

Words about Deeds

100 years of International
Voluntary Service for Peace



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One hundred years of international voluntary service for peace

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Layout: Marilou Ruijter, Amsterdam

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Printed in the Netherlands by Boekengilde, Enschede



Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union

Published by:

SCI
International Secretariat
Belgiëlei 37
2018 Antwerpen
Belgium

SCI International Archives
Bibliothèque de la Ville
Rue du Progrès 33, c. p. 3034
2303 La Chaux-de-Fonds
Switzerland

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Second edition March 2020

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ISBN 978 94 639 6538 5

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*One hundred years of international voluntary
service for peace*

Service Civil International 1920 - 2020

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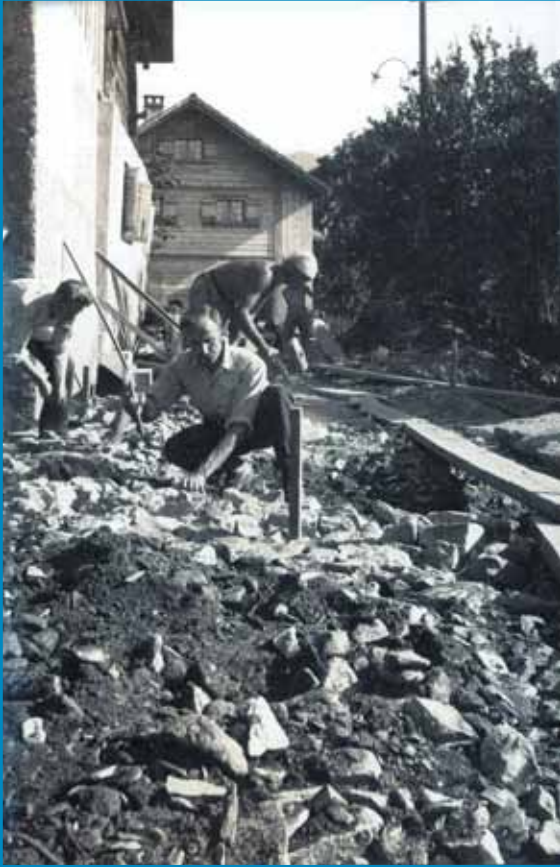
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Part 1 - SCI from 1920 to 1945

The building of a peace movement

The building of a peace movement

Many texts about Service Civil International (SCI) mention the first workcamp in 1920 / 1921 on the battlefield of Verdun (France). It was really from this action for post war reconciliation that brought SCI into being (101). However, the camps that followed it in 1924 were part of a campaign. By means of public appeals, volunteers were sought to help clean up after natural disasters and to promote this through alternative service for conscientious objectors in Switzerland, Ceresole's country of origin (102). A first highlight in the 1920s was the cleansing up of flooded agricultural land in 1928 in Liechtenstein. Over 700 volunteers from all over Europe and beyond joined to this SCI service (103).

Behind these workcamps stood a timid and religious man who became a radical pacifist during the war years 1914 to 1918 (104). Pierre Ceresole was convinced that the propaganda of militarism could be overcome through practical volunteering on an international basis (105). He showed great diplomatic skill in bringing together opponents as well as supporters of civilian service and deploying the help needed e.g. in the devastated village of Safien in 1932 (106). But his pacifist commitment needs to be seen in the context of the 1930s, when militarism regained ground. As a response to this, Otto Weis, who took part in the SCI service in 1928, organised passionate lectures about SCI in the emerging Nazi Germany (107).

In the 1930s SCI services expanded into new areas. The 1931 Brynmawr workcamp first addressed social issues such as widespread unemployment in the coal mining region of South Wales (108). The SCI founder Pierre Ceresole took the 1934 earthquake in Bihar (India) as an opportunity to initiate an unprecedented solidarity action by bringing SCI relief services to earthquake affected areas in India for several years (109). This also laid the foundation stone for SCI's presence in Asia after World War II.

Another milestone was the SCI's expansion into humanitarian aid during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Several relief organizations commissioned SCI to help refugees in Spain and later in France (110). SCI not only provided help, but also changed the volunteers themselves. Outstanding volunteers like Irma Schneider who represented SCI in Spain (111) or Elisabeth Eidenbenz, who made a major humanitarian commitment in France (112) internalized the values of the organization and lived by them.

But there were also great people in the background who steadily supported SCI in its early period. The socially committed Swiss H  l  ne Monastier helped Pierre Ceresole to network internationally in the early days of SCI and took part in several workcamps. In 1947 she became the first international president of SCI (113).

The first workcamp and the founding of SCI

by Philipp Rodriguez

From 20 November 1920 to 21 April 1921, the first workcamp of SCI took place in Northern France in order to reconstruct a war damaged village. Behind this initiative was the Swiss pacifist Pierre Ceresole, who saw this as a solution to overcome nationalism and militarism. Subsequently, he used this method of peace work to introduce civilian service as an alternative to military service. This service could provide aid after a natural disaster.

When more than seven hundred volunteers took part in a workcamps in 1928, an international organisation was founded, Service Civil International.

The Conferences in Bilthoven 1919 and 1920

During the First World War Pierre Ceresole (see article 104) became known because of his publicly voiced opposition to war. In the summer of 1919, the well-known theologian and pacifist Leonhard Ragaz invited Pierre Ceresole to a Peace Conference in Bilthoven (The Netherlands), where several Christian pacifists founded the Fellowship of Reconciliation. At the conference, Ceresole met many like-minded people and future companions. He was especially impressed by the pacifist tradition of the Quakers, a denomination of which he would become a member seventeen years later.

Due to his extensive language skills, he was elected as conference secretary. Appointed to advocate international reconciliation, he suggested a fraternal workcamp, which should be organized in a similar manner to the reconstruction work of the Quakers in Poland and in France. At the second conference of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, again in Bilthoven, in July 1920, his suggestion found great support. A German participant declared his willingness to help repair war damage, as his brother, who had been a soldier, had contributed to the devastation in Northern France. Inspired by this, after the

conference, Ceresole decided to travel to Germany to find participants for his project.

The project in Esnes in France 1920

The English Quaker Hubert Parris, who had experience in organizing relief work, supported Ceresole in preparing the project. In the autumn of 1920, they travelled to an area in north-eastern France, where the war had taken an extremely high toll. The authorities gave them permission to carry out a reconstruction project in the village of Esnes with German participation.

Esnes had been destroyed during the battle of Verdun in 1916. The reconstruction team intended to build emergency accommodation for the farmers. In the middle of the icy November of 1920, Ceresole and Parris started building a shelter for the volun-



Pierre Ceresole (left) and two volunteers in Esnes 1920/1921 [1])

teers who would be arriving in December.

During the winter months, the volunteers built several huts for the village. Already in January the working conditions deteriorated, and the work of the volunteers became more demanding. The French government reduced the funds for the building materials and in March the Prefect of the *Département de la Meuse* forbade the mayor of Esnes from allocating work to the volunteers. The difficult political circumstances of that time when the negotiations concerning the German war reparations had just failed, explain the Prefect's decision.



Pierre Ceresole and volunteers clearing debris at Les Ormonts 1924 (Photo: SCIIA)

Still, this did not prevent the volunteers from continuing to help the farmers, who appreciated their work. In addition, a neighbouring village put forward a new agricultural reconstruction project. Subsequently the rapport with the local population worsened. The continuation of the relief work was now subject to the conditions imposed by the authorities, that the German volunteers must leave the area. Driven by his desire to achieve reconciliation, Ceresole did not want to comply. The team finished its work in April 1921 and left Esnes.

Petition for national civilian service in Switzerland 1924

After the first workcamp in France, Ceresole was appointed to teach at a newly opened private school in Gland, near Geneva. Using alternative teaching methods, he taught French, German, Esperanto, mathematics and science. Meanwhile his commitment to the implementation of a civilian service continued going on: men who refuse to do military service for reasons of conscience should, in his opinion, be allowed to do an alternative kind of service. Together with Leonhard Ragaz and other pacifists, Ceresole launched a petition and submitted 40,000 signatures to the Swiss parliament in Bern in 1923.

A voluntary civilian service

In order to gain support for his petition, Ceresole looked for like-minded people as volunteers to participate in a 'civilian service' in the summer of 1924, as proposed in the petition. He found in the Les Ormonts valley in the Canton Vaud a suitable location for implementing his plans. During the previous winter, an avalanche had covered a house and its grounds with rocks, mud and tree-trunks. The village accepted Ceresole's offer to help and supplied accommodation and tools. From August 7 to 28, a dozen committed male and female pacifists - among them Hélène Monastier and John Baudraz - participated.

Shortly after the work in Les Ormonts, there was a landslide at Maggiatal in Ticino, leaving ten casualties and destroying several houses in the village of Someo. The organizers of Les Ormonts spontaneously decided to call for another workcamp. Although the summer holidays were over, more than 300 volunteers answered the call to support the population of Someo (see article 102).

Under the leadership of Pierre and Ernest Ceresole, the volunteers cleared the village of Someo of debris and rocks, working for three months. They also built new protecting walls against floods.

The organizers imposed an army-like discipline and routine; in this way they wanted to prove that 'civilian service' really is an equivalent to military service. Although these first two 'civilian service' work camps in Switzerland were successful, the government and parliament again rejected the petition presented by Ceresole and Ragaz at the end of 1924.

The Swiss Central Office for Peace Work

Even before the 'civilian service' petition was rejected, the organizers decided to found a Swiss Central Office for Peace Work in order to continue supporting 'civilian service' and disarmament. Ceresole was elected secretary and worked from then on in the house of the Ragaz family at Gartenhofstrasse 7 in Zurich. He participated in many events all over Switzerland and always vehemently expressed an anti-military point of view. He personally distributed leaflets to soldiers, inciting them to refuse military service.

International expansion 1928-1931

When lecturing for the Central Office for Peace Work, Pierre Ceresole spoke about the voluntary workcamps in Someo and Les Ormonts. He emphasized that it is not enough to simply say 'No' to war. A more advanced form of international coexistence, based on mutual help and trust, is necessary. The national 'civilian service' should therefore become an 'international civilian service'.

We hope that the 'civilian service', developing gradually on an international basis, will contribute to turning our foreign neighbours into friends, whom we would be ashamed of mistrusting. [2]

At the end of 1927, the river Rhine flooded parts of Liechtenstein, leaving vast amounts of mud and debris. The damage for the local population is huge, as nearly all the cultivated land was lost. This time Ceresole appealed for both Swiss and foreign volunteers. In 1928, more than 700 volunteers from over 20 countries responded positively to his call. The experience in Liechtenstein and the enthusiasm of the volunteers became a model for future workcamps, which from 1930 onwards took place also in France (1930), Great Britain (1931) and other countries. Finally, this led to the founding of the association, Service Civil International in 1931. The spade with the broken sword and the word PAX (peace) become the logo of the organization.



The arrival in Esnes

[...] On November 19, 1920, Pierre and two friends arrived at a demolished village which lies to the north of Verdun. Before the war - if the postcard pictures of it are true - it was a place with white houses clustered about curving streets and a quaint stone church and orchards on a hillside. Now it is a rubble of iron junk and stones. None of the former houses are there, the church is gone except for the stump of its tower, and that too is now weathering away. The trees are dead, some standing stark bare but most of them down; the fields are riddled with shell craters and holes, they are littered with refuse, and when the farmer wants to clear them, he must remove brambles of barbed

wire and rocks made of explosives and steel. Peasants live here and there in wooden barracks put up after the storm of fire and metal had passed by; but there were many families still needing even such rough shelter on the day that Pierre and his comrades came.

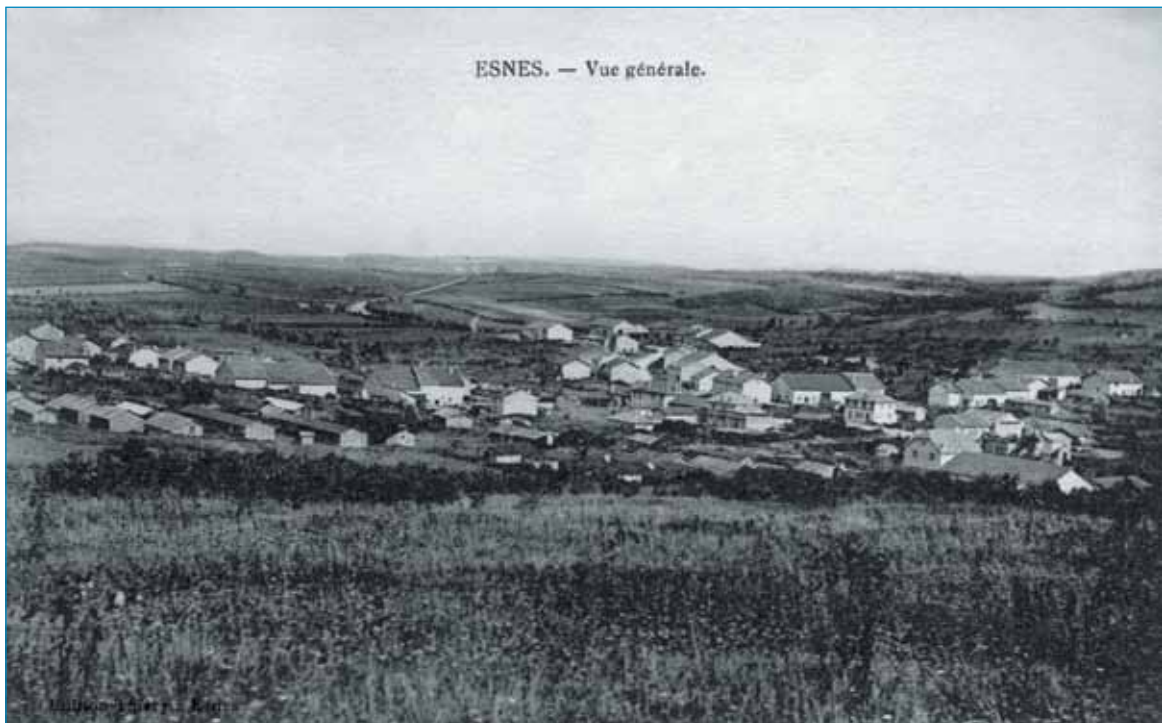
The three newcomers had with them tools for the construction of houses, and a contract from the 'Département de Régions Libérées' authorizing them to build four huts.

They had also been given a verbal promise that they should have contracts to build at least sixteen houses more. The French Government had agreed to furnish the timber; Pierre and his friends were to do the construction; they rejoiced at the thought of hammering nails.

Pierre had been a teacher of mathematics and knew about relativity. He was a Swiss. Hubert was an English Quaker who had volunteered during the war for work with the Friends Mission in France. Kris came from Holland; he had got three weeks' leave of absence from his regular work that he might share at the start in the adventure of peace-making love.

It was night when the three arrived. They had a load of furniture, but there was no house where they could put it or have a roof over their heads. They found a half-finished hut without floor, ceiling, or windowpanes. Here they spread out their camp beds and slept. When later it came on to rain, big Pierre awoke; silently he arose, took his own heavy blanket, and spread it over Kris as a mother covers her child. [...]

John Nevin Sayers (1885-1982), a peace activist and member of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR) visited the workcamp in Esnes in February 1921 [3].



View of Esnes in 1922. The huts built by the volunteers can be seen in the foreground on the left (Photo: SCIIA)

An earlier version of this text had been published in a brochure about Pierre Ceresole in 2010 [4].

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Volunteers for Someo!

A public appeal reached finally over 300 volunteers

The early services of the SCI often arose from the simple need to show solidarity with the victims of a disaster. Therefore, a broad-based ad hoc committee was formed to deal with organizational and logistical challenges. But also the political question of alternative civilian service is referred to, here still in the national context of Switzerland (see article 101).

Dear Compatriots,

On the 24th September a terrible landslide ravaged the village of Someo (Val Maggia, Ticino). Donations of money have been made, but we are still short of men to help with clearing up the rubble. The undersigned committee is putting together a team of 80 volunteers which will set to work in a few days' time and remain on the spot until 15th December.



The volunteers during clean-up in Someo (1924)
(Photo: SCIIA)

The men will be able to take it in turns; everyone commits themselves for a period of at least two weeks. The first group of volunteers will have to be there if possible, for the 20 October, or the 27th at the latest. The others will arrive later.

The volunteers will submit to a strict discipline. Board, lodging and tools will be provided free of charge. They will not receive any pay, will bring their own equipment, and will have to lay out their own travel expenses. Reductions in fares will be requested and have already been partially granted; we hope to be able to reimburse everyone's travel expenses either completely or partially.

The original idea for this project came from a group of friends of alternative service, but no one should try to monopolize it. Opponents of non-military service are also invited to enrol as well, rather than leave to others the exclusive merit of patriotic constructive action.

Friends or opponents, sons of the same homeland, equally dear to all, let us unite to defend the territory of one of our most beautiful cantons, thus through brotherly service we will strengthen the ties which unites us with the compatriots of Ticino!

Apply for the enrolment form immediately - time is short!

If you are unable to take part in the work, please send your contribution to 'The Volunteers of Someo'.

The Committee:

Hans Amberg, publisher, Zurich; Henry André, architect, Morges; Alfred Bietenholz, Tutelage Office, Basel; Pierre Ceresole, engineer, Lausanne; Alice Descoedres, teacher, Geneva; Georg Felix, minister, Prüz; Maria Fierz, Zurich; Ernest Gloor, doctor, Renens; François Grand, master joiner, Lausanne; Karl V. Greyerz, minister, Berne; Bernhard Guidon, minister, Scharans; Clara Honnegger, Zurich; Dr. A. Isenschmid, district judge, Zurich; Bernhard Lang, doctor, Langenthal; Gerold Meyer, teacher, Zurich; Charles Naine, government adviser, Lausanne; Max Odier, engineer, Baden; Leonhard Ragaz, professor, Zurich; Clara Waldvogel, teacher, Neuchâtel; Max Weber, editor, St Gallen.

Translated from French by David Palmer

Reference

SCIIA 20201.3 SCI Service: Someo (1924)

Schaan (Liechtenstein) 1928

International solidarity action becomes largest workcamp ever

by Philipp Rodriguez

At the end of 1927, the river Rhine flooded large areas of Liechtenstein, leaving vast amounts of mud and debris. The damage for the local population had been huge, as nearly all the cultivated land was lost. Pierre Ceresole appealed for volunteers, not only from Switzerland, but also from abroad. In 1928, more than 700 volunteers from over 20 countries responded to his call-in order to help the population by removing the debris.

The organisation of the service was led by Ernest Ceresole's brother Pierre. The service received support from the governments of Switzerland and Liechtenstein. Volunteers were equipped with old soldier uniforms and boots, and travel costs were covered.

The experience in Liechtenstein and the enthusiasm of the volunteers became a model for future work camps, which from 1930 onwards were carried out in France, Great Britain and other countries [1].

Haakon Nederland, a young Danish volunteer in Liechtenstein wrote letters to his mother. In the third letter he described the daily life. (18 May 1928) [3]

'[...] Mother, you think that I should make more effort with my handwriting; please do not forget that I am doing hard work here. Holding a spade in my hands all day has made my fingers stiff. What is more, I do not have a great deal of time to write. We have to be in bed by ten because that is when the lights are turned off. When you are sleeping in a dormitory you have to show consideration for others. The next day we all have to get up at 6 a.m. and work hard all day ...

We can have a shower every day and a hot bath once a week in Vaduz, which is not far from here - but we have to pay for the bath.

We have to line up for roll call at 6.30 in the morning before we set off for work. Then we walk to the site, where we arrive at about 7 a.m. Our lunch break is from 12 noon to 1.30

p.m. We have to line up again for roll call before we go back to work. We stop working at 6 p.m. We sleep in a Club House and on the balcony. Some of the volunteers also live in the village kindergarten. We can sit down where we want for our meals. We Danes do not all sit together.

We also work in mixed groups along with other foreigners which is a good thing for that is when we learn the most. There are four Danes in my group, but there are also three Swiss, one German, one Frenchman, one Englishman and one volunteer from Liechtenstein. So, we are a motley crowd, but I do not find that we are all different. The canteen and kitchen are in the basement in the Club House. There are no tablecloths or waxed tablecloths on the tables, and we eat from aluminium plates.

We get a small piece of meat and some potatoes about once a week. I have been told that they have also had bacon before. There has never been any fish.

In the evening, when we are free, we write letters or sleep or chat with each other or walk through the streets of the village. The stage for amateur productions has been turned into our common room. We can spend our evenings there or in the canteen. We can read or come up with our own entertainment. There are some really funny fellows here who can pull faces and put on a show. We have enjoyed ourselves immensely. The Germans and Swiss can sing very well - and they can even sing harmony whenever they want to. But the Danes are slightly more reserved.



International volunteers helping to remove debris from the cultivated land in Liechtenstein, 1928 [2]

Although we did sing 'der er et yndigt land' [Danish national song] once in the shed on site during our tea break.

The village does not have a cinema, but it does have three inns. The only thing is that hardly any of us can afford to go there.

We get macaronis in all shapes and sizes. The thickest macaronis taste the worst. A 25-year-old Swiss girl runs the kitchen. We call the female volunteers 'sisters'. There are also a few volunteers who are your age, Mother. There is a laundry in the village. If we want to do our own washing, we can get hot

water in the kitchen. Yes, we do have a radio, but only a few people are allowed to operate it. That is why we do not listen to the radio often. [...]

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3. Haakon Nederland: Third letter (18.05.1928)
In: In the service of Peace - Overcome evil with good. Liechtensteinisches Landesmuseum, Vaduz (2013) Page 26.

Figures

Country:	Liechtenstein
Period:	02.04. - 05.10.1928
Number of volunteers:	710
Female volunteers	78
Average Participants:	104
Average stay per volunteer:	25 days
Number of volunteer nationalities:	20
Type of work:	Reclamation after flood

Words about Deeds

In November 1920, a group of volunteers from different European countries went to France in order to reconstruct a war-destroyed village. This was the starting point for *Service Civil International (SCI)* and one hundred years of international voluntary work for peace.

This richly illustrated volume offers insight into SCI's long journey, combining original research articles, workcamp spotlights, source texts and recollections from veterans and activists.

