

SERVICE CIVIL INTERNATIONAL  
International Secretariat  
9, Guy de la Brosse, Paris 5e

Paris, 7 December 1949

Randi Kittelsen,  
Internationaler Zivildienst,

Prüm / Eifel

Dear Randi,

Forgive me for answering your letter at once; it didn't get to me until Saturday (Dec 3rd), and since then I have been very busy writing the minutes of our meeting at Mülheim. Even now I have an enormous amount of work waiting, but I wanted to send you at any rate a few words in reply to your questions.

On the question of alcohol, Willy has already written to Tino that there is not written ruling on this subject in SCI but that it is an unwritten and generally accepted principle that alcohol is not consumed by volunteers while they are in a service. I think this is not because it is thought that the drinking of wine is wicked or absolutely undesirable in itself; but it is a thing which is so easily abused, and when it degenerates into drunkenness then I think it is very definitely detrimental to a service - in many ways. As it may be extremely difficult (as you have found in Prüm), once drinking in a service is accepted, to know exactly where to draw the line, it seems to me very much wiser simply to keep to the accepted tradition of 'no alcohol on a service'. I think the people who say that certain contacts in the local community are more easily made by going and drinking with people are right up to a certain point; but it seems to me that there are one or two rather important questions that one should ask oneself in that connection: Does this method reach all the people one wants to reach? If not, does it always reach even those whose opinion we should most value?

Is there not a danger that it actually alienates some of the population? (I don't mean the fact of drinking one glass of wine or beer once in a while, but those occasions when people cannot stop at that and get drunk - and I think one must clearly visualise this danger if one accepts the drinking of alcohol on a service at all). Personally, I think the dangers are greater than the advantages. I would add, too, that even the contacts that are achieved by drinking with people are often of a rather superficial character; superficial in their personal aspect of contact between individual volunteer and individuals outside the service, and - and for me this is much more serious - creating a superficial and undesirable conception in people's minds of what SCI stands for. A light, easy camaraderie is not difficult to establish by drinking a few beers with people; but how often does it develop from that into the more serious understanding of an respect for our real aims, which surely is what we want in our relations with the local population?

Apart from this consideration of the effect on the outside world, I would prefer to see alcohol kept outside our services. If a group of people coming from such different places, backgrounds, professions and with such varied ideas on every imaginable subject, and yet - we hope - with one serious aim in common, cannot find something more interesting to do together than get fuddled with drink, then I think there is something seriously wrong with that group of people! And if one of them say:

'But I know my own limits, I am perfectly capable of enjoying a drink without getting fuddled', I would still say that it is perfectly clear that at Prüm there are some who are not capable of this, and that 'for the sake of the weaker brethren' the others should refrain too. And what about the effect on the work? Is someone who has gone to sleep drunk tonight capable of working the next day as we should expect people to work on an SCI service? If we want to win the respect and the real, deep friendship of the people among whom we are working, I believe that the best way is to show them by our work that when we offered to come and help them that was our true and only motive, and that we are prepared to give the very best we are capable of in that help. But, I've preached long enough! Perhaps too long already! And I've a lot of other work waiting.

Reports: yes, it is certainly a pity that two or three members of the committee writing these reports have so little experience of SCI. Unless the group is prepared - on the ground of lack of SCI experience - to choose a different committee, perhaps the only thing to do is for that committee to make it clear in their reports that they were not able to reach a unanimous opinion and to give all the opinions expressed by members of the committee on the volunteer in question. It's not a very happy solution, but a better one, I think, than letting the question worry them and divide them overmuch. I am sure that the one thing to avoid in a group, is thinking of any question in such a way that it becomes a cause of serious division into 'cliques and a sort of obsession which makes people forget all the things they have in common and remember only that one thing - often not itself of very great importance - which divides them. Avoid it like the plague, Randi! Always try to make people remember that the things they have in common are more, and more important than those that they cannot share. And especially in an SCI service their one reason for being there should make it impossible for the to allow themselves to be divided by comparatively unimportant things. But I said I'd finished preaching!!

My best greetings to all the folk I knew at Prüm; I still have very pleasant memories of my few days there and the people I met. And I hope that you all, too, are going to leave with many happy memories, as well a memory of difficulties which you certainly have had; and I think you will certainly leave with a sense of a good deal of really useful work well done.

Au revoir, Randi. I very much hope that we shall work together again one of these days.

Yours very sincerely,

Dora Begert-Tregenza