Brethren Service in Europe, cont’d

(Continued from pg 1) It was seeing the Berlin Wall breached that year and placing a BVSer in East Berlin; it was sharing BVSers with groups in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Sadly, too, it was watching the wars in Yugoslavia. And then being part of the peace work already familiar to me, having served six years with German and Austrian peace groups. It was amusing to learn about apples and our Brethren-Polish agricultural exchange; it was sobering to see The Troubles still happening in Northern Ireland.

Numbers of volunteers increased, sometimes up to 35 were on project. Not to compare it with the “glory days” of post WWII Brethren work in Europe: I count 58 participants in a 1960 retreat photo. But it wasn’t about numbers. It was celebrating Thanksgiving in 1989 with our Polish friends in Skierniewice who witnessed the changes in Poland; (Story continued on pg 2)

Brethren Service in Europe

I never tire of explaining that this is not only the BVS office, but that Brethren Service in Europe has a longer history. Despite our 18th century German origins and a few mission efforts, Brethren first returned to work in Europe during the Spanish Civil War and World War II. Offices were located in many countries and the central administration for Brethren Service in Europe was established in 1947 in Geneva, Switzerland, with the World Council of Churches. BVS, born in 1948 in the USA, was invited to provide young volunteers for the programs in Europe.

We will be closing the Geneva office when I retire at the end of 2019. Sadly, there has been a steady decline in volunteers serving in Europe in recent years. The good news is that BVS volunteers will continue to serve in Northern Ireland and Ireland.

What an amazing job, ministry, and privilege this has been. Never could I have imagined in 1987 that I would stay for so many years. There were 16 volunteers on project when I arrived, from Belfast to Alkmaar to Skierniewice. I set off to visit everyone and expand my knowledge beyond the European peace work already familiar to me, having served six years with German and Austrian peace groups. It was amusing to learn about apples and our Brethren-Polish agricultural exchange; it was sobering to see The Troubles still happening in Northern Ireland.

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In the summer of 1989, I became a stranger. The Polish language, with seven cases for nouns, was a glass wall between me and most other people for nearly six months. Hard and soft currency were terms, not realities I knew how to navigate. My instincts about social cues couldn’t be trusted: that man who didn’t smile at me, is he being polite or rude? But people welcomed me to their homes to share food and watch TV, even when I could not carry on a conversation. They taught me how to make coffee without filters, where to buy better bread, how to break opłatkí on Christmas Eve.

Language immersion does work, eventually, and as I began to communicate better, I learned I wasn’t the only one who lacked control. My students began telling me stories of resisting during martial law. They shared the supplies they’d stored up to deal with shortages, we watched the Berlin wall come down, and one night soon after that I listened to teenagers debating which country they prefer to be overrun by, next time it happened. I began to see that control is always a thin veneer, even for those who are at home.

BVS made me a stranger. I had to rely on others for help with every task and I’ve never quite gotten over it. These days, when I feel uncertain about the future, worried that my secure life isn’t really very secure at all, I take an afternoon to coach a Congolese refugee family struggling to tell junk mail from utility bills. Then they feed me food that reminds them of home and we laugh over our attempts to speak each other’s languages. We are all strangers here, and the love we share is all the home we have.

Finding Home Amidst Strangeness  
By Kelly Johnson

We somehow failed to actually do any writing that evening – there was just too much that felt essential to cover while together. These topics, while so natural to us, wouldn’t have felt so necessary to discuss with a non-BVS friend. As we said our good-byes later than anticipated for the night, we agreed that maybe BVS and our ethical commitments, and intellectual interests even more deeply in our careers.

Sara Cook began on January 1, 2020, as the Coordinator of BVS Europe. Sara was part of Unit 246 in 2001, and served at three different projects in Northern Ireland from 2001-2003 - Ballysally Youth and Community Centre (Coleraine), Kilcranny House (Coleraine) and the Peace and Reconciliation Group (Derry/Londonderry). Sara is currently living in Belfast, N. Ireland and brings experience as a teacher and trainer in facilitating and mediation in Northern Ireland and internationally. BVS is so grateful for Sara’s willingness to share her wisdom, expertise, and caring nature while accompanying European volunteers and continuing the meaningful partnerships that already exist in Ireland and N. Ireland. Sara was part of a trip in December with Kristin Flory and Emily Tyler to visit and meet with current projects in Ireland and N. Ireland.

Coffee, Gossip and Atrocities: Conversations for Life  
By Katie Hampton and Tori Tevis

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