

HISTORY OF THE SCHLESWIG GROUP

I came to Schleswig in late April 1948, and remained until RS 109 was wound up almost exactly a year later. I succeeded Alan Robertson, who went on - no doubt well primed through his experiences in Schleswig - to become a borstal gouverneur, and with whom no-one, as far as I know, was able to remain in touch.

My brief (and I cannot recollect whether it came from London, before I left, or from the Senior IVSP representative at zonal HQ) was to promote democracy, and international understanding, amongst young people throughout the area covered by RS 109, which extended from Kiel to the Danish border. A commitment to the work camp movement was implicit, and my qualification was that I had served as a member of the members committee of one of England's earliest and largest mixed clubs. With one exception, youth clubs were a war-time development here, and a professional training programme for club leaders did not come into the syllabus till the mid-fifties or later.

Alan had built up a youth group which met weekly in Schleswig at the Unit centre. He had also organised and run at least one weekend work camp. He also organised the one at Flensburg, although it took place after the change-over and I was responsible for facilitating it.

I saw it as part of my function to convert the group into a club, and I recollect Kurt Thede and Hans Kuhn playing a leading role in drafting a constitution, and we got round to having a members committee. The format was similar to English youth clubs at the time, in that the early part of the evening was devoted to games - there was a table tennis table, I cannot recall any other facilities, although there was room for ball games outside. The latter part of the evening was taken up by a group discussion. Indeed the committee structure did not function well, if at all, because it was possible to plan programmes and activities in, after or during the discussion.

For me the theoretic bases was that the club should be the decision-making body, in which I had a dual role: I was a participating member, but I was also its executive officer: I was responsible for implementation. Then as now, I realise that this was Theoretic, in that I alone had access to very scarce resources: food, tools and transport particularly.

This of course was also the situation in British clubs, because their members were slightly younger (14 - 18). I can only hope that this distortion in the democratic structure, was not too obvious, nor that power was exercised perversely.

The group was socially relatively cohesive : although a very few people were ex-military and in employment, the bulk came from the top forms of the local high schools. I started two more groups, one in Eckernförde, which was younger, poorer and intellectually less challenging - based on the expellee camps near the Bucht. I did attempt to leaven it by trying to involve the very superior expellees centred on the grounds of the Regional Commissioner's official residence, but the Bismarcks, Bethmann-Hollwegs etc gave me a very cool reception, except the Commissioner himself, who later remembered me and I did some political work for him on Northern Irish civil liberties, and the role of the army there in the early 70ties; and earlier still in connection with a University of London issue.

However the Eckernförde people remained a much more led group, in contrast to a very small group in Kiel who met for discussion and who invited me occasionally to join them. I am under the impression that - certainly when I was there - their proceedings were much more formal, and academically rigorous. Their leading spirit was an ex-submariner.

Westerland was the first camp which was actually carried out in the name of the work camp movement, I do not recollect whether it was published as SCI, IZD or IVSP. All three groups were represented plus 4 or 5 Brits (2 from RS 109) and I managed to interest 4 American girls from a Mormon project in Hamburg. Jim Tapp was the reliefworker for the area including Sylt, and the camp's task was the dismantling of one of the wooden seaplane hangars. I cannot recollect whether Jim wanted the wood for a self-help building project by expellees, or to store as firewood. The symbolism of an international group dismantling a war installation was part of the inspiration.

I recollect the camp as being successful, and I retain, with some pride, two other recollections; firstly that we did not have a "leader": various people with technical knowledge took charge of various aspects of the work.

There was not only the wood; but nails and bricks were prepared for re-use. Secondly, we did not have a rigid work distinction. The "sisters" still did the cooking, but there were so many of them that on a rota they were "allowed" onto the site and to participate in the same work as the men. I emphasise this last point because in two earlier camps I had participated, in 1947, in Belgium and Holland, the gender discrimination on which Pierre Ceresole laid so much stress, was still rigidly obeyed.

In fairness I should add that I have very faint recollection that someone might have brought their mother, who had group catering experience, so we may have had an unofficial headsister!

The Schleswig Group undertook a quasi political (with a very small "p") semi-public-activity in that we organised with the Unit for ourselves and invited guests a Christmas celebration, of songs and readings - vaguely derived from the then fashionable Service of 9 Lessons and Carols broadcast from Kings College, Cambridge - with strongly pacifist slant. The more light-hearted recollection of that event is how awful RS 109 sung; I hope one of the German participants in this event will confess to their rehearsing secretly.

The last weekend camp I can recollect was instigated by the Red Cross (DRK), and I recollect making plans for it, in or near Eckernförde, but it actually took place a month or so after I left. Somebody kindly sent me some photos to show that it actually happened!

Whilst this is the bulk of my recollection, old photos suggest that there were at least one or two more weekend camps, but I have totally blacked out on them.

As I am describing a years work let me add in self-defence that I have here only referred to activities with an SCI content. I had some other projects for younger pupils, the biggest being setting up a pen-friendship scheme for over 100 local kids, with correspondents abroad. Whilst on the defensive, I do not conceive myself to be the sort of personality that facilitates easily; leadership would come more naturally. I therefore leave it to someone else to evaluate the Unit's contribution.

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