

## Origin of SCI's East-West activities

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( file 40 831 )

CSSR 1946 - 1947 / 1967 - 1968

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### 1946 - 1947

In July 1946 a team of six volunteers from Switzerland and Britain left Zurich with a lorry and 3 tons of tools, camp equipment and clothes for distribution. This action has been organised on request of friends in Prague ( among them Premisl Pitter and Jrji Hayek, later Foreign minister ) who had taken part in SCI camps in Switzerland and France in the twenties and thirties. The team consisted of 4 artisans and 2 women teachers.

In Prague twelve CSSR volunteers joined them to travel to Stitina near Opava, Silesia, where Soviet and German army sections had been fighting each other. The team reconstructed, from 8th July to 20th October 1946, several war-damaged houses. In November and December they repaired the house installation in two castles which had been transformed to homes for war orphans of Jewish and German origins; worked a couple of weeks in another war-damaged village called Stetnik and then sorted out and transported medicines, dry food, linen, woollen clothes and shoes on behalf of the Government to distribution centres.

Suddenly a rather ironic, perhaps typical for that time, apparent discovery was made ( by the Secret Service ? ) : After having suspected the SCI volunteers in Stitina 1946 to be communists and ordering them to "stay at home" when President Benesh visited the region, in May 1947 an order of arrestation was issued for the leader of the SCI team because "he may be a capitalist spy"! He had already left the country to resume his job in Switzerland after the 6 months leave he had received were over.

### 1956 - March 1975

In the framework of World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY) contacts were officially established with functionaries of the Council of the Czechoslovakian Youth (CSM) in Prague, with no practical result. Such contacts were renewed in 1963. In 1964 exchange of volunteers became possible. A real opening happened in 1966 : CSM was offering SCI to send fifty volunteers to France, Britain, Switzerland, Italy and Austria. On the other hand, SCI proposed to send volunteers to CSM's camps.

In the meantime the CSM Town Council, International Department, had engaged some students to organise more camps. Within a few weeks they prepared seven camps in Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia.

In January 1967 the SCI European Secretary, Janet Goodricke, visited Prague and met Joseph Skacek, international secretary of the Student Council of CSM. On his suggestion the number of CSSR volunteers being sent to Western European countries was drastically increased. However, there were considerable handicaps : difficulties to get passports in time, or exit-permits; volunteers received only a tiny sum in foreign currency. On the other hand some Western European Embassies in Prague were hesitant to issue visas.

Other difficulties had to do with the "re-birth" of the SCI group in Prague. Some contacts with individual friends had been maintained after 1947 in a loose way and long intervals. Some cooperated with CSM to find volunteers and helped to organise small camp activities. Now the group began to increase in number and offered volunteers directly to SCI branches abroad in agreement with some of the CSM secretaries. It was suggested that the group should apply for official status. They hesitated.

Contrary to the older leaders of the SCI group, most of the temporarily engaged functionaries of the CSM Central Council and its various branch officers were enthusiastic, active and efficient students. On the other hand they tended to overrate their competence and possibilities. Some ran into difficulties.

The rather hectic activities rising on all sides and levels, announcing the so-called "spring of Prague" with the hope for more independence and freedom for activities, created at times - particularly in summer 1967 - some confusion and misunderstandings among the various groups in the CSSR with which SCI in Western Europe was cooperating. Several visits by SCI secretaries and a member of the international committee could not help to settle difficulties and clear existing confusion, especially those concerning relationship between CSM and the small SCI Prague group.

On suggestion of the director of CSM Student Council, the then SCI European secretary agreed in January 1968 to receive more than 300 volunteers in Western European camps and to send 25 volunteers to SCI camps in CSSR in summer of that year.

In August 1968 the Soviet army and units from other socialist countries occupied Czechoslovakia.

The military occupation did not completely stop contacts and volunteers' exchange. Some relationship continued with the Travel Bureau of the Czechoslovak Youth and Students, Section work camps (CKM), and the Coordination Committee for Voluntary Service in CSSR (KOVDS), which had taken the place of CSM. The directors were the same as of those organisations with which SCI had cooperated before. In spite of the deteriorating political situation, everybody in the movements of voluntary work that it was constructive to give young people the opportunity to travel abroad and take part in international voluntary workcamps. Cooperation in good comradeship continued.

The SCI group in Prague unofficially also continued to exist and some of the members met from time to time. In January 1969 they set up a constitution called "International Peace Service, Club of Friends of SCI". They issued a circular letter, giving a short historical review and some recent news, of what are quoted : "... So far, we can say that the Soviet intervention did not cause any remarkable troubles considering our situation with the other groups organising workcamps in CSSR. We cooperate with them in the Coordinating of Voluntary Services in Czechoslovakia, and try to encourage other groups interested in the methods and ways of SCI ... Our future depends very much not only on the development of the political situation in 'Middle Europe', but also on our internal condition ... "

The opinion could be heard that workcamp-exchange had contributed to spread ideas of the 'Prague Spring'.

In June 1970 CKM "at the occasion of its 15th anniversary, awarded to SCI the diploma and medal for outstanding services in facilitating the exchange of young people and student throughout the world."

Franco Perna, the then SCI European secretary, wrote in a analysis of East-West activities in 1971 : "... particularly in 1967 - 1968 Eastern European Youth bodies started utilising the work camp method as a useful channel to satisfy the growing desire of young people in their countries to travel to the West ... SCI friends in CSSR managed to get, if only temporarily, some official recognition as a group in 1968 and were able to hold a few projects independently from official youth bodies. The end of the 'Spring of Prague' did not openly interfere with East-West exchanges, but it surely brought a cold shower on those who promoted them ... "

In March 1975 Eugen Schart, secretary of SCI in Prague, wrote : "The number of volunteers sent to SCI camps in Western European countries will be reduced. Too many young people did not return in 1974. Improvement of relationship cannot be expected. A hard line is officially followed."

Is this still so in 1989 ?

*( Ralph Hegnauer )*