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1920 - 1970 The first fifty years of Service Civil International

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Origins

Since the beginning of this century men and women had been wondering about that rise in violence and asking themselves which action to take upon in order to avoid that such a wave would develop which would bring about total war.

This is how some men and women especially in Great Britain, tried to create a chain of resistance and came in contact with pacifists from Germany, the USA etc... A rather important group was set up in Cambridge, Great Britain: some of its members, particularly in Britain, objected to their call-up-order.

In 1919 the various groups met up again at Bilthoven in Holland, an estate which belonged to one of their friends, and that is where the International Movement for Reconciliation (IMR) was officially set up. Pierre Ceresole had been invited and there were his first contacts with the Quakers who had carried out many relief actions for the victims during and after the war.

For him that meeting meant a decisive step in his life. As a Swiss citizen he had constantly been arguing against that war and feeling Indignant about the passivity of the Christian churches; he became a total pacifist which led him to spend many months in prison in Switzerland in order to demonstrate publicly the horror of that war.

At Bilthoven he felt himself very fast at ease and accepted to be General Secretary of that new-born movement. At once he started preparing a much more important congress for the following year which took place at Bilthoven in July 1920. That congress was an entire success: there were over 400 participants from Great Britain, Germany, Holland, the Scandinavian countries, the USA.

The central issue was "How to build Peace". There were some very notable Interventions. They casted on genuine possibilities of working for the construction of Peace. Discussions lasted two days, but at the end of those two days a young German intervned somewhat brutally "we have now been discussing for two days, that is enough. We must do something now we must start my brother was a soldier in the German Army, he was at war in France he participated in bombing that country - I come here to do my part in order to build, to reconstruct it.

That was like a trigger for Pierre, he recalled that phrase from the philosopher. William James: "Put in the service of Peace those splendid forces which have been wasted until now by war and its. They had to show that the enemies of yesterday could now work

together to build Peace. Nevertheless the congress came to an end without an agreement on a concrete work to be realised.

Pierre resigned as General Secretary of IMR so as to devote himself to organising a Practical Service for Peace. He undertook a journey to Germany and Berlin in order to get in touch again with his pacifist friends. The British Quaker Hubert Paris, who should have replaced him at IMR but who had been convinced by his ideas came to join him there. In the course of their conversations they decided to create a PRACTICAL SERVICE FOR PEACE. They left at once for the devastated regions in the North of France in order to find a site best suited for a first experiment of an international workcamp. They had to overcome the hostility of the authorities and the local people.

Finally after having obtained the consent of the Mayor, the ministry and the local people they were able to organise a workcamp at Esnes near Verdun; construction of wooden houses for the victims of the war. Hubert Paris had much experience in international relief actions and was a big support to Pierre Ceresole.

First Experiment

They needed money and volunteers, the problem was solved after having approached many people, in particular the American Quakers, some friends in Switzerland, England and Holland and last not least IMR. Ernest Ceresole, Pierre's brother, colonel in the Swiss Army, asked for a special discharge in order to work also for the construction of Peace; a Dutch-woman joined them and contributed not only with her work but also with a large sum of money. The French government also granted some financial help.

The workcamp started on the 20th of November 1920 with a reduced team, that were 2 Swiss, 1 British, 2 Dutchpeople, 3 Germans and 1 Hungarian. It finished on the 10th of April 1921 due not to a lack of work but due to an anti-German campaign which was started by some of the local people. They had to separate themselves from the Germans: they found that inadmissible so the whole group split up as their message had not been perceived and their action was worthless. That first experiment was a semi-failure, but the Idea was taken up again later on.

With much determination Pierre Ceresole undertook to convince friends in Switzerland (in particular) to obtain a Civil Service for the "objectors of war. In 1924, that is four years after the first experiment, two workcamps were organised Someo in the Tessin and at Vers l'Eglise in Switzerland.

Successful Action

In 1927 In the small principality of Liechtenstein the rich Rhine Valley had been covered over by mud, sand and stones by the enraged river Pierre Ceresole offered the Prince the assistance of that new-born movement which was the only solution for the government but what a challenge!

A genuine mobilisation of means for action took place very fast: material was loaned from the engineer corps (shovels, pickaxes, tip-wagons, tents, kitchen, equipment from the Swiss and Austrian governments) and there was an agreement for free transport throughout those two countries. Besides a campaign for recruiting volunteers and financial aid was started.

In spring 1928 soon after the thawing of snow that hard work was undertaken with success: 710 volunteers from 28 different countries followed each other between April and October. The local farmers took courage again.

The demonstration of what that genuine Practical Service for Peace could achieve was conclusive. The movement was well launched, the world press kept on reporting on that adventure: "Men without hate" was the title of a series of articles by Alexis Daman, Journalist at Paris-Soir. The experiment was renewed two years later in France in the Garonne Valley at Albeville-Lagarde but on a smaller scale as the French government was reluctant. However the German volunteers' presence there had a consciousness-raising-effect on the local population which had suffered due to the war and came to realise that the Germans had come there in a spirit of friendship and were not barbarians.

Provocative Actions

Challenging Colonialism 1934: Following an earthquake in the Bihar (India) an international team, small but supported by the entire movement, with participants from Switzerland, Great Britain, the USA put itself in the service of the victims and a real collaboration between colonisers (Great Britain) and colonised people (Indian population) could take place. Ideological and Racial Tension The issue of relations to Eastern countries was particularly hard to solve. There existed a complete hostility and total lack of understanding between the two European halves (Western Europe - Eastern Europe). There also numerous efforts led to an opening: In 1955 the first East-West workcamp started at Warsaw and in the USSR in 1958.

Conscientious objectors were "Outlaws" except in Great Britain and Sweden. SCI in accord with its basic principles mobilised itself in order to obtain for them a legal status: with demonstrations, support actions for imprisoned objectors illegal welcoming on SCI workcamps, in 1963 the status was obtained in France, followed by Germany, Italy etc.... In many countries they are assigned to services either in their home country or abroad. During the Second World War the British government instructed SCI to organise workcamps for conscientious objectors (afforestation workcamps) or first-aid-teams in the bombarded regions. New forms of relations between the countries at war: Solidarity Actions during and after military conflicts.

Spain

The Spanish war in 1937 meant a severe trial for SCI. What to do faced with 'a massacred country'? Our solidarity had to be put into practice urgently but SCI had few means, however an important action of a trust of social organisations in Switzerland, called "Ayuda Suiza a los niños de España", entrusted SCI with work in Spain: evacuation of children from the front from Madrid to Valencia soup-kitchens in Madrid for mothers and babies, regular delivery service of fresh provisions which came by sea from British and American Quakers to about twenty children's homes set up temporarily in the province of Valencia, transport and delivery service of food and clothing in Catalonia.

Once peace had returned in Spain that aid was continued in France where homes were opened at first for Spanish children who had fled to France, later for displaced Jewish children, in 1942 the trust and 501 handed over these services to the Swiss Red Cross which set up a special section "C.R.S. Secours aux Enfants" in order to carry on that

work. The French branch participated secretly in those activities. It had dissolved itself In 1940 in order to avoid any collaboration with the Nazis.

Tibet

During the invasion of Tibet by China substantial aid was offered to Tibetan women and children by their escape to India across the border in the mountains That action went on for many weeks with the consent of the Indian Army until the authorities organised some social services for the Tibetan refugees.

Algeria

1955 - 1962 - the Algerian War: The International SCI' organised relief actions for Algerian children (refugee children's homes at the Moroccan and Tunisian borders). There Were protests raised to the French government against the abusive imprisonment's and tortures. These actions were Supported by the French branch through solidarity actions towards the Algerian nationals living In France.

Once independence was obtained Important activities for the reconstruction of villages took place: a basic public health service for 60000 inhabitants was set up supplementary alimentation was offered to children and schooling was organised in the district of Sebdou, Tlemcen Departement, Algeria.