



SCI's HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT

(Working paper from the report of the seminar:
DEVELOPING DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION: SOLIDARITY WORK AND
VOLUNTEER EXCHANGE". held in Bemburg - Northern Ireland - from 5 till 9 April
1987)

(NB: A number of Ralph's significant comments have been added to the working paper.)

Introduction

This is a modest attempt to review SCI's history, its principles and its, in so many ways fascinating adaptation of practical activities to "needs of the time". It may be helpful to first throw a glimpse at the situation as it prevailed in Europe in the twenties: in the year after World-War-1st. All countries were in economic crisis, had shattered currencies and went through considerable

political and cultural unrest. There was a widespread craze for speculations of all kind, leading in October 1929 to a crash at the New York stock exchange, followed by a general economic collapse with an unemployment rate of hitherto unknown dimensions: at that time without any State unemployment compensation. This meant horrible hardship for millions of workers, employees, workshop owners and shopkeepers. It also meant frantic attempts towards national self-sufficiency, full of hatred for anything so-called foreign, although exactly such chauvinistic attitudes had 15 years earlier let to the First World War and its consequences and with all its misery!

As usual in such situations, a majority of people in nearly all-European countries was frustrated. Radical political parties on the left and on the right, as well as group of all kind, advocated various economic, social or religious solutions how to get out of the troubles, if people only would follow new leaders and let them carry out of proposed changes.

1920-1924

Among the many new ventures and organisations coming into being, there was an attempt of practical Franco-German reconciliation on an ex-battlefield in France. Two Quakers, a French speaking Swiss, Pierre Ceresole, and his English friend, Hubert Parris, decided at an assembly of the Fellowship of Reconciliation in the Netherlands 1919, to organise an international reconstruction work camp by voluntary, unpaid effort, at Esnes near Verdun. The village council agreed to welcome helping hands and volunteers were found: two Swiss, two English, three Germans, one Hungarian -all men- and one Dutch woman. The camp lasted from December 1920 (a long time had been

needed for negotiations and preparations) to April 1921. A French official social work lady objected to the presence of Germans, "so soon after the end of the war", and managed to have French authorities ruling that the German volunteers should be dismissed. The group decided to leave together rather than accept such discrimination. In the final report it is stated that the reasons given were "The presence of German volunteers could weaken the hatred of the French population for their enemies and, consequently, their patriotism"; - the only "religion" practised by many inhabitants, added the authors, Pierre Ceresole and Hubert Parris. - Officially this attempt of Franco-German reconciliation had failed.

But the formula of a voluntarily rendered practical service had proved to be feasible and efficient. Good work had been done, recognised by the majority of the population. Living, working and voluntarily sharing difficulties together when confronted with serious misunderstanding from outside, also conditions of hardship, had closely knitted the volunteers to a group of friends "beyond national barriers".

For the founders of SCI and particularly for Pierre Ceresole and Hélène Monastier, it was important that SCI's ideology was not identified with their own. more radical pacifist convictions. Had they wished to make such an identification, they would have chosen "War Registers International" or "Fellowship of Reconciliation" to sponsor their first voluntary workcamp. Early appeals and statements show that. besides asking for determined efforts in carrying out work projects, they expected the volunteers to express their individual opinions and to participate in constructive discussions about them.

They a/so advocated tolerance and expressed hope that common efforts would produce mutual understanding. In their view SCI should be a kind of platform where a wide variety of sentiments, feelings and opinions could meet and where volunteers by working, living and learning together would have the opportunity to learn how to contribute to building peace. In their view. peace could only be achieved by deep insight, mutual understanding and co-operation based on common solidarity. Everybody can contribute in their way by their personal behaviour: based on justice, sympathy for other's people needs, respect and love. international voluntary workcamps are a good means to be introduced to questions of social Justice, freedom and peace. They also said that each generation would have to adapt their methods of service to their time.

Four years later Pierre Ceresole happened to walk along the fence of bar-racks in Lausanne. He saw a lonely young man in civilian clothes standing in the courtyard. This man had refused to undergo military training on con-scientious grounds. Ceresole remembered information on possibilities of alternative service in the United Kingdom. He mobilised a number of friends in the Swiss Peace Movement to launch a popular petition in the Swiss Parliament to create a civilian service for conscientious objectors. 40.000 persons signed. The petition was refused with a typical "Swiss argument":

that such service would and could not function without "sergeants" boots behind the young men!

At that time there were two landslides in the country (Les Ormonts / Vaud and Someo / Ticino). The petitioners considered that helping the farmers to clean their land would be an excellent opportunity to prove to politicians and militaries that the "boots argument" was not fair. They issued a public appeal for volunteers- Both camps turned out to be a success: excellent work done. good spirit, interest and acknowledgement by the inhabitants and local authorities in both villages. This was an encouraging result. A practical example for an alternative service had been demonstrated. But it did not help to further the idea of a solution for Conscientious Objectors. Would it be possible by

persisting? Since then hundreds of voluntary work camps, many with real hardship, took place. But there is still no recognised alternative service in Switzerland.

1925-1944

The group of friends interested in the issue now had a strong motif to get organised and continue work camp activities. The circle of active fellow workers, men and women, extended continuously. In 1928 710 volunteers took part in an important rubble clearing service in Liechtenstein where heavy flooding of the river Rhine had occurred. Again the two brothers Ceresole were in charge: Ernest for organisation and administration; Pierre, who worked as a "normal" volunteer, for cultural and spiritual concerns- in 1930 Pierre and his friends organised again an important service after floods in Lagarde in the South of France, with over 200 volunteers.

In this period the association of the friends of SCI was founded. It offered two principles: 1) international co-operation and unity on a non-governmental level and 2) International voluntary service as a way of life, "to spread across barriers which divide men, a new spirit which will render morally impossible war between nations" (from first SCI constitution in 1931).

During the economic crisis in Britain, 1931, a work camp was organised in Brynmawr / Wales, to help restore self-confidence to a distressed mining-town. Volunteers together with unemployed miners built a swimming pool and laid out a public park. As a follow-up of this experience, the practical-orientated British volunteers founded a Branch of SCI, called International voluntary Service (IVS). A significant story in this context must be told: when learning of financial difficulties in Wales, the "maire" of Lagarde travelled to Brynmawr to bring the surplus of the Lagarde camp in order to ensure the continuation of the ongoing work.

Three years later there was a heavy earthquake in the Bihar State in India. Ceresole and a few other Europeans joined volunteers of the Ghandi freedom movement to reconstruct villages. They were at work for several winters and made contacts with Indian leaders. One of the student volunteers was Rajendra Prasad, who later on was elected the first President of independent India. He asked IVS in 1949 to send European volunteers to help resettle refugees from Pakistan after participation on the Indian continent. He told the author of this report on a visit in 1951 that the experience 15 years earlier had left deep impressions on him.

1936 marked a turning point; some units of the army tried to over-throw the Government of the Republic of Spain. Civil war broke out. Some welfare organisations, including SCI, decided to offer helping victims on warfare, especially children. The representative of the insurrection, of which General Franco had become head, refused to admit help by neutral organisations:

The Republican Government accepted. A joint committee, made up of all welfare bodies in Switzerland collected money and four lorries, with adjustable benches suitable for transportation of people as well as goods, were bought. A regular evacuation service for children from Madrid to Valencia was set up. Later reinforced by a modern bus. On the return fare flood for Madrid's civilian population was loaded. A maternity in Madrid, a canteen for pregnant women, feeding programmes for children and old people, and a number of centres for sewing and distribution of clothes in several towns were opened. The activities in Spain had been entrusted to SCI by the cartel in Switzerland. It was a new kind of activities: "red cross" work, another field of action carried out by SCI - an enterprise adapted and responding to urgent needs of a given socio-political situation. It has not been decided in a light way: Hœe9ne Monastier of Lausanne, one of the finest and most remarkable women who had joined

the Ceresoles from the beginning of their activities, told later: Pierre was not in favour of such type of work for SCI - as in the meantime the common enterprise had been named. He wanted to maintain work, as an alternative to military service with strict discipline as it was understood at that time: hard manual work under strong leadership, done in groups. Somebody suggested to Pierre to visit Spain in order to see for himself what should be done. When he came back he had changed his mind:

"Au diable les principes quand il s'agit de sauver des vie humaines" (To hell with principles when there is need to save human life). As Pierre already had committed himself to continue village reconstruction in India, Rodolfo Olgiati, the secretary of the Swiss branch, was already in action in Spain. It was a service which deeply influenced a number of volunteers. It definitively established SCI as a recognised body.

The outbreak of World War Two in September 1939 stopped all SCI activities except in Britain and a few activities in Sweden and Switzerland, retrospect of SCI's history up to 1939 it should be dear that there was at no time such a thing as an SCI ideology in the sense of thought-up system of aims. SCI's basic motifs grew out of responding to "needs of the time". A group of idealistically minded people were of the opinion that it was possible to carry out practical activities by unpaid voluntary service in favour of communities in need. SCI's basis was motivated -as has been seen- by a modest attempt for Franco-German reconciliation, helping to provide an alternative service for Conscientious Objectors and practical social work of solidarity in situation of urgency and particular distress. These activities were understood as being part of a general principle to work for a more just and peaceful society based on mutual understanding and altruistic co-operation.

After WWII

In 1959 together with Algerian Trade Unions leaders a venture in favour of Algerian refugee children and teenagers began in Tunisia and a year later in Morocco, which was changed, from 1962 on. into an important action for the Algerian population. After the liberation a feeding programme for children in co-operation with the Algerian Red Crescent was carried out in the Department of Tlemcen, together with reconstruction of village, completely destroyed by warfare, in co-operation with the inhabitants. To ensure basic medical care a dozen simple dispensaries were opened in the District of Sebdou, staffed by European doctors and nurses, giving training to assistant male nurses; school classes were begun and, after a period of trial with Algerian teachers, handed over to the new educational authorities at Tlemcen. Lasted until 1968, when political changes began to restrict SCI's contribution and new forms of co-operation had to be explored.

The fifties was also the period when SCI had to suffer in European countries from being slandered as a disguised subversive "communist" organisation. SCI has always had a progressive and often pioneering attitude, but its independence was never proved better than at that time. When working with Algerian inhabitants before and after its liberation, SCI India in the same period took care of women and children of the distressed groups of Tibetan refugees asking for asylum at the border in the Himalayan mountains, after the invasion of their country by units of the Chinese army.

In the early sixties the British branch began to send volunteers with special skills on long-term assignments to countries in West- Central- and Southern Africa and eventually to Asia. Also the Belgian branch sent medical personnel abroad on individual assignment.

Short-term volunteers who had served in SCI camps in other countries started activities at home: in the United States of America. Japan. Israel and Sri Lanka. Gerson Gu-

konu, the founder of "Volontaires au travail" in Togo became a committed SCI member and his association a partner. British long-term volunteers encouraged work camps in Mauritius.

Conclusion

Attempt to take stock after fifty years of SCI existence. It is impossible to enumerate in a short review all the ventures, which took place in different regions and continents from 1945 to 1970. This part covering 1920 -1970 may be concluded by a few observations on achievements and failures in SCI's first fifty years,

No illusions: whereas the idea of international unpaid voluntary service is without any doubt a wonderful possibility to give human society a new direction, its realisation is difficult. It is for the time being a concern of a small minority. Although it can be furthered by activists, it depends largely on general tendencies. Critical appraisal is indicated:

- Franco-German reconciliation was of course out of reach by voluntary methods -although with Important symbolic value!- and has been achieved by the need for European-nations to joint their resources; their human, political, financial and military forces to match the newly emerged world powers USA and USSR.

- Except in some countries the problem of conscientious objection has found in Europe at least partial solutions. The right to refuse military service has been granted thanks to the efforts of many non-governmental associations and a change of mind in governmental circles. However, practical forms of alternative service have still to be improved in most countries.

- Social work, practical help after natural catastrophes, relief work with refugees after upheavals and revolutions are still part of SCI's activities, but have become to a large extent the matter for national states, specialised agencies of the United Nations and many non-governmental organisations. It will, however, still be necessary to get into action from time to time and SCI will have to be flexible and remain ready for such ventures.

- Experimental self-administration and common responsibility in camps and services were realised and become accepted part of SCI's principles, although leaders naturally still play a special part by their conviction, their personality and their sense of commitment to the ideals of SCI. Common responsibility according to modern views is inherent in the method of voluntary work by creating an atmosphere of friendliness and mutual concern. Some research had been made in the framework of other voluntary bodies. but the possible impact of this point has not yet been conclusively established within SCI.

What about the less encouraging results?

- Although the number of women and men volunteers in SCI camps were about equal every year, the presence of women in committees, working groups and secretariats, that is to say in position of responsibility, were clearly insufficient in most branches and on the international level in 1970. Why? What development has there been since then?

- There seemed little headway made in a matter to which the founders attributed great importance: did - or does - SCI still believe in, and work towards the opportunity of voluntary service becoming an agent not only for better international understanding but also for promoting a new-life-style. philosophy and a new way to form human society? Was and is SCI still taking seriously paragraph 2 of AIMS AND METHODS in the international constitution: "Through the means of practical service in the community to spread. across barriers which divide men, a new spirit which will render morally

impossible war between nations, and the degradation of human dignity and in which all men and women may live free from want, ignorance and fear of war? Was and is SCI able to give impulses in this respect?

- In 1970 SCI had just managed to make a modest beginning with building up a real international movement in the sense of:

- overcoming, on the level of organisation, the form of a very loose federation of practically independent national branches:

- planning and analysing activities internationally together more closely:

- visualising and creating a common strategy to promote close unity beyond national mentalities, political feelings, thinking, interests and pressures.

Such suggestions may be breaking with SCI's attitude to "respond to the needs of the time" But is it not "time" to take stock and find out whether strategy and tactics possibly need to be adjusted to the present situation? And consequently also follow the founders' purposes?

Last point: After working 20 years in economically developing countries, SCI had in 1970 not been able to find the adequate solution for young Europeans working constructively at the long run in projects of Asian branches and African partners in the framework of their mutual possibilities. And the other way round: how, and to what extent, did and does co-operation with Asian, African and eventually Latin American partners change influence and help to develop SCI's European attitudes? In 1970 SCI as a movement was not prepared to analyse and study thoroughly the British branch's experience with their long-term volunteers in Africa. Was it too early at that time? What about today?