

East-West - Background

SCI's first practical cooperation with Eastern European organisations was in 1955, and took the form of a joint workcamp in Warsaw.

During the late '50s and early '60s several joint camps were arranged, mostly preceded by very long negotiations over conditions. As exchanges became easier, the number of such special co-sponsored camps shrank and the present system emerged, which is that SCI invites Eastern Europeans to ordinary camps in the West and sends SCI volunteers to international camps run solely by the receiving organisations in the East. (The main exception is the DDR, where we have an annual agreement about a co-sponsored camp for which we supply more than a third of the total number of volunteers taking part.)

This year we have sent SCI volunteers to camps in the USSR, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary (for a "man-only" camp), East Germany, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia. In some of these countries we have built up good relations with the cooperating organisations concerned and the camps are reasonably close to the SCI pattern. There will always be some differences in the way they run things, of course, because their tradition of voluntary service is based on the widespread use of youth brigade 'volunteers' for post-war reconstruction and large-scale agricultural and public-works programmes. In a few countries, especially those where we have only recently begun to cooperate, volunteers return full of complaints about (a) how unprepared they were for what they found and (b) what appeared to be unsuitable or badly organised projects. Coming the other way, Eastern European volunteers on our camps are often very much surprised at what they find - that leaders work, that volunteers don't expect pocket-money, that there are no 'norms' (i. e. fixed Targets) except to finish the work available, and so on.

The repetition of certain points year after year - by volunteers to the organisations which sent them East or West, and between SCI and the cooperating bodies - is leading gradually to more satisfaction on both sides. The main point is that we cannot expect instant agreement that our way of doing things is the only way : there must be a certain amount of give-and-take.

After the difficult years of the Stalin era (which was also, as we sometimes forget, the McCarthy era), East-West exchange is flourishing as never before. It is not just the increase in the number of volunteers involved which is important, not the slow but steady improvement in the way the camps are organised to meet the requirements of both sides. Equally significant are the small but clear indications that the whole atmosphere is less tense than it used to be. For example, there is the exchange of participants in leaders' training courses (this year) and the plans for a joint course for leaders and young organisers (next year, in Yugoslavia). These things show an interest that goes beyond written agreements, occasional concessions, and pushing up the numbers for statistical records : it is the beginning of a really friendly and unguarded dialogue. There are still a lot of difficulties which must not be underestimated, but there are also more grounds for hoping, now, that international rust has more or less got the better of the Curtain.

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