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## A BRIEF PRE-HISTORY OF CAREE

by Charles C. West

*Dr. Charles C. West, long gracing our acknowledgements page as an associate editor, during the time he discusses below, was Professor of Ethics, and for a time Academic Dean of Princeton Theological Seminary. Other involvements, including his relationships within the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, account for this truly insider reflection on the intentions and efforts of CAREE.*

The roots of Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe go back to the Second World War, when the western world was divided into two camps: the Communist world, and the rest of us. The peoples and their churches, as diverse as Evangelical East Germany, Roman Catholic Poland, and Orthodox Russia, Romania and Bulgaria were forced to live with Soviet power and atheist ideology as they struggled to maintain their faith, their existence, and their witness. That reality defined Eastern Europe. It forced churches, whatever their traditions, into relations with one another. It forced western Christians to face the question: how do we relate to these churches in their struggle?

There were two simple answers to this question. One was to find in the Soviet Revolution, for all its atheism, cruelty and violence, the promise of God for a society where all would share equally and the common good would replace private profit. The other was to see the atheism, and the totalitarian power of the Communists, and to imagine that the only true Christian is the persecuted one. CAREE embodied a third, an ecumenical, policy, which tried to undergird all the churches in Eastern Europe spiritually, aware of the piety they embodied and the fears and temptations which beset them. It was a hard way. One might misjudge an action, or a person, and we often did. But we believed it was the way of Christian responsibility toward our brothers and sisters in Christ who lived in that part of the world.

It began when Josef Hromadka, a Czech theologian with good ecumenical credentials, who had chosen to stay in his country when the Communists took it over, persuaded the authorities to allow the formation of a Christian Peace Conference distinct from the World Peace Council which the Soviets had organized. He had support in the West not only from Christian pacifists but also from many who believed the church should transcend and reconcile the conflicting communist and capitalist ideologies rather than siding with one of them. So the CPC was founded by an assembly in Prague in 1960. I would love to have been there. Though I had publicly criticized his theology and his politics, Hromadka had befriended me. But the World Council of Churches was suspicious. Did this threaten to be an alternative ecumenical movement? So I, as an employee of the Council, could not attend until the second assembly in 1964.

That was an experience. The official conclusions, though Christian, had to be acceptable to the political authorities, but the meeting itself was a cauldron of personal interaction. Orthodox met Protestants, Poles talked with Hungarians, westerners like us learned about life and faith in one eastern country after another, and shared our lives as well. For many, in the east as well as the west, it was a first-time experience to discover Christians in other countries than their own. Marxists were there too, eager to work out their own philosophy, in dialogue with Christians. Hromadka came by at one point, clapped me on the shoulder and said, "Charles, I hope you are talking with many people." Exactly. That was the real point of the meeting.

I thought it was an episode. Then, early in 1965, Paul Peachey asked me to come to a meeting in Carl Soule's office at the Churches' Center for the United Nations to discuss follow-up.

There were three of us. We could not have been more different. Peachey was a Mennonite Professor of Sociology at Catholic University in Washington DC, and a pacifist. Soule was a social gospel Methodist who believed that Communists and western Christians could cooperate, because we had the same goals. I was a Reformed Christian, taught by Reinhold Niebuhr, deepened in faith and experience by the witness of the evangelische Kirche in Communist East Germany. But there, on that day, the U.S. Committee *for* the Christian Peace Conference, the ancestor of CAREE, was born. We were careful. We said “for” not “of”. We wanted to participate, but not be bound to defend all the resolutions that assemblies or committees of the CPC might pass. It hindered our official relations, but it also left us free.

The next six years were exciting. CPC commissions were formed in east and west. A theological commission met in Switzerland; it was an encounter between Orthodox and Protestant theologies of social change. I was part of a political commission that met in Sofia, Bulgaria in 1966, just before the World Conference on Church and Society in Geneva, and worked out a Christian theology of just revolution, its conditions and its limits. The Soviets were concerned. The concept of revolution which they had owned was escaping their control among youth, and even being directed at times against them. Their ecclesiastical fellow travelers had their say in CPC commissions, but they did not dominate. Furthermore Marxist philosophers, outside of CPC but cultivated by Hromadka, began talking to Christians. Roman Catholics too, through the Paulusgesellschaft, got into the act. Everything was in movement, and we were part of it.

Then, in 1968, came the Prague Spring. “Socialism with a human face” was its motto. It was what Hromadka had been waiting for. Open Communists gained power in Czechoslovakia. Collective farms and factories were democratized. Schools, including universities, lost their ideological constraints. And restrictions on churches were removed. They were free again to play their public role; not only that, but the Minister for Religious Affairs asked how she could be of help.

In the midst of this, the Third Assembly of the Christian Peace Conference was held. It was truly an open, and an opening, meeting. Delegates from Asia and Africa brought their own experience to bear on the European debate. Hromadka, in one of his greatest speeches, laid out his Christian vision for the future of his country and the eastern world. The Russian Orthodox delegation and its ecclesiastical satellites were heard but could not dominate. I remember, as leader of the American delegation struggling with Metropolitan Nikodim about the wording of a resolution that would be acceptable to us both. It was spring. The atmosphere was fragrant with hope.

So it was until August 21st. Then Soviet troops invaded Czechoslovakia. The Czech government of Dubcek was overthrown and a regime acceptable to Moscow was put in place. There followed eleven years of winter. The Marxist-Christian dialogue broke off; most of the Marxist participants were silenced, or fled. Creative Marxist thought was no longer possible. The government restrictions on the churches were reimposed. The Christian Peace Conference had a brief reprieve. Hromadka, in a letter to the Soviet ambassador, immediately condemned the invasion, and wrote to the Working Committee of the CPC in theological defense of democratic socialism. The Working Committee, meeting in October 1968 in Paris with Hromadka in the chair, condemned the Soviet invasion. For a year we struggled. I remember three of us in 1969– A.K. Thampy from India, CPC General Secretary Ondra, a Czech, and me - planning strategy with Hromadka at his summer place in the Bohemian hills. It was all in vain. The Russian Orthodox arrived at the Working Committee meeting in September 1969 with a full complement of churchmen from Soviet bloc countries. They outvoted the westerners, the Africans, the Indians and

the Czechs. They deposed Ondra as General Secretary, and passed a resolution supporting the Czech invasion. They were in full control. Hromadka resigned his chairmanship and died in late December. The western European, Indian and African groups withdrew from CPC.

The U.S. Committee was in a somewhat different situation. We were a committee for, not of the Christian Peace Conference. Still, we had a representative on the Working Committee, Harold Row, of the Church of the Brethren. For three years he struggled valiantly on our behalf to moderate the Russian Orthodox line. Through him we fed into the Working Committee's meetings our analyses and point of view. We even entertained the Interim General Secretary, Janos Makowski of Poland, at our annual meetings in 1970. In 1970 also, Karoly Toth, then Secretary of the Hungarian Ecumenical Council, talked to me privately (it was in a neutral setting, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya). He had been asked to be General Secretary of the CPC, and wanted my reaction. I gave him all the reasons why he should not do it, in light of the events above. But he did it anyway, and he was right. Over nearly 20 years he used his position to promote dialogue in CPC meetings between churches in east and west, and drew Americans from CAREE into them. It was Hromadka's ministry in a different style.

In the United States two things happened. First, we realized that east-west relations were changing. There were other channels than the CPC through which we could cultivate relationships across the Iron Curtain. Second, we needed to block the formation of an ideological US Committee of the Christian Peace Conference which would reflect Soviet policy. (We succeeded for 15 years.) So, in 1972, we re-formed ourselves into Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe, and added on our letterhead, "and for relations with the Christian Peace Conference."

There followed several years of interaction with Eastern Europe on several fronts, under various leadership. Paul Peachey was active until he retired. James Will, from Garrett Seminary in Evanston Illinois was our specialist on Poland. Bruce Rigdon, then of McCormick Seminary in Chicago, knew Eastern Orthodoxy well, spoke Russian, and led tours on the Volga for the National Council of Churches. Ken Ziebell served as CAREE secretary and link to the Europe Committee of the NCCC for several decades. Alice Wimer was the staff member of the National Council who co-ordinated our activities with theirs. Priscilla Whitehead was Ukrainian origin and led us as CAREE President in the 1990s into that sphere.

And then there was Paul Mojzes. He came aboard in 1970, and has been with us to this day. He founded *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, which dropped the word "Occasional", in 1993. For several years in the '80s he was President of CAREE. He brought the Yugoslavian area into the scope of our concern, but more, he was our leader for years. He continues to inspire us, and we are grateful for him.