

SERVAS HISTORY

From Peacebuilders to Servas (1949 - 1953) shortened version

Why was the original name 'Peacebuilders' changed to 'Servas' in 1952?

My search for the roots of our organisation in the archive brought up interesting information about the early years. which I want to share with you.

In a letter of 'US Peacebuilders' of September 1950 to all 'Friends' this explanation is given: 'Peacebuilders is a movement seeking to build bridges between many small groups in distant corners of the earth doing practical jobs for reconciliation and community growth. It is our hope that the coming together of these scattered peace-motivated groups can become the beginning of a vital movement with the dynamics of the more nationalistic and political movements, yet with the higher ideals of non-violence and service to all. Our 'Work-Study-Travel System', which covers much of Western Europe and North America, encourages and helps peace building to study and work with creative groups in other countries.'

In his article 'SEEDS OF SERVAS' Bob Luitweiler wrote in 1999, 50 years after he had founded this movement in Ascov (Denmark): 'The leaders of the various anti-war organisations like the War Resisters International, the International Voluntary Service for Peace, the Quakers and the Fellowship of Reconciliation were part of my ideological family. Without them Servas could never have been started. I would have found little sympathy in most other circles. You can call me the seeder of Servas, but call those who cultivated those seeds the true founders. Although many of them are pacifists, Servas never was a pacifist organisation, either in terms of wanting mostly pacifist hosts or travellers or desiring to convert anyone to become a conscientious objector. In the capitals of each country the offices of the peace-oriented organisations were visited ... I guess I recited the plan of open doors for peace hundreds of times.'

In 'Brief History of Servas-The First 25 Years', Maris Golding wrote: 'In the aftermath of World War II many people in different parts of the world were striving in isolation to build and strengthen the fragile peace. One was Bob Lutiweiler, an American conscientious objector, who wanted something more positive than mere 'war resistance'. While travelling in Europe he found many small groups working in various ways to build and foster a peaceful, non-violent society. He saw the possibility of building a more effective Peace Movement by linking groups through a sharing system of work, study and travel combined with home stays. In 1949 his idea was realized when at a Folk High School, Askov, Denmark, he and a group of friends worked out details for the Work-Study-Travel System known as Peacebuilders, later (1952) changed to Servas'.

In many countries Working Committees were founded who sent messages to all 'Open Doors' in their countries. The newsletters of the British Working Committee in Birmingham were even sent to committees and contact centres of the 'Work-Study-Travel System' in other countries. They produced a handbook for the committees of the system.

After a year's deliberation it was decided, in Hamburg, to change the name from Peacebuilders to Servas. many had complained that the word Peace was now too much associated with communism. In her article in SIN 36, 1994, 'Forty Years in Servas', Barbara Whitehead explained that when she joined Servas in 1954 'Its pacifist emphasis had already been modified thanks to Senator McCarthy (USA), but its aims were still educational and international. The Esperanto word 'Servas' was chosen to avoid persecution from those who could not tolerate anything with 'Peace' in a name.'

Pat Knowles wrote in her book 'Servas- an experiment in Peace Building', 1989: 'The use of the word Peace was viewed with suspicion in Europe.' Later she added: 'It was good to see the peace issue re-instated with the creation of than international Peace Secretary in 1972 and later national peace secretaries with a similar role'.

Why was the name Servas chosen?

In 1952 there was much discussion about possible different words and their relation to the needs of the organisation. It was agreed that the name must cover not only the Travel System but also the deeper ideas of building a new social order through selfless service based on Gandhian ideas. Esperanto came up as the Esperanto movement was spreading fast among the members then, Bob Luitweiler was associated with Esperanto and many people especially in East Europe did not speak English and preferred corresponding in Esperanto. It was suggested that the Servas Newsletter should be written in Esperanto. The name Servas was unanimously decided on as carrying the implication that the movement is based on service. In Esperanto 'ni servas' means 'we serve'.

At the Hamburg meeting a Servas magazine was planned. The need for working committees in every country was expressed with the aim to link them all up with the World Committee in the USA. Members of committees would be chosen from the pacifist and work-camp movements. Sponsors should be found, so that people will have confidence in the movement. It was decided to produce a 'Handbook for the working committees of the Servas Work-Study-Travel System'.

The next meeting was held in 1953 in Askov, Denmark. The discussions and decisions became guidelines for the following years:

- *Principles and Practice for Servas Teams.*

Looked at the difference from other international travel schemes which did not get to the roots of today's critical social cause of war.

- *Organisational Structure*

Looked at the difference between an association involving more direction from the head office and a movement which is freer and more spontaneous.

- *The Work-Study-Travel System*, Considered the need to interview to check suitability.

Next year to look at the development of Servas and its relationship with the UN as an NGO.

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