SUMMARY

WORDS ABOUT DEEDS: 100 YEARS OF INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTARY SERVICE FOR PEACE

The building of a peace movement

Many texts about Service Civil International (SCI) mention the first workcamp in 1920 / 1921 on the battlefield of Verdun (France). It was really from this action for post war reconciliation that brought SCI into being (101). However, the camps that followed it in 1924 were part of a campaign. By means of public appeals, volunteers were sought to help clean up after natural disasters and to promote this through alternative service for conscientious objectors in Switzerland, Ceresole's country of origin (102). A first highlight in the 1920s was the cleansing up of flooded agricultural land in 1928 in Liechtenstein. Over 700 volunteers from all over Europe and beyond joined to this SCI service (103).

Behind these workcamps stood a timid and religious man who became a radical pacifist during the war years 1914 to 1918 (104). Pierre Ceresole was convinced that the propaganda of militarism could be overcome through practical volunteering on an international basis (105). He showed great diplomatic skill in bringing together opponents as well as supporters of civilian service and deploying the help needed e.g. in the devasted village of Safien in 1932 (106). But his pacifist commitment needs to be seen in the context of the 1930s, when militarism regained ground. As a response to this, Otto Weis, who took part in the SCI service in 1928, organised passionate lectures about SCI in the emerging Nazi Germany (107).

In the 1930s SCI services expanded into new areas. The 1931 Brynmawr workcamp first addressed social issues such as widespread unemployment in the coal mining region of South Wales (108). The SCI founder Pierre Ceresole took the 1934 earthquake in Bihar (India) as an opportunity to initiate an unprecedented solidarity action by bringing SCI relief services to earthquake affected areas in India for several years (109). This also laid the foundation stone for SCI's presence in Asia after World War II.

Another milestone was the SCI's expansion into humanitarian aid during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Several relief organizations commissioned SCI to help refugees in Spain and later in France (110). SCI not only provided help, but also changed the volunteers themselves. Outstanding volunteers like Irma Schneider who represented SCI in Spain (111) or Elisabeth Eidenbenz, who made a major humanitarian commitment in France (112) internalized the values of the organization and lived by them.

But there were also great people in the background who steadily supported SCI in its early period. The socially committed Swiss Hélène Monastier helped Pierre Ceresole to network internationally in the early days of SCI and took part in several workcamps. In 1947 she became the first international president of SCI (113).

P. 13: Volunteers cleansing a road in the village of Almens (Switzerland), 1926 (Photo: SCIIA)

The emergence of a worldwide movement

The end of the Second World War and the defeat of European fascism gave SCI the chance to develop new activities. The first focus was on reconstruction work in war-devastated countries in central and western Europe. Besides Germany and France (201, 202), SCI also became active in the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Norway, Italy and Czechoslovakia (208). In Switzerland and Great Britain, services continued. The immediate post-war period also saw the emergence of SCI as a federation of branches (full members) and groups (not yet 'mature' enough to be full members) at the national, later also at the sub-national level. In 1949, when the first international constitution (204) had been decided by the International Delegates in Bièvres, France, SCI consisted of nine branches covering France, Switzerland, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Norway, West Germany, Belgium, Italy and Austria. The first attempt to expand beyond this original geographical and cultural area was in Greece - an experiment which after almost two decades proved unsustainable (203).

After the partition of former British India which brought along enormous challenges both for humanitarian work and for international reconciliation, SCI became active, for a second time, in South Asia which was the start of an uninterrupted SCI presence in Asia (205, 206). This included the gradual development of new branches and groups in India, Japan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, East Pakistan / Bangladesh, South Korea and Nepal and regional sub-structures in the course of the 1960s. In the 1950s and 1960s, SCI started to exchange volunteers beyond the 'iron curtain', co-operating with communist youth organisations in some eastern European countries, starting with Poland (208, 209). In western Europe, SCI in some cases continued to function as a disaster relief organisation, as it already did in its early period (207). In the course of decolonisation, SCI took steps to expand to the African continent, to former British and French colonies in West Africa, and in Mauritius (211, 212). A special case is SCI's presence in Algeria from the late 1940s until the mid-1960s, after the country had achieved its independence from France, partly interrupted by war (214, 215). Another special case of unsustainable SCI activity during the 1950s and early 1960s was the Middle East, in particular Israel, where there was a small and active SCI group for around five years, but also Lebanon and Jordan where joint workcamp activities with American Quakers had been organised.

Being an international movement of clearly European origins, SCI found it hard to root itself in North America, even though social, political and cultural circumstances in the United States and in Canada were definitely as favourable to a movement promoting peace and international understanding through voluntary work. In fact a small SCI group in the US, developed workcamp and exchange activities from the mid-1950s. Section 2 ends with the spotlight on a workcamp in the US, which deals with some of the issues typical for Western society in the late 1960s (217). During the 1950s and 1960s, SCI became a worldwide movement, continuously expanding the geographical scope of its activities. Besides the traditional aim of organising volunteer work by international groups serving community needs, SCI had also become an actor in the growing field of development co-operation between the West and the 'developing countries' in the global South (213). Learning processes took place on both sides (210, 216). In 1970, SCI consisted of 12 branches and at least 10 more recognised groups on four continents and exchanged volunteers with many more partner organisations, in particular in Eastern Europe and Africa.

P. 49: Construction of a school building in Donisi (Italy), 1954 (Photo: SCIIA)

SCI in a changing world

Decolonisation, students' revolt, opposition to the US warfare in Vietnam: Western societies were marked by growing demands for change in the years around 1970. These developments affected SCI which had always had the aspiration to be part of a wider 'progressive' movement. Ideological differences within SCI became more apparent than ever and some branches tried out new forms of activity including a deeper reflection on the social and political implications of SCI's work (301). Practical and political work for the cause of conscientious objection continued to be an important pillar of SCI's mission (302, 304). Cooperation with partners in eastern European communist countries continued as well and became easier in the context of political détente between 'West' and 'East' during the 1970s (303). In this period, SCI also fostered reconciliation in the troubled context of Northern Ireland (305) and showed solidarity with liberation movements in Africa (308).

The rise of the women's liberation movement was another characteristic feature of social change in the 1970s and 1980s, not only in western societies, and it left its traces in SCI history especially in this period. It was the time when the first 'women only' workcamps were organised (306, 307). Besides workcamps, long term volunteering became an important way for volunteers to become active within and through SCI (313, 314). At the same time, the expansion of the movement came to an end in Africa and considerably slowed down in Asia, with the remarkable exception of Malaysia (309). On the European side, new SCI groups and later branches were founded in countries which had just been liberated from right-wing dictatorial regimes such as Catalonia / Spain (304) and Greece (311). But also far from Europe in Australia, SCI activities emerged on a small scale (312).

SCI's international structures in the third quarter of a century of its existence were remarkably unstable. The International Secretariat started to 'follow the secretary' - from Switzerland to Luxembourg, then to England, South India, and Germany - whereas the European secretariat was re-established only towards the end of the 1970s. The latter was moved to Antwerp, Belgium, in 1981, and one and a half decades later this office was transformed into a permanent International Secretariat separate from the residence of its staff (310).

Towards the end of this period, the Cold War between 'West' and 'East' also came to an end. Section 3 therefore ends with a piece on an environmental campaign which brought together SCI volunteers with activists in eastern Europe (315).

P. 107: Participants of the 48th International Committee Meeting in New Delhi (India), 1979 (Photo: SCIIA)

Expansion and transformation in a globalizing world

The end of the Cold War meant that SCI's East-West exchange programme was no longer appropriate and it opened up the door for expansion into the half of Europe which so far had been part of the 'communist bloc'. During the 1990s and early 2000s, new SCI branches and groups emerged in Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria (403), Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova, as well as new partner organisations in other countries, including Russia (401, 402). The European continent in the 1990s, however, was also shaken by the wars in former Yugoslavia. SCI soon became active in this new conflict area (405). New branches and groups also emerged in this area - first in Slovenia, later in Croatia, Vojvodina / Serbia, Macedonia, Kosovo (406) and Albania, fostered by an international Working Group focusing on the Balkan area (the 'Sava WG') which unlike the East-West Working Group (401) still exists today. The crisis in the Balkans also played a role in the development of new projects which focused on working with refugees and on awareness-raising about cross-border migration issues which until now play an important role in SCI (404). Since the 1980s, long-term volunteering had gained significance within SCI, and therefore it is no surprise that at an institutional level, SCI participated in successful lobbying efforts to establish a 'European Voluntary Service' (EVS) in the 1990s (409).

Except in the former 'communist bloc', SCI's other attempts at expansion were less remarkable. Cooperation with partners with Latin America had started in the 1980s and has since become an important pillar of SCI's volunteer exchange activities, but no sustainable establishment of SCI branches was possible: - attempts in Mexico and Brazil had failed after a few years. Developments in Africa as well as in the Middle East followed the same pattern: with the exception of VWAN, a former partner transformed into an SCI group in Nigeria, cooperation was limited to partner organisations. On the Asian continent, SCI's traditional second stronghold, SCI was also confronted with violent conflicts, such as in Sri Lanka (408) where at the same time, 'ordinary' workcamps could be organised with a long-term perspective (407). SCI managed to develop new partnerships in other Asian countries, with North-South exchange gaining more importance in a rapidly 'globalising' world. New SCI groups emerged in Hong Kong (413) and in Indonesia. Partnership with organisations in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America were and still are governed by regional Working Groups within SCI.

The establishment of a permanent International Secretariat in Antwerp in 1998 and the strengthening of SCI's international structures in general were soon followed by attempts to implement strategic planning at the international level within SCI (410). One of the consequences of these efforts was the strengthening of SCI's profile as a peace organisation, e.g. by establishing a network of 'peace messengers' (411). The International Constitution was modified in order to register SCI as an 'International Not-for-profit Organisation' according to Belgian law (414).

SCI's main activity - the international exchange of volunteers - entered the digital age towards the end of the first decade of the 21st century (412). In line with the growing importance of awareness-raising campaigns (404), new working methods such as 'human libraries' also entered the world of workcamps (413) while the more traditional manual work projects remain as important as ever (403).

P. 157: Volunteers doing artistic painting in a workcamp in Novi Bečej (Vojvodina, Serbia), 2006 (Photo: Philipp Rodriguez)