Weeraratna's visit to Germany in 1953 was the recruitment of Friedrich Moller, a teacher of Rackow College, Hamburg to engage in Buddhist propagation work. The Society paid for the passage of. Moller, who arrived in Sri Lanka on the 5th of June, 1953. He became an Upasaka and was placed at the Island Hermitage, Dodanduwa. Ven. Nyanatiloka Mahathera instructed him. Moller was the first German trainee of the Society. It was originally intended to train Moller in Dhammaduta work for two and a half years and then make Moller a member of the first Buddhist Mission to Germany that was planned to leave Sri Lanka in 1956 (the year of the Buddha Jayanti).

,Buddhagosa' of Germany

The Lanka Dhammaduta Society was privileged to have had Ven Nyanatiloka Maha Thera as its first Patron. The Venerable monk stands like a colossus in the history of Buddhism in Germany. He was the first German to join the order of the Buddhist Sangha. He arrived in Sri Lanka in 1903, became a monk in Burma in 1904, and later settled down at the Island Hermitage, Dodanduwa that became known as a Buddhist Training Centre for Europeans.

Ven. Nyanatiloka has been hailed as the ,Buddhagosa' of Germany for his great literary output which, includes the following works:

- 1) ' The Word of the Buddha ' (in German and English)

- 2) The German translations of
 - a) ‘ Visuddhimaga ’ (Path of Purity)
 - b) ‘ Milinda Panha ’
 - c) ‘ Anguttara Nikaya ’
- 3) A Guide through the Abidhamma Pitaka
- 4) Pali Anthology
- 5) German Pali Grammar

Ven. Nyanatiloka’s message

In a memorable message to the publication ‘ Buddhism in Germany ’ Ven. Nyanatiloka says as follows:

“ It was just 50 years ago in 1903, that I came first to this Island which, since then, I have considered my spiritual home, and I am therefore happy to be now a citizen of Sri Lanka. Yet, it will be understood that it was the great wish of my heart to give the country of my origin the best I possessed, i.e. the Dhamma. And to that end I have devoted the greatest part of my 50 years in the Sangha. I did so in the firm conviction that the Dhamma will take root in my home country, Germany, and may have a great future there. Now it has been a very great pleasure to me to hear that Mr. Weeraratna returned from Germany with the very same conviction, and was able to report on lively Buddhist activities there. I believe that the chances for Buddhist mission work in Germany are now greater than ever before. I am therefore very happy that the Lanka Dharmadutha Society has undertaken that great task of sending a well-prepared mission to Germany and to support Buddhist work there, in general.

I greatly appreciate the initial work done by the Society up to now, and particularly the sacrificing labour, devotion and energy shown by the Founder and Secretary of the Lanka Dharmadutha Society, Mr. Asoka Weeraratna. I should, indeed, regard it as a happy culmination of my life if Vesak 1956, i.e. the year 2500, will see a well – established mission in Germany, which will not fail to have a far-reaching influence on the other Western countries, too. I wish the Society full success in their great and noble enterprise. Selfless effort to give the Dhamma to those who are most in need of it will be of great blessing to those who give and receive ”.

Nyanatiloka

(May 25, 1953)

Training Centre of the Society

Soon after his return from his second visit to Europe in 1953, Asoka realized that a Training Centre for Dharmaduta work was one of the pressing needs of the Society. A temporary Centre for this purpose was therefore opened at No. 145, Kandy Road, Dalugama, Kelaniya. The well - known German monk Ven. Nyanaponika Thera and several other Bhikkhus were given accommodation there. In the meantime, the Society continued to look for a permanent Training Centre for Dharmaduta monks at a suitable place in Colombo.

The purchase of a Printing Press

In advance of the proposed Buddhist Mission to Germany, the Society decided to ‘ fertilize the field ’ with Buddhist literature. For this purpose, the Society purchased a Multilith Off – Set Printing Press and Equipment, and installed it at the Headquarters of the Hamburg Buddhist Society, of which Dr. Helmut Palmie was the President. The Society decided to print an initial number of 10, 000 pamphlets on Buddhism for free distribution in Germany.

The Million Rupee Trust Fund

With great determination and energy, Asoka Weeraratna launched in 1954 under the auspices of the Society a ‘ Million Rupee Trust Fund ’ for the permanent establishment of the Buddha Sasana in Germany and appealed to the public for contributions. The Million Rupee Trust Fund was inaugurated at a Public Meeting held at the Colombo Town Hall on September 6, 1954. Mr. Dudley Senanayake, the former Prime Minister presided at this Meeting.

This public meeting was a huge success. It received wide publicity in all the newspapers and the Colombo Town Hall attracted the biggest Buddhist gathering for a public meeting at that venue. The proposed Buddhist Mission to Germany had by now captured the public imagination.

One of the speakers at this Meeting was Dr. Georg Ahrens, the newly appointed Ambassador of Germany after the establishment of Diplomatic Relations between Sri Lanka and Germany in 1953.

One of the key objectives of this Fund was to finance the sending of a Buddhist Mission to Germany in B.E. 2500 (i.e.,1956) consisting of laymen inclusive of Germans recruited and trained in Sri Lanka as Dhammadutas. Friedrich Moller, the first German recruited by the Society was to accompany this Mission together with other German Trainees and receive the Higher Ordination of ‘ Upasampada ’ upon German soil, the first step in the establishment of the Sambuddha Sasana. (Note: He completed his period of training and received ordination under the name of Bhikkhu Ñānavimala in Sri Lanka but did not join the Buddhist Mission to Germany as planned)

The Board of Trustees of this Trust Fund comprised the following persons:

1. Dudley Senanayake Former Prime Minister
2. H.H. Basnayake, Q.C. Attorney – General
3. H.W. Amarasuriya Proprietary Planter
4. H.Nelson H. Soysa Proctor S.C.
5. Asoka Weeraratna Merchant

Asoka Weeraratna contributed a sum of Rs. 25, 000 (Twenty Five Thousand Rupees) from his personal funds to this Trust Fund at the Inauguration of this Fund. This was in addition to the Rs. 1,000 (On Thousand Rupees) he had contributed to the Society on the day of its formation i.e., September 21, 1952.

Albert Thenuwara, Proctor, S.C., attested the Trust Deed and the Trust Fund was formally established on November 25, 1954.

The Collection of Funds

With growing public support, the Society soon won the recognition and encouragement of the State and the Government declared the ‘ Million Rupee Fund’ an Approved Charity. Among the many

benefactors who contributed to this Fund, particular mention must be made of Walther Schmits, a German Buddhist, who left a valuable legacy of DM 550.000 to the Society.

As money began to flow in to the Fund, the Society purchased a new Vehicle (a Van). Asoka visited various parts of the country in this Van. The Society conducted a series of public meetings throughout the country, which were addressed by leading Buddhist monks and laymen, and collected funds from the public.

Asoka Weeraratna himself collected about Rs. 125,000 (Rupees one hundred and twenty five thousand) from the public within a very short time in 1956, which was roughly the cost of all the buildings of the German Dharmaduta Society Centre at 417, Bauddhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 7.

Anagarika Dharmapriya Mahinda (formerly known as Mr. Henedige Nelson Hector Soysa)

Mr. Henedige Nelson Hector Soysa (Proctor S.C.) came into contact with Asoka Weeraratna in the early fifties after Asoka had conceived the idea of propagating the Buddha Dhamma in the West. Shortly after the Lanka Dhammaduta Society was established in 1952, Nelson gave up his lucrative legal practice and devoted his full energies for the propagation of the Dhamma. He gave his whole – hearted co – operation to Asoka. He took another significant step. He changed his name to Dharmapriya Mahinda and became a strict vegetarian.

Nelson Soysa contributed a sum of Rs. 10,000 (Ten Thousand Rupees) on the eve of the public meeting (September 6, 1954) launching the drive for funds and overall a sum of Rs. 20, 000 to the Trust Fund. Nelson Soysa was also instrumental in getting the other members of his family to contribute Rs. 5, 000 each to this noble cause, including the construction of a Monks' Training Centre (Sanghawasa) at the German Dharmaduta Society Headquarters at 417, Bauddhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 7. These were princely sums of money in that era.

Trip to Burma

The Society sought funds and the support of other Theravada Buddhist countries for this noble project to spread the Buddha Dhamma in Europe. Burmese and Nepalese living in Sri Lanka attended public meetings of the Society. Special mention must be mentioned of His Excellency U Ba-Lwin, the Ambassador from Burma, who addressed several public meetings of the Society, and Ven. U Seelananda (Burmese Monk) who joined a delegation of the Society to visit Burma in December 1955 to collect funds for the propagation of Buddhism in Germany.

The delegation from Sri Lanka to Burma comprised Ven. Nyanaponika, Ven. Galle Anuruddha, Ven.U Seelananda (a Burmese monk who later became the Rector of the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Yangon, Myanmar), Nelson Soysa and Asoka Weeraratna.

Land and Buildings

In November 1955 the Government granted to the Society an acre of vacant crown land in Bullers Road, Colombo on a 99-year-old lease.

The foundation stone was laid on December 9, 1955 and number of prominent personalities including Hon. Dudley Senanayake, Hon. H.H. Basnayake, Dr. Georg Ahrens, Hon. Arnold Ratnayake (Minister for Home Affairs), Mr. J.L.E. Fernando, Mr. H. Nelson H. Soysa and Mr. Asoka Weeraratna participated in the function.

Two buildings were constructed on this block of land. One building was to be used as the Main Office, while the other building was to be used as the Monk's Quarters and Training Centre for Dhammaduta monks.

In August 1956, Hon. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, Prime Minister, declared open at a ceremonial public meeting, amidst a large gathering, the newly built Headquarters and Training Centre of the Society at 417, Bullers Road (Buddhaloka Mawatha), Colombo 7 consisting of a two-storied dormitory of 14 rooms, an Assembly Hall, Office and Library, built at a cost of Rs. 125.000.

Eight prominent Buddhist monks led by the German monk Ven. Ñānatiloka Mahāthera and including Ven. Balangoda Ānanda Maitreyya, Ven. Galle Anuruddha, Ven. Akuretiye Amaravansa, Ven. Ñānaponika (German), Ven. Kudawella Vangīsa and Ven. Vappo (German) were attached to the Centre. These monks offered their services to train German Buddhists and others in the study of Buddhist Philosophy.

Death of Ven. Ñānatiloka Mahāthera

Ven. Ñānatiloka Mahāthera who lived in the Monks' Quarters of the German Dharmaduta Society premises where he was looked after with great solicitude, passed away peacefully on the 28th of May 1957, about three months after his 79th birthday.

The Government of Sri Lanka granted an Official State Funeral in tribute to this great monk and eminent exponent of the Dhamma particularly to the Western world. The cremation took place on June 2nd, 1957 at the Independence Square, Colombo amidst vast crowds that had gathered for the occasion. The then Prime Minister of Ceylon, Hon. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike delivered the funeral oration.

The ashes were interred at the Island Hermitage, Dodanduwa near the late Mahāthera's hut.

A Monument that was later erected at the Island Hermitage carries the famous stanza of Ven. Assaji who had introduced Ven. Sariputta to the Dhamma. This stanza is engraved in four languages, namely, Pāli, Sinhala, German and English. It reads as follows:

"Of things that proceed from a cause,
their cause the Tathāgata proclaimed
and also their cessation
thus taught the Great Sage."

In a tribute to the late Ven. Ñānatiloka, a well-known German Buddhist, Guido Auster said that:

"... a gratifying result of this great man's activity was the bridge of friendship he has helped to build between the people of Sri Lanka and his home country, Germany."

The First Buddhist Mission to Germany

Three reputed monks from the Vajiraramaya, Colombo were chosen for the first Buddhist Mission to Germany. They comprised Ven. Soma Thero, Ven. Kheminda Thero and Ven. Vinita Thero.

It was on Poson Poya day on June 11, 1957, that this first Buddhist Mission sponsored by the German Dharmaduta Society, commenced its journey from Mihintale. A largely attended meeting was held under the patronage of the Mahanayake Theros of the three Nikayas. The Ven. Purijjala Sri Siddhartha Saranankara Maha Thera of the Malwatta Chapter presided. After the public meeting,

which announced the Mission and invoked the blessings of the Maha Sangha and the Government and the people, the missionary monks were escorted to Colombo to await the arrival of the ship ' SS Orantes' on June 15, 1957.

It was Asoka Weeraratna who initiated the idea of selecting Mihintale as the starting point of this first Mission. Mihintale from where the teachings of the Buddha spread over Sri Lanka, was considered as the most appropriate place from which a new Buddhist Mission to a foreign country should commence its journey.

The second stage of the journey to Germany began on June 15, 1957 from the Headquarters of the Society at No. 417, Bullers Road (now Bauddhaloka Mawatha), Colombo 7. A motorcade of about 100 vehicles participated in the procession that took the three monks from the new premises to the Elizabeth Quay, Colombo Harbour.

Several high-ranking dignitaries including the then Prime Minister Hon. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, the former Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake, and Sri Lanka's Representative at the UN Hon. R.S.S. Gunawardene were present to farewell the Mission.

A meeting organized by the Harbour Buddhist Society and the German Dharmaduta Society was held under the Chairmanship of Ven. Kalukondayawe Pannasekera Nayaka Thera. The Prime Minister handed over a casket of relics to Ven. Soma Thera and Mr. Dudley Senanayake presented the Buddhist flag to the Mission to be used at the Vihara in Berlin. The three monks embarked on this voyage to Europe on the ship ' SS Orantes ' amidst cries of ' Sadhu, Sadhu ' from the people who had come to witness the memorable ceremony.

The ship ' SS Orantes ' set sail from Colombo Harbour on June 16, 1957 and reached Naples on June 29, 1957. The Mission upon disembarking at Naples proceeded to Frankfurt by train via Switzerland and was met by Asoka Weeraratna who had flown in from Colombo. The Mission flew from Frankfurt to Berlin. The members of the Berlin Buddhist Society greeted them at the Berlin Airport. On July 2, 1957 the Mission went into residence at the ' Das Buddhistische Haus ' in Frohnau, Berlin.

The Purchase of 'Das Buddhistische Haus'

Dr. Paul Dahlke, a German Physician, built 'Das Buddhistische Haus' in 1924. With his death in 1928 the ownership of the premises devolved on his sister and thereafter on his nephew.

Nearly 30 years after Dr. Dahlke's death in 1928, i.e. on December 13, 1957, Asoka Weeraratna negotiated with the nephew of the late Dr. Paul Dahlke in Sylt Island (near Denmark), the purchase of the ' Das Buddhistische Haus ' on behalf of the five Trustees of the German Dharmaduta Society.

Asoka was successful in obtaining the following advantages during the negotiations:

- a) The purchase of nearly 2 / 3 of the premises (15, 510 sq. meters equivalent to 3.83 acres) together with the buildings of 'Das Buddhistische Haus' at a very low price of DM 100,000.
- b) An initial payment of DM 50,000 at the time of the signing of the Sale Agreement

And the balance sum of DM 50, 000 to be paid in two equal instalments in two successive years without payment of any interest.

- c) The lack of funds to purchase the remaining 1/3rd of the land prompted Asoka to propose the following terms to the owner:

- i) Block out the remaining three plots of land totaling 8015 square meters (or 1.98 acres) from the entire premises. One part was in the front and the other two blocks were in the rear
- ii) Offer the right of pre-emption in the Deed of Transfer for the remaining three blocks of land being 1/3rd of the premises (8015 sq. meters) of 'Das Buddhistische Haus' to the Trustees of the GDS.

These terms were accepted and incorporated into the Agreement.

In 1957 Asoka spent nearly six (6) months in Germany at his own personal expense attending to various matters connected with the purchase of 'Das Buddhistische Haus' and the settling in of the first Buddhist Mission of three monks comprising Ven. Soma Thera, Ven. Kheminda and Ven. Vinita Thera.

Asoka had to personally visit at his own expense the owners of Das Buddhistische Haus who lived in an island called 'Sylt' in the extreme north of West Germany (over 500 km. from Berlin) to negotiate the transfer of the land.

He was aware of possible opposition from various quarters who may not wish the ownership of Das Buddhistische Haus to be passed to a Buddhist group. With great care and a lot of patience Asoka was successful in persuading the owners to agree to the sale of the premises.

He cabled his brother Dharmasena Weeraratna in Colombo to remit by telegraphic transfer 50,000 Deutsche Marks as an initial payment from his private funds to secure the purchase, and which sum of money was immediately remitted. These monies were later repaid by the Society.

There were several hurdles to clear in respect to the purchase of the premises. There were three owners of the property of which one was a minor and therefore Asoka had to obtain sanction from the District Court for the sale of the minor's share.

Re-calling the strength of 'Kusala Kamma' in past lives

One evening while being in Germany a leading Buddhist had telephoned and told him that if he failed to sign the purchase of land agreement before mid night he will not obtain the property, as there was great Christian opposition to its sale to Buddhists. That night Asoka had sat on his bed and like a 'bodhisatta' recalled the strength of all his 'Kusala Kamma' (good actions) done in his incalculable past lives in Samsara, to help and guide him to clear all the obstacles and opposition to the purchase of the premises and resolved with determination not to return home until he purchased the property. A miracle happened! He was able to realise his goal by being able to put the deal through.

A Joint Meeting of the Board of Trustees and Board of Management held on November 19th 1957 at the GDS premises in Colombo unanimously resolved to purchase 'Das Buddhistische Haus' property for a sum of DM.100,000 in the names of the five Trustees as per the provisions of the Deed of Trust attested by Mr. A. Thenuwara, Notary Public.

Due to the lack of funds, three Trustees namely Messrs. H.W. Amarasuriya, Dudley Senanayaka and Dr. P.B. Fernando arranged with the Bank of Ceylon, Colombo to provide a loan of Rs. 35,000 in the joint names of these three Trustees to the German Dharmaduta Society in order to meet the immediate financial requirements of the purchase.

Asoka Weeraratna was given full Attorney powers to enter into the transaction on behalf of the five Trustees of the GDS.

Mr. H.W. Amarasuriya, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, GDS visited Das Buddhistische Haus together with his wife Lena and daughter Indrani, in late 1957 to inspect the premises prior to its purchase.

Purchase of the remaining property

In 1961 Asoka Weeraratna visited Germany and purchased the three remaining blocks of land on behalf of the Trustees of the GDS.

On June 27, 1961 the two rear plots were acquired for a total amount of DM 40, 475/= The two blocks comprised 3015 and 3150 square meters in extent. The rear plot A (3015 square meters) was purchased for DM 24, 725 and rear plot B (3150 square meters) was purchased for DM 15, 750.

On August 29, 1961 the valuable road frontage block of land (1850 square meters) was purchased for DM 31,450. As there had been a great demand for the road frontage plot

the owners had not been willing to sell this land. Therefore, Asoka had to take a lot of trouble and time before he was able to convince Dr. Dahlke's nephew that the road front plot of land should be sold only to the Trustees of the GDS as it was a front plot and the only remaining piece of land of the Das Buddhistische Haus premises.

Nevertheless, a higher price of DM 31, 450 was required to be paid despite the bargaining with the owners to acquire this valuable front plot being 1850 sq. meters in extent.

The total cost of acquiring the premises of Das Buddhistische Haus purchased over a period of four years was DM 174, 370 (equivalent to Rs. 318, 016). This is stated in the

Report issued by the German Dharmaduta Society covering the period 1961 – 1967.

A further sum of DM 17,029 had to be expended to attend to immediate repairs as the property was in a debilitated state

The acquisition of the premises of Das Buddhistische Haus for a Buddhist Centre in Germany was a very notable achievement of the German Dharmaduta Society.

The legacy of Walther Schmits

In 1954, Asoka Weeraratna had read an account in a Sri Lankan newspaper that a German was interested in Buddhism. Asoka had then inquired from two leading Hotels in Colombo about this German and subsequently met him. His name was Walther Schmits. He had been impressed with Asoka's deep commitment to Buddhism and had invited Asoka to visit him every other day during his stay in the country. Walther Schmits had visited Sri Lanka for three consecutive years and stayed in the country for about 3 – 4 months on each visit. Asoka used to visit Schmits very often after business hours during these 3 visits.

It was during these visits that Walther Schmits had given an assurance to Asoka that he (i.e. Asoka) need not worry about money for Dhammaduta work in Germany because he (i.e. Schmits) would leave a rich legacy for the noble cause. Schmits had further told Asoka that he was doing so solely because Asoka was an honest and an energetic Secretary.

Upon his death in 1957, the German Dharmaduta Society received a legacy of DM 550,000/= from the estate of Walther Schmits. This sum of money was instrumental in generating Bank interest to meet the costs of maintenance of Das Buddhistische Haus, and an expanded program of activity of the Society.

Re - construction of the Library

The Library was reconstructed by the German Dharmaduta Society at a cost of DM 173, 603 in the 1960's. Mr. G.S. Peiris, the then Ambassador for Sri Lanka in West Germany declared open the new Library on October 26, 1967 amidst a distinguished gathering.

In 1961 Mr. S.P. Wickremesinghe, the then Ambassador for Sri Lanka donated a sum of Money to Das Buddhistische Haus in memory of his deceased daughter Hemamala for the specific purpose of acquiring valuable Buddhist Books for the Library. This contribution helped the Library to replenish its stock. The Library was thereafter named as the ' Hemamala Wickremesinghe Memorial Library'.

Dhammaduta Monks in the Berlin Buddhist Vihara

Since 1957 there has been a stream of Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka and other countries, taking up residence in the Berlin Buddhist Vihara. Some of the more notable monks who spent more than three years in residence were:

1. Ven. Badulla Shanthi Bhadra (1958 – 1962)
2. Ven. Talpitiye Anuruddha (July, 1964 – April, 1967)
3. Ven. Pandit Athurugiriye Sri Gnanawimala Maha Thera (1966 – 1981)
4. Ven. Udugampola Wijayasoma (1968 – 1982)
5. Ven. Shanthi Deva (German Monk) (1972 – 1977)
6. Ven. Dikwelle Mahinda (1982 – 1991)
7. Ven. Attanagoda Pannavisudhi (1986 – 1990)
8. Ven. Walpola Kalyanatissa (1991 – 1994)
9. Ven. Rambukwella Devananda (1992 – 1998)
10. Ven. Rathmale Punnaratana (1996 – to date)

They have braved the cold winters of Europe and the innumerable difficulties that prevail in Western countries, particularly for Buddhist monks from Asia. These monks together with other visiting monks and lay teachers comprising both men and women, at Das Buddhistische Haus have contributed in no small measure towards correcting centuries old negative impressions about Buddhism in the Western consciousness, and have given solace to a large number of Europeans seeking a philosophy that places an emphasis on self- reliance, non – violence and loving kindness to all living beings. It is an inspiring achievement.

Ven. Pandit Athurugiriye Sri Gnanawimala Maha Thera

Special mention must be made of Ven. Athurugiriye Sri Gnanawimala Maha Thera who acted as the Viharadhipathi of the Berlin Vihara for a period of 15 years i.e. from 1966 – 1981.

Accepting an invitation from Mr. Asoka Weeraratna, the founder and Hony. Secretary of the German Dharmaduta Society, the Ven. Gnanawimala Thero proceeded to Germany in 1966 to engage in Dharmaduta work at the Berlin Vihara. He acted as the Viharadhipathy of the Berlin Vihara for an unbroken period of 15 years, during which time he oversaw substantial improvements in the dissemination of the Dhamma to the German public.

He learnt the German language and delivered Buddhist discourses in German. Some of these talks have been published in a book under the title ‘ Berlin Lectures ‘ in Sinhala. Ven.Gnanawimala Thero was instrumental in translating and publishing a number of Sutras in the Pali Tripitaka into German. He initiated the publication of a Buddhist Newsletter, which was then posted to an increasing number of German Buddhists and friends of Buddhism.

Ven. Gnanawimala Maha Thera successfully negotiated the grant of a handsome donation from the State Lottery Board of Berlin in 1974 which sum of money was then utilized to re-construct on a bigger scale the Ceylon Haus on the premises of the Berlin Vihara.

He also assisted in developing the collection of Buddhist Books at the Hemamala Wickremesinghe Library situated at the Berlin Vihara. He was instrumental in obtaining a large collection of Buddhist Books in both English and Japanese altogether totaling 222 books for the Berlin Vihara Library from Mr. Fujio Yushida, the Japanese Ambassador in Germany in 1968 pursuant to a request made by Ven. Gnanawimala and the kind use of the good offices of Mr.G.S. Peiris, the Ambassador for Sri Lanka.

This library holds the biggest collection of books on Theravada Buddhism including the Burmese and Pali Tripitaka, in Germany and draws a stream of visitors from all over Germany and other parts of Europe. A good number of these visitors are serious Research students on Buddhism.

Ven. Gnanawimala had the unique honour of being the preceptor of Bhikkhu Shantideva who was the first German to be ordained as a Buddhist monk on German soil. In his lay life Bhikkhu Shantideva was an electrical engineer and known as Rainer Stranch. He was ordained by Ven. Gnanawimala at a ceremony conducted at the Berlin Vihara in 1972.

The German Buddhists held Ven. Gnanawimala Maha Thero in high esteem and consequently he was made the President of the Berlin Buddhist Society in 1971– the first non- German to be elected as President since the Society was founded in 1955.

In appreciation of his invaluable services to the Buddha Sasana, both the Amarapura Maha Nikaya and the Ramanna Maha Nikaya in Sri Lanka accorded him with prestigious titles. The Amarapura Maha Nikaya bestowed on him the title ‘ Sasana Kirithi Sri Saddharma Bhanaka’ and in 2001, the Ramanna Maha Nikaya conferred on him the title ‘ Sri Saddharma Vachiswaracharya Tripitaka Vagiswara ’

Ven. Gnanawimala Maha Thera passed away on January 5, 2003 at Homagama, Sri Lanka at the age of 90 years.

Relationship with the Sri Lanka Embassy in Germany

Sri Lanka established formal diplomatic relations with Germany in 1953. The German Dharmaduta Society purchased Das Buddhistische Haus in 1957. Ever since then both Das Buddhistische Haus and the Embassy of Sri Lanka have been in constant and close contact with each other. All the

Ambassadors from Sri Lanka to Germany over the past fifty years have been associated with Das Buddhistische Haus on all important occasions even when the Embassy was in Bonn.

The Embassy of Sri Lanka actively participates in the events at the Berlin Vihara including Vesak festival and other important events. Through such involvement there is promotion of closer relations between Sri Lanka and Germany.

Asoka Weeraratna enters the Order of Sangha

Asoka Weeraratna resigned from the post of Secretary of the German Dharmaduta Society in 1972 having served the cause of Buddhism in that capacity for a period of nearly 20 years.

In the mid 1960s Asoka Weeraratna turned his attention to the construction of the Nissarana Vanaya Hermitage at Mitirigala, which became one of Sri Lanka's most respected meditation monasteries under the guidance of the outstanding Meditation monk Ven. Matara Sri Gnanarama Maha Thera. Asoka himself entered the Buddhist order under the name Ven. Dhammanisanthi Thera in August 1972. It is a remarkable example of renunciation of all worldly possessions given that in the 1950's and early 1960's Asoka was one of Sri Lanka's leading businessmen.

Even then, however, his mind still dwelt on the fate of Buddhism in Germany, and in 1982 he went to Berlin for a year's residence at the Vihara.

Death of Asoka Weeraratna (Ven. Mitirigala Dhammanisanthi Thera)

Asoka Weeraratna having been ordained as Ven. Mitirigala Dhammanisanthi Thera spent 27 years in the Sangha most of the time as a forest monk. He passed away on July 2, 1999 at the age of 80 years. Being an ascetic monk he left instructions that his funeral should reflect the Fundamental Buddhist concepts – Anicca, Dukkha and Anatta, which are unfortunately honoured in the breach in most Buddhist funerals.

Therefore he left directions that the following conditions be observed in respect to his funeral:

- a) Within 24 hours of death, his body should be cremated with least expenses and without any pomp and pageantry
- b) The body not to be embalmed
- c) No flower wreaths not even gok kola decorations
- d) No obituary notices in newspapers
- e) No Radio announcements
- f) No flags, No Banners
- g) No Funeral Notices to be pasted
- h) Before the cremation, no appreciations.

The funeral was conducted in a very simple austere manner on July 3, 1999, the day following his death, at the General Cemetery Kanatte in Colombo where the remains of Ven. Mitirigala Dhammanisanthi Thera were cremated amidst the cries of ' Buduweva ' ' Buduweva' from a small crowd of faithful mourners. Amongst them were a band of solemn monks from the Mitirigala Forest Hermitage.