

Origin of SCI's East-West activities

(file 40 861)

People's Republic of Yugoslavia 1947 - 1948 / 1952 - 1972

After World War II Peoples' Youth of Yugoslavia (PYY) was organising Brigades of young people, mostly students, to help to build new railway lines much needed for economical development. In summer 1947 the Swiss branch of SCI decided to send three experienced volunteers to take part in such work. The experience was positive and the volunteers recommended to negotiate through World Federation of Democratic Youth a regular exchange of volunteers.

In 1947 or 1948 (no exact dates available) IAL Sweden sent volunteers to the brigades working at the hydro plant Vinodol. They tried to convince PYY that regular exchange of volunteers would favour East-West understanding. It seems that there was no response "because of ignorance or prejudices of the responsible administrative services". Eventually IAL managed to break through red-tape : dated 1952 there is a report written by Klaus Hilkenbach, an SCI volunteer in an IAL / PYY working group, ". . . There are two points to be considered when continuing collaboration : Is it right that we peacemaking associations collaborate on such work as the big dam knowing that the electricity will mainly serve rearmament ? And should we take part in camps which for the local volunteers serve also as premilitary training camps ?"

Dorothy Guiborat, International secretary, wrote 1952 in a report to the International Delegate Meeting : "IAL is perfectly aware of these problems. But in spite of them, they think it worthwhile to continue collaboration. This mainly because it is strongly felt by all participants that any problem can be discussed very frankly and openly and the Yugoslavs take an enormous interest in foreign matters, being extremely keen to have contacts with the outside world, repeating constantly that they are a relatively new country which needs to learn a great deal still. Our friends have found great interest and good understanding for our aims and methods . . . The leaders of IAL try to get permission for camps on our lines, so far without result, mainly because the authorities find that 'voluntary work camps' do not pay for themselves . . . Would there not be room to prove that services can pay for themselves materially, and that they also can pay in terms of better general understanding between people and peoples ?"

The first venture carried out by IAL Sweden (now a branch of SCI) with PYY was followed by many contacts of SCI branches with official and semi-official organisations in Beograd, Zagreb, Sarajevo, Ljubljana, such as Yugoslav Students Union (YSU), Union of Yugoslav Youth (UYU), Rural Youth of Yugoslavia (RYU), People's Youth of Yugoslavia later called Yugoslav Youth Alliance (YYA), Foreign sections of Universities, Union of Slovenian Youth, Esperanto Group of Zagreb Observatory.

Up to 1962 more or less regular exchange of volunteers was carried out. However, in 1963 YYA agreed to organise also a joint camp in Yugoslavia, together with AFSC (American Friends Service Committee) and SCI. It took place in Bohinj / Slovenia.

In August 1963 happened the earthquake at Skopje / Macedonia. This was the opportunity for the SCI Emergency Relief Team. They went immediately into action and were followed by groups of volunteers who worked for two months.

The following years some more joint camps were realised. In view of administrative difficulties on national level, increased contacts with local authorities and groups were sought and established; sometimes together with AFSC and UNA (United Nations Association) of Great Britain. SCI adapted easily to the Yugoslav federal ways of doing things. Thus, the International Committee asked in turn the Swiss, French, Norwegian and Italian branches to accept responsibility on behalf of, and the support by, the European and International secretariats, to continue contacts with the various associations and groups in Yugoslavia. For each action, be it exchange of volunteers or a joint camp, however, practically every year contacts had to be renewed with different partners. This asked for particular, constantly repeated and little rewarding efforts from SCI.

Finally, when there was nobody in SCI showing real interest in cooperation with Yugoslav organisations and / or groups any more under such circumstances, activities stopped.

Nevertheless, in 1966 SCI was invited to take part at the "International Conference on Prevention and Elimination of Effects of Disasters" in Beograd, where the secretary of SCI France, Etienne Reclus, explained the principles and the working of Emergency Teams in case of catastrophes.

In 1972 SCI contacts in Yugoslavia seem to have stopped completely. Only in recent years a limited exchange of volunteers was resumed.

(21st March 1989)

Ralph Hegnauer