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TENUOUS BRIDGES OVER THE IRON CURTAIN: MENNONITE CENTRAL COMMITTEE WORK IN EASTERN EUROPE FROM 1966 TO 1991
by Mark Jantzen

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Early in September 1983, large-scale Warsaw Pact training exercises near the inner-German border that perhaps masked a Soviet intent to invade Western Europe sparked mutinies in the East German army. In an effort to contain the chaos three Soviet armored divisions spilled across the border and then sliced through the Fulda Gap to take much of West Germany. Desperate efforts to negotiate a cease-fire failed and an initial exchange of tactical nuclear weapons was soon followed by a massive strategic strike. Soviet nuclear bombs hit Kansas on September 16, 1983, targeting the Titan missile bases near Wichita and Whiteman Air Force Base near Kansas City. Over the next few months many of the people of Lawrence, Kansas, who survived the war succumbed to radiation sickness even as hunger, looting, and vigilante justice were established as the new social order. While a few families were able to maintain bonds of self-sacrificing love as they cared for their immediate members, American civilization was clearly and permanently destroyed.

This is the story told by the made-for-TV movie The Day After broadcast on ABC on November 20, 1983. Almost half the adult population of the United States watched the movie, including President Ronald Reagan. The movie mirrored the tensions and concerns of North Americans as the détente between NATO and the Soviet Union that had characterized much of the 1970s turned frosty in the early 1980s. In this context of fear and anxiety Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) tried to build bridges across Cold War divides by placing workers in the communist countries of Romania, Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and East Germany.

At a time when Canadian and US governments considered Soviet Communism to be their major enemy, these workers embodied an effort to respond to enemies by living amongst them. In contrast to North American social and political practices of demonizing, fearing and avoiding the people who lived under communist rule, MCC placed workers to live among them with the assignment to build bridges of understanding across deep ideological divides and to counter anti-Communist fear-mongering in the broader society as well as within Mennonite churches themselves.

By the lofty standards the program set for itself, it seemed to be a failure. While institutional activism aimed at doing something about and against the Cold War gave birth to the program in the 1960s, clarity on goals was never achieved. No consensus emerged on which

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2 I want to express my thanks to MCC for funding research in the MCC collection at Goshen College, to Dennis Stoesz, the Archivist there who provided able assistance and to Merlin and Eileen Becker-Hoover who hosted me during a week of research the summer of 2008 as well as in Warsaw a time or two back in the day. Special thanks are due to all the former MCC East Europe workers who took time to fill out surveys for me, Danke, Hvala, Dziękuję, köszönöm. Thanks also to Walter Sawatsky for making his private files available to me.
institutions, churches, or social groups in the east should be at the other end of the bridges MCC hoped to build. A chronic lack of applicants as well as tense and chaotic living conditions for workers related to currency exchange, language, housing and secret police issues led most participants and some administrators to argue that the program’s mere existence was a success while other administrators and some MCC supporters found the dearth of applicants, the lack of clarity and the absence of demonstrable results to be clear signs of failure. This utterly unique program nonetheless demonstrated the possibility of long-term peace-making placements and small-scale bridge building even in highly antagonistic domestic and international settings if the right institutional support and individual initiative are available.

Because restrictive visa requirements made residence in these countries difficult, most workers were placed as students or as teachers of English, mostly in church settings, to learn from and with people who were the targets of NATO’s nuclear missiles and whose governments were aiming missiles at the families and churches of the workers back home. The presence of workers and the reporting they made possible reminded people in North America of the humanity of Eastern Europeans.

MCC work in Eastern Europe faced a number of significant internal and external challenges. Worker recruitment efforts were always well behind goals, in part because it was not always clear how to recruit workers openly to a politically sensitive program. For much of this time the program faced internal criticism because the work did not neatly fit into typical MCC rubrics of relief or development. The highly individualistic nature of assignments and widely scattered placements in time and place made even some of the workers feel the effort suffered from a lack of focus and purpose. With whom and to whom was one building bridges? To Christians in the East? And if so, to the larger, traditional Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant churches or to more evangelical folks like Baptists, Methodists or Pentecostals? Or maybe to ordinary people regardless of faith commitments? Should the North American side of the bridge be anchored to Christians back home or mainly Mennonites or North American society as a whole? As one worker noted, “at times I felt as if I was facing a massive sea of possibilities as bridges can be built in so many directions.” In addition, the difficulties of language acquisition and currency exchange, the complications of non-functioning economies, monitoring of mail and isolation from other MCC workers, or indeed other North Americans of any kind, made placements stressful. Nonetheless many personal and church connections and relationships were fostered, even exchanges that brought East Europeans to North America were possible. In a small way important and durable bridges were built across vast chasms of culture, language and ideology that most people at the time said could not be spanned.

This Cold War bridge-building endeavor began in 1966 with the placement of the first regular MCC volunteers, a pair of intrepid women in Yugoslavia, and ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the start of fighting in the former Yugoslavia. These external political changes forced an obvious and radical shift of MCC work in Europe that was paralleled, however, by equally dramatic internal shifts in the priorities and perceptions of MCC involvement in Europe.  


The focus on the experiences of MCC and its workers in Eastern Europe is intended to highlight the experience of living with the “enemy.” It also means that several important programmatic areas of overlap with this program have not been included in this analysis. Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, as it was known at the time, had several workers in Eastern Europe at the same time under MCC administration. Their records, however, were not included with the MCC reports and thus those workers’ stories could not be included here except in the one case of Sara and Gerald
Program Origins

Three clear strands of MCC activity in the 1960s and early 1970s created and shaped program developments in Eastern Europe. The MCC Peace Section office by the 1960s functioned as a think-tank focusing on peace issues with leaders who were active in seeking opportunities to engage issues of peace theology in Europe, including in the East. Secondly, one key leader, Peter Dyck, Area Secretary for Europe, experimented with several different ways to couple that interest with practical programs on the ground. Finally with Dyck’s encouragement, Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, a Pennsylvania-based mission board, started a new approach to placing workers in Eastern Europe. This new methodology focused on gaining visas as students who then supported local churches as they studied languages, theology, history or music.

The Peace Section of MCC grew out of church efforts to provide alternatives to military service for Mennonites and Brethren in Christ young men in the two world wars. The church committees that provided leadership to those efforts were made part of MCC in 1942. After the war the Peace Section broadened its interests, including work on conciliation in conflict situations at many levels. This office maintained a representative in Europe in the 1950s and 1960s and worked especially at dialogue on war and peace issues with other Christian groups. Starting in the 1950s the Peace Section sought a way to expand that work across the Iron Curtain and to include Christians in Eastern Europe.  

Initially study tour groups seemed the best way to make contacts given the impossibility of obtaining long-term visas. Not until 1965 was it possible to make tour arrangements, with Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder leading an international group of nine Mennonite academics and church leaders to the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and Czechoslovakia. Annual tours then followed in 1966 and 1967. The response to these tours, which brought Mennonite church leaders into contact with church leaders in the east, was so positive on both sides that the brochures were printed up and distributed for four different tours to be held in the summer of 1968. “Crossing this ideological wall which divides the East from the West is a means by which bridges of understanding can be built between Christians of the West and Christians of the East.” Tensions over reforms undertaken by the Communist party of Czechoslovakia scuttled these visits and resulted in the Soviet invasion there in August. The Peace Section gave up on study tours but injected a strong interest in learning from and supporting Christians in the East into MCC Europe programming that remained a major part of the work in Eastern Europe for the next two decades.

Shenk whose final term in Yugoslavia was jointly sponsored by the two organizations. MCC work with Christians in the Soviet Union and those emigrating from the Soviet Union to West Germany in this time period was enormously dynamic but of such immense proportions that it could not be integrated in this study. Likewise MCC workers placed in Western Europe, even those working directly on Eastern Europe issues in placements at Keston College in England or with Soviet refugees in Italy, were omitted to keep the paper within limits. Additional relevant MCC efforts to address Cold War issues in Western Europe have been documented in two important occasional papers, J. Robert Charles, “Mennonite International Peacemaking During and After the Cold War,” MCC Occasional Paper, No. 21, (July 1994), available at http://mcc.org/papers/MCC-OP21.pdf, and Andre Gingerich Stoner, “Entering Samaria: Peace Ministry among U.S. Military Personnel in West Germany,” MCC Occasional Paper, No. 12, [Sept. 1990], available at http://mcc.org/respub/occasional/12.html. For a general overview of MCC involvement in Southeastern Europe see David A. Martin, “Mennonite Central Committee in South East Europe: 1948 – 2005,” (March 2006), available at http://www.seeurope.mcc.org/english/history.


Parallel to the Peace Section’s interest in church exchanges and theological bridge building, Peter Dyck as Area Secretary was experimenting with practical ways to get workers into Eastern Europe on something other than a tourist visa. Disaster response in Yugoslavia provided early short-term windows of opportunity as MCC sent relief workers to help for a few weeks or months in 1963 after a massive earthquake damaged Skopje, the capital of the Yugoslav province of Macedonia, and in 1965 in response to flooding along the Danube. The resulting contacts with the Yugoslav Red Cross allowed two women, Nancy Sarco and Rachel Wenger, to pioneer slightly longer stays in a Communist country by serving six-month assignments as nurses in Slovenia in the northwest of the country. Four PAX men followed up by serving their alternative service via the Red Cross there in shifts of two two-year terms from 1967 to 1971. As part of this program roughly a half dozen Yugoslavs came to North America for a year each as part of MCC’s International Visitor Exchange Program (IVEP).

Already by 1969, however, a number of problems had become apparent and in 1971 Dyck recommended terminating the placements with the Red Cross because the work allowed only limited interaction with Yugoslav society. Dyck and Doreen Harms, administrator of the IVEP program, met with Lamar Gibble, head of Brethren Voluntary Service, in 1969 to learn how that agency structured its work in Poland. These visits shaped a new exchange program for MCC in Poland beginning in 1970. A contract signed with the Council of the Federation of Technical Research of Engineers and Technicians of Agriculture brought over 100 Poles to the US in a program parallel to IVEP in the 1970s and sent eleven MCCers to Poland from 1972 to 1977 for two-year terms as agricultural workers. The problem of long-term renewable visas was thus solved, but placements in isolated villages limited the program’s impact on Polish society and meant virtually no contact with church leaders other than local priests.

Even as Peter Dyck was seeking a way into the East bloc via agricultural exchanges, feedback from MCC workers in Yugoslavia suggested that at least in that country international students were allowed to participate in low-key church work while on a student visa. Gordon Burck, one of the last PAX men in Yugoslavia, agreed a new direction was needed, noting that the Red Cross used them as “slave labor.” He saw many other useful avenues for service and ministry, however, and arranged for Dyck to meet with church leaders when he visited the work in 1971. Dyck passed this kind of information as well as several pages of contact information on to Paul Kraybill, who was at the time lead administrator for Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities (EMBMC), the mission agency of Lancaster Conference Mennonite churches in eastern Pennsylvania. EMBMC had close ties to Mennonites in Ethiopia living under a Marxist regime and their experience of witness to a socialist society served as an inspiration. By 1971 Harley Wagler was studying the language in Zagreb, the capital of the province of Croatia, and making connections especially with local Baptist outreach efforts. His success both at staying longer term as a student and working closely with local Christians made this model much more attractive to

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“MCC Peace Section Eastern Europe Study Tour, June 29-July 21, 1967; the quote is from a brochure found in file East-West Student Encounter 1968, all at Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Indiana (MCA-G).

1 Paxman was the label given to American men (and some Canadian volunteers) in a program approved as alternative service for conscientious objectors. [editor]

2 Martin, “MCC in SEE,” 7-9, MCC Collection, IX-12-6 (Report Files, Set #6, 1960-75), file Yugoslavia 1966-1975, MCA-G.

MCC than the agricultural exchange program then in place in Poland.\textsuperscript{10}

As a result, a 1976 MCC consultation on work in the Soviet Union addressed the question of whether MCC should also support students in Eastern Europe. The encouraging reports of Wagler's work by the EMBMC representative and advocacy for this approach by Walter Sawatsky, who was an MCC researcher on Eastern Europe working at Keston College in England, a research center focused on religion in Communist countries, convinced MCC to adopt this strategy. This program was jointly supported by both organizations with MCC providing the administration in Europe. Some workers were funded entirely by EMBMC, some entirely by MCC and some by both. The initial vision statement of the Eastern Europe Study-Service Program, as it was called, envisioned it as, “small (up to 12 people), low publicity, but not secretive, with emphasis on learning, witness, fellowship and assistance of churches, peace-making.”\textsuperscript{11}

**Program Practices and Placements**

The dual foci of study and service provided important parameters for MCC work in Eastern Europe after 1976. A key feature of the program was the semi-annual meetings of scattered workers who collectively were known as the East Europe Fraternity. These meetings provided opportunities for MCC and EMBMC workers to learn from invited guests in the host cities as well as to think together about how to build bridges between East and West as their discussions set directions for the overall program. Worker placement decisions now centered around the intersection of which schools would provide North Americans with student or teacher visas, which local churches or church agencies would welcome Mennonite partners, and the interests of individual applicants. Over time, however, the direction of the program was reshaped significantly as changing Europe Area Secretaries articulated different visions for how the East Europe Study/Service Program fit into the larger MCC program and as the area underwent dramatic political changes.

Phyllis Krabill was the first MCC worker to be placed under this new Study/Service paradigm. The contacts that MCC had amassed in Poland as a result of the agricultural exchange program provided the entrée. Doreen Harms made nearly annual visits to Warsaw to keep the Polish agricultural exchange program running. In 1975 she explored options for an MCC worker to teach English at the Methodist English Language College. The initial placement did not work out as a health emergency forced the assigned MCC workers promised to the school to back out. When Phyllis was ready to go in 1977 the school, feeling they had been burned once, was reluctant to take her. Initially she instead simply studied the Polish language and was in country on a student visa. Having been to Poland in 1974 as part of a Study/Service trimester run by Goshen College, a Mennonite school in Goshen, Indiana, she was not intimidated by the setting or the uncertain future. She was eventually allowed to substitute teach at the Methodist School and restored relationships to the extent that subsequent MCCers were easily able to work in Poland by teaching here, as Julie Keim did 1980-82, Sam and Doreen Myovich did 1982-84 and Merlin and Eileen Becker-Hoover did 1988-90.\textsuperscript{12}


\textsuperscript{11} MCC Collection, IX-6-3, file 1976 Russian Consultation; file 1985 Europe Office Sawatsky, Walter Sawatsky, “Europe and the East/West Vision,” MCA-G.

Other options in Poland included language and theological studies as well as, in one case, music study. For most workers MCC recommended one year of language study. Two couples, Paul and Julie Keim and Becker-Hoovers, did their first year of study in Kraków. The last Study/Service worker in Poland, Doug Yoder, studied Polish at the Catholic University in Lublin. Phyllis Krabill also pioneered another important avenue of connecting to Poland’s dominant Catholic Church by studying at the Catholic Theological Academy in Warsaw. Myoviches studied there their third year in Poland as well. Paul Keim studied at the University of Warsaw and Doug Yoder studied music at the Chopin Institute.

The importance of earlier MCC work for smoothing the start of Study/Service work in Poland is highlighted by the difficulty of beginning such work in Hungary. The only contact there had been occasional visits of a few Mennonites to a small and isolated group of Anabaptists, known as Nazarenes there and as the Apostolic Christian Church in North America. This church was the result of a Reformed/Mennonite revivalistic fusion in Switzerland in the 1840s. Walter Sawatsky working from England visited this group in the 1970s as did Delbert Gratz from Bluffton College, a Mennonite college in Bluffton, Ohio. Yet this connection did not form any basis for placing MCC workers since the Nazarenes were neither willing nor able to help secure a visa.

Instead the first MCC worker here, Daniel Liechty, had to find his own way into Hungary with encouragement from MCC but not much practical assistance. Liechty was sent to Vienna where he worked with the Hungarian embassy to get permission to study Hungarian in Budapest. The request was so unusual that no category really existed for it in the Hungarian bureaucracy. After a seven-month wait the embassy eventually granted him a visa as an auditor but no one quite knew what to make of his status once he got to Budapest. He ultimately studied for a year at the University of Budapest and then worked as a researcher in the Renaissance Literature department of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He attempted to walk with the Nazarenes, who unfortunately had split shortly before his arrival into an older, traditional group and a younger, charismatic group. Staying in touch with both groups proved difficult and ruffled some feathers of Mennonites in North America who had connections to them. This hard path to gaining access to a visa and the delicate balancing act of relationships did not seem replicable, and after Liechty’s term was up in 1981 it was four years before the next workers arrived.

Joe Miller and Julie Zimmerman entered Budapest in 1985 on different visas than Liechty and with a different Mennonite group to relate to. The path to study as a tuition-paying foreigner was now clearer, they both studied language for one year at the Nemzetközi Előkészítő Intézet (National Preparatory School). The second year Julie was accepted for graduate studies at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music and Joe was the first student from the west to study at the Baptist Theological Seminary. Julie eventually taught English at the Seminary, becoming both the first Westerner and the first female to teach there.

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16 Survey response by Joe Miller and Julie Zimmerman to author.
Their major church partner was to be the Mennonite Fellowship in Budapest. This group had been started by Peter and Maria Falley, a Hungarian-German couple who had come into contact with Milo Schantz, a Mennonite Canadian businessman. They had been baptized in 1980 while visiting the St. Jacobs Mennonite Church in Ontario. Additional members of the group were baptized at Mennonite World Conference in Strasbourg in 1984. Peter Falley had asked MCC to send workers to help build up the fellowship. The group was not, however, meeting regularly and could not agree on whether or how to register with the government. Since this group did not function as a church, Millers ended up relating much more to the Baptists. The Mennonite Fellowship essentially ended with the sudden death of Peter Falley in 1989.17

Only one placement ever worked out in Romania. Steve Friesen had visited there while a student at Fresno Pacific College and he and his wife Janice applied to MCC with interest in going there or to East Germany. Steve was a student at the Romanian Orthodox Theological Institute in Bucharest and Janice took classes at the university. Their placement resulted in MCC sponsoring two Romanian Orthodox priests to study at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries (AMBS) in Elkhart, Indiana. Later in the 1980s Friesens helped arrange MCC relief and medical shipments there.18

MCC had many contacts with church leaders in West Berlin and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) yet visas turned out to be difficult to obtain. Perhaps the most unique feature of MCC work here was the presence of a clear Mennonite partner, the Berlin Mennonite Church that had been split in two by the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. John and Norma Thiessen, the first workers here lived in West Berlin from 1983 to 1987. They were actually housed in the church building, a 1920s-era converted villa known as the Menno-Heim, and for the most part John commuted on day visas to make contacts and presentations or attend classes on the other side of the wall in East Berlin. In addition to supporting the Mennonite congregations in both Berlins they reconnected with and expanded MCC connections that went back to the study tours of the 1960s. One important, if controversial, connection was with Pastor Bruno Schottstädt, a Protestant pastor interested in peace issues and mission work in the new suburbs, where the government typically did not allow churches to be built. At the same time his support for the government made some uncomfortable. Nonetheless he invited Thiessens to move to his parish on a short-term visa, a plan that took tremendous effort to get through the bureaucracy but eventually allowed Thiessens to live in the East the last three months of 1986. Tim and LaVerna Reimer followed them, serving from 1988 to 1993. Reimers also lived in the Menno-Heim and worked with both Mennonite congregations in East and West, playing a role in the two groups reuniting after the wall came down.19

Thanks to the work of Thiessens in uncovering how student visas could be obtained, subsequent placements were much easier to make. Romwald and Nancy Maczka lived in Leipzig 1984 to 1987 where Rom wrote a dissertation on the changing interpretation of the radical sixteenth-century theologian and GDR official hero Thomas Müntzer. Although the topic was a hot potato,
the history department approved Rom’s dissertation, the first non-Marxist thesis passed there in roughly forty years. The final placement in the GDR from 1988 to 1991 benefitted in addition from a connection between Marlin Miller, then President of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, Indiana, and Heinrich Fink, head of the Theology Department of Humboldt University in East Berlin.20

MCC program in Yugoslavia was unique in riding on the coattails of EMBMC workers, although since all workers met together in the Fraternity the program was genuinely cooperative. Nonetheless the records and MCC’s direct involvement were thin in Yugoslavia until Walter and Juanita Epp arrived in Zagreb in 1982. They did a year of language study and then Walter worked on a Masters Degree in International Relations at the University there. They also related to Baptist, Pentecostal and Catholic churches.21

Gerald and Sara Shenk brought the longest-term connections to the country. They had served from 1977 to 1983 with EMBMC support in Sarajevo and Zagreb. When they returned for a three-year term in 1986 they were jointly sponsored by MCC and EMBMC. With fluency in the language and advanced degrees, they moved from study to teaching, Gerald offering courses and mentoring graduate students for Biblijsko-Teološki Institut (BTI) in Zagreb and Osijek while Sara wrote especially on family issues for Izvori and Radost, two Pentecostal magazines.22 The final MCC workers to be placed in the entire Study/Service program were Emmanuel and Helen Gitlin, who followed Shenks and taught at BTI in Osijek in 1990. Although they completed a five-year term, the civil war that dissolved Yugoslavia directly hit Osijek and radically changed the nature of their assignment.

Challenges and Achievements – Life on the Ground as a Volunteer

The heart of MCC’s program in Eastern Europe was the lives and activities of its workers there. As Robert Kreider noted in his survey of the impact of MCC service at the organization’s golden anniversary, “As we paint with a broad brush … we trust that both shadow and light, the negative and the positive will be in evidence.”23 Thus this brief summary of lived experience highlights both challenges and achievements.

The recruitment of volunteers remained an unsolved problem for the program’s entire existence. Although bridge building to other Christians and peacemaking across the Cold War divide were the reasons most often given by MCC for their program in Eastern Europe, applicants to the program were few and far between. According to survey results, those who went either had already visited the area while in college, had family ties of some kind to the area, or had been recruited personally by MCC administrators. Despite many different types of efforts at recruiting, the lack of applicants regularly raised questions within MCC about continuing the program.

The first workers, who were draftees doing alternative service in a program known as PAX, had less input on placements than volunteers who came later. Rodney Gerig, for example, noted that when his two years of service at headquarters in Akron were almost up, Peter Dyck asked him if he would be interested in serving an additional two years in Poland. “Who can say no to Peter?”

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Peace building did not play a significant role in his decision to go. Gordon Burck and Rodney Hofer were sent to Slovenia at the last minute because a planned placement in Germany fell through.\textsuperscript{24}

With the end of the PAX program and the opening up of additional possibilities with the Study/Service program new challenges in recruitment became apparent. As one memo put it, “criteria for selection are very high.” Survey results show that most workers in this program were specifically attracted to the opportunity to work for peace in the Cold War context. A separate applicant-screening grid was developed and a parallel recruitment track was opened outside of normal procedures because the qualifications were so exacting. “Unlike so many other MCC assignments, e.g. teaching, medical, etc., this assignment is not a matter of ‘performing’ for three years, but is based on a continuing involvement and relationship with churches and leaders which is part of the total and long-term MCC strategy of supporting and learning from Christians in socialist countries.”\textsuperscript{25}

One additional question was whether to send singles, couples or families. Some initial advice leaned against sending singles, especially single women. Nonetheless Phyllis Krabill, a single woman, was the first worker placed in this new program. While families were not initially discouraged, after the program gathered a little experience, families were often warned about the difficulties of caring for small children or finding adequate schooling. Yet all of the couples placed in Eastern Europe bought children with them and/or had children while on assignment. The “ideal” candidates might have existed but they did not apply.\textsuperscript{26}

The attempt to recruit outside of normal channels did not function well. Sometimes it resulted in confusion for applicants. AMBS professors who supported the Study/Service program, for example, recruited Daniel Liechty but when he talked to MCC administrators they wanted to start the selection process all over again. The number of applicants was never what was needed. The August 1982 Fraternity meeting suggested a number of new initiatives to bring more workers to Eastern Europe. Walter Sawatsky, MCC Europe Area Secretary beginning in 1980, wrote a letter to all the Mennonite college and seminary Academic Deans asking for help in recruiting students. A brochure was drafted to put in their hands, “For North Americans, we have been taught during the past generation to view the communist nations of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as our enemy. Have you thought about this major area of the world as worthy of your life commitment?” Yet this effort did not bear the anticipated fruit. Administrators in Akron even talked about closing the program in 1984 due to a lack of applicants.\textsuperscript{27}

Fraternity members and MCC Europe administrators discussed numerous ideas to aid recruitment in the 1980s. One suggestion was to group workers together more so they were not as isolated and could help new workers get started. Edgar Stoesz, MCC Europe Area Secretary from 1985 to 1987, worked hard with the personnel department in Akron to get them more involved in the process. Singles were now to be officially welcomed. An MCC newsletter produced in the MCC Europe office, \textit{East Europerspectives}, devoted its lead article in February 1989 to recruitment. A field

\textsuperscript{24} Rodney Gerig survey response to author, Gordon Burck survey response to author.


\textsuperscript{26} MCC Collection, IX-6-3, file 1976 Poland, Peter Dyck, Memo to Poland File; file 1976 Russian Consultation, MCA-G. Daniel Liechty survey response to author.

\textsuperscript{27} MCC Collection, IX-6-3, file 1982 Walter Sawatsky, “Mennonite East Europe Scholarship Program,” file 1984 East-West Concerns Consultation; Walter Sawatsky private collection, Fraternity folder, August 1982 Elspeet Fraternity meeting minutes.
guide to help orient new workers was created for Poland. Nonetheless by 1990 job descriptions for Poland, Romania, and Hungary languished and were never filled.\textsuperscript{28}

Once on location, workers agreed that learning East European languages was hard work. The Paxmen were given relatively little help. Richard Tieszen suggested at the end of his term that in the future workers to Poland should be given the chance to learn the language before going. Stan Shetler lamented the lack of textbooks or tutoring help in Yugoslavia. Yet language acquisition was key to success in this type of work as Peter Dyck noted in a letter to William Hildebrand, “Ultimately the work that you will leave behind will not be primarily that which you did in the barn ... but that which you did in the lives as you interact with them... Without the language facility that is of course utterly impossible.” Almost all of the Study/Service workers started with a year of language training and the few who did not regretted it. Even a year of training did not always seem like enough, as Juanita Epp noted at the end of her first year, “As I look back on those now distant and hazy days of September 1982 as we prepared for our assignment in Yugoslavia, I am slightly embarrassed by my own naiveté. I am guilty of thinking and even saying things like: ... 'If I can't learn a language in a year there must be something wrong with me.'” MCC children too struggled to learn the language, not even enrolling them in activities of the Young Pioneers, the Communist version of Cub Scouts and Brownies, seemed to help.\textsuperscript{29}

Another challenging aspect of East European assignments was negotiating currency issues. From start to finish, MCC’s official position was that workers should never participate in the alternative market or violate currency laws. Most workers, however, found the reality of communist economies to be quite difficult and stressful. One prominent issue was finding housing. Landlords typically demanded rent payments in dollars, even though this was technically illegal. Workers tried a wide variety of options to satisfy both landlords and MCC policy, often discussing these problems at Fraternity meetings to seek advice and ensure accountability. One couple paid the regular rent in the local currency and in addition made occasional dollar “gifts” to the landlord. In another case the rent was simply paid in dollars. One couple noted that the only way to live legally in Warsaw was to stay in a hotel for three years or register on a twenty-year long waiting list for an official apartment. Their solution was to save MCC half the cost of rent at the official rate by paying Deutsch Marks to the West German bank account of the landlord’s daughter, who had a student visa to West Germany but was living in Yugoslavia. Did this fit MCC policy or not?\textsuperscript{30}

Another set of complex issues involved how to obtain local currency and what to spend it on. In some cases workers were paid a local stipend or salary. This amount might be more than they needed and local currency piled up, as was the case for Dale Hershberger. As he left Poland in 1975 with no immediate replacement, he placed 44,500 zloties with Michał Stankiewicz, President of the Polish Baptist Union, for someone to pick up later since the money could neither


\textsuperscript{29} MCC Collection, IX-6-3, file 1975 Poland, Box 139, Peter Dyck to William Hildebrand; IX-12-6 MCC Reports 1960-1975, folder Poland; IX-6-3, file 1979 Yugoslavia (1968-1979), Stan Shetler, “Resume of Two Years in Yugoslavia;” file East-West Concerns Consultations, Box 168, Fraternity minutes, Zagreb, 4-6 Febr. 1983; file 1983 Yugoslavia, Box 170 “Year end report,” MCA-G.

\textsuperscript{30} For a frank Peter Dyck admonition on the subject see MCC Collection, IX-6-3, file 1975 Poland, Box 139, Peter Dyck to William Hildebrand; file 1979 Poland, Peter Dyck to Phyllis Krabill, October 30, 1979; file 1982 Poland, Box 165, Walter Sawatsky to Paul and Julie Keim, Oct. 27, 1981, MCA-G; Walter Sawatsky private collection, Fraternity folder, minutes of August 1983 meeting.
be converted nor taken out of the country. This seemed a poor option to Hershberger, who worried inflation would destroy the sum before it could be used. Other times the available salary was too little to provide even basic food. Thus extra money often had to be carried into the country thousands of dollars at a time as bank transfers were not always reliable or often not even available, turning Fraternity meetings into a massive cash transfer operation on top of everything else.31

Once the money was in country one had to make sure it lasted until the next trip out and decide how to spend it. Was it okay to blow a week’s salary on six bananas for one’s sick children? And should one trade only in the banks at rates that were one third to one tenth of street rates which themselves were so normal they were published daily alongside official rates, at least in Polish newspapers? On occasion bank tellers refused to exchange money for a worker, insisting he or she go change on the street. Listening to local partners did not always help, as one church asked to change their weekly offering at street rates into dollars with MCCers, an offer that was declined. Marlin Miller, attending one Fraternity discussion on the currency issues, noted the workers seemed engaged in “searching for the monetary equivalent of transubstantiation.” The tension of living in this system were eloquently captured in a report by Juanita Epp,

Another statement made at orientation still lingers in my mind. It is the simple and understandable comment that MCCers, for obvious reasons, will shun the black market and exchange money through the proper channels. At that time the image of a ‘black marketer’ was a man of dubious character approaching you on a deserted street to ask you to change your dollars with him so that he can do any number of illicit things with it – buy drugs, I suppose, or deal in illegal jewel smuggling. I was not prepared for the black marketer who is a church-goer seeking penicillin for her children; or the American student receiving a scholarship paid in dinars, wanting to buy parts for his car; or our actor friend wanting to buy coffee when his troupe leaves the country on tour. So many things can be bought only with dollars, yet there is no legal way for the people to acquire them.32

Moral dilemmas over currency issues and access to wealth unavailable to locals were hardly situations unique to Eastern Europe MCCers, but issues raised by the totalitarian nature of these governments did present exceptional challenges. When Phyllis Krabill did not send in timely reports in 1979, for example, because all of her mail had been opened the entire month, making her letter writing “infrequent.” Dale Hershberger felt sufficient unease about the currency he left with Stankiewicz that he advised Peter Dyck when writing to inquire about it not to refer to 44,500 złoties, but rather that the brother would understand “if you said Psalm 44:5.” Persistent problems with and anxiety over mail that was opened and read by internal security forces finally prompted circulation throughout MCC offices in Europe and North America of an official policy on what to mail and what not to mail to workers in Eastern Europe. Mail to workers in the GDR was hand-delivered where possible by workers living in West Berlin.33
Internal security issues affected workers in many other ways as well. One of the tensions for Friesens working in Romania was the knowledge that many of the people they came in regular contact with were putting themselves at some potential risk. The government made it clear that citizens were to avoid contact with foreigners and questioned those who ignored that advice. Doreen Harms found it difficult to move freely around Warsaw in the mid-1970s as she explored options for MCC programs there. John Thiesen faced skeptical questioning at the border about all his visits to East Berlin from West Berlin, leading in part to the desire to move to the East if possible. Once there, they hoped to extend the initial three-month visa another three months, but it was the internal security ministry that rejected their application. Daniel Liechty in Budapest discovered years later that one of his best friends for a time there had been informing on him and their circle of friends. And finally when martial law was imposed in Poland in December 1981, Paul and Julie Keim in Warsaw were expecting a child. All the phones were turned off, so it was not possible even to call an ambulance, doctor or hospital. Once phone service was turned back on in January Julie called a friend to ask a question about medical services. When her friend did not know the answer, the police official listening in on the call spoke up and provided the information Julie was seeking.34

Daily living conditions also created a great deal of stress for workers. The basic shopping routine involved standing in lines for even the most basic staples, in Romania, for example, long waits in different lines were necessary for “cheese, milk, meat, fruit, toilet paper, detergent, coffee.” The litany of unavailable products was equally long in Yugoslavia, “no meat, no freezer, no fast-foods, often no electricity, no milk, no cheese, no sugar … and no Pampers.” The list of unavailable items in Poland was similar at times. MCC visitors there routinely brought along large quantities of toilet paper and other household items for workers, during martial law in the early 1980s MCCers reported living off of care packages sent by relatives back home. Apartments at different times lacked heat, electricity, water, and sewage, forcing MCCers, like locals, to visit friends who happened to have those services at the moment or to do without.35

Official MCC responses to these stresses varied. Administrators visited workers for the expressed purpose of listening and providing support. As Peter Dyck put it, “when a Paxman asks ‘Do you have time to hear me’ and then takes three hours to unburden himself, it seems that pastoral counseling rather than administrative necessity was the priority of the morning.” Additional time for devotions was added to Fraternity meetings because “in Eastern Europe one becomes much more aware of one’s powerlessness.” Other administrators, however, were frustrated that MCCers in Eastern Europe found placements there so difficult, living conditions in other placements around the world were equally challenging. Jerry Shenk, who visited Eastern Europe from Akron headquarters for the Personnel Office, noted, “These strenuous living conditions may not be much different from some other MCC settings around the world. The striking dissimilarity with most settings was the relative isolation. [Current workers] have no one

culturatively close who can be their support system."

Life was by no means all doom and gloom; there were also many exciting and rewarding moments for workers living in Eastern Europe. Workers felt incredibly privileged to experience world historical events like martial law in Poland, the eventual triumph of Solidarity there and the end of communism in Eastern Europe even as they noted that the resulting wrenching economic change made them less euphoric than the media consumers of these events in North America seemed to be. There was some joy in obtaining long-sought visas, passing exams in foreign languages and simply being able to live in difficult circumstances. The Baptist Seminary in Budapest publically recognized Julie Zimmerman’s teaching with a gift of replica Hutterite pottery, an acknowledgment of the long-standing Anabaptist roots in Hungarian lands. There were some opportunities for addressing a larger local audience with a message for peace, for example, when Reuben Miller in 1987 was selected as the US representative to a Hungarian television panel of eleven-year-old boys and argued that if he were president he would work for disarmament. The most common pleasures, however, derived from friendships made across Cold War divides.

MCCers formed many deep and abiding friendships with people who were supposed to be their sworn enemies. Dan Miller in Poland, for example, summed up his time this way, “When I stop and really think of the reason for my being here, I see the worthfulness of every moment. We cannot hate our neighbors and still truthfully say we love God. Peace shall only come through love.” Many workers were involved in small-group Bible studies. These settings allowed for deep discussions of theological problems or supporting families feeling pressure for keeping their children out of Communist youth groups. In one case this type of connection resulted in a baptism into the Berlin Mennonite Church after the fall of the wall. Most of the surveys returned report that these friendships continue to this day, twenty years or more later.

Winding Down the Program

The placement of MCC workers in Eastern Europe was initiated when the MCC Europe Office and Peter Dyck were located in Frankfurt, Germany. The office was moved back to Akron in 1967 only to return to Europe, namely Neuwied, Germany, in 1980 following a major consultation with European Mennonites the year before. The initial program as conceived by Dyck and Walter Sawatsky aimed “to confront the fears in North America, especially in the general public, but also among the Mennonites.” Workers were sent to be a Christian presence in the East, typically via student visas, and were urged to write for publications back home to educate North Americans about East European realities and to humanize the “enemy” via story-telling.

This approach faced several challenges in addition to the lack of applicants. Survey

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responses were unanimous in doubting much long-term impact in North America beyond a small circle of friends at best. Several people noted re-entry was excruciatingly difficult because of a lack of interest in or any real knowledge of Eastern Europe. Some MCC board members were vocally opposed to a “ministry of presence” and especially to MCC financial support for graduate work. Reports of this criticism prompted one couple to ask if they would even be allowed to complete their term.40

When Edgar Stoesz became MCC Europe Area Secretary in October 1985 he gave the program a vigorous review but concluded it should continue. He solicited input from many on the question of “Should the Mennonite East Europe program continue?” One major problem was that the exchange was only flowing one way. “The MCC bridge has many lanes with traffic flowing out, but only a walkway carrying cargo back.” It was also at about this time that the Peace Section representative was withdrawn from Europe, so that voice was missing in these deliberations. Recommendations were that workers should be grouped together more and served by a dedicated administrator who would probably live in the West and work on making connections both ways. Stoesz continued to think of this program “as a bridge-building ministry which is needed as much in the West as in the East.”41

Yet the program was closed by 1991 due to unbelievable changes in Eastern Europe as the people toppled their Communist governments and to changing assumptions about the role of MCC workers in Europe as a whole. The program in the GDR, for example, was closed by events when the country itself ceased to exist after unification on Oct. 3, 1990. Visas were now or soon would be easily attainable in many of these countries, even for open church work. An exploration trip to Prague in 1990 found 300 Canadians already teaching English in Czechoslovakia. In the midst of this massive change, MCC Europe underwent a self-evaluation that involved workers from both Eastern and Western Europe to address the question of whether there should now be a single Europe program. The conclusion reached by workers in the East was that an Eastern Europe program should continue because “East Europe has been long on words and short on deeds for a long time.” New placements teaching English at seminaries or helping churches start and improve desperately needed social services, however, would be better than sending more students or teaching English in public schools or commercial settings.42

This internal evaluation was overtaken, however, by larger MCC considerations at two levels. The massive flood of Western aid and missionary activity in the East made MCC partners in Africa nervous and their concern made administrators in Akron cautious about new initiatives in Europe. Hugo Jantz, MCC Europe Area Secretary since 1987, was exploring the place of MCC in Europe with European Mennonites. He thought local Mennonites, who were divided by language, theology, and memories of enmity during World War II and the majority of whom were recently arrived re-settlers in Germany from the Soviet Union, could best get together if MCC withdrew from Europe entirely and only came back if invited. The resulting process of consultation raised issues of the role of Europe in MCC work in general and the advantages and disadvantages of having the area secretary on site, the only MCC program decentralized in that way. As part of lengthy and complicated conversations leading to a consultation on this topic in November 1991,
few new placements were made in Europe as terms ran out, a fact that also helped relieve budget pressures. At the end a new European Mennonite Organization (EMO) was attempted that was to take over relief and development work in Europe and on behalf of Europeans, but it never made it off the ground. One suggestion that came out of the process that was implemented was the creation of regional coordinators, as the lack of Country Representatives in the European setting was identified as a major weakness.43

Late in 1991 MCC needed to find new leadership for Europe quickly because the Europeans had asked Hugo Jantz to work for them organizing EMO. Hansuli Gerber was brought in with a new focus and location for MCC Europe. He moved the office to his native village of Tramelan, Switzerland, and stressed conciliation and peace efforts within Europe as a major theme. Events in Yugoslavia gave this orientation a particular urgency. Helen and Emmanuel Gitlin, the last workers assigned under the Study/Service program, were teaching at the Pentecostal BTI in Osijek when advances by Serbian forces early in October 1991 obliged the school to relocate to a church camp in Slovenia. When Gitlins went back during a lull in fighting to retrieve items from their apartment they experienced shelling of the town along with the inhabitants who had stayed. From this point on MCC work in Eastern Europe focused on relief supplies for refugees and supporting local church peace initiatives wherever possible.44

**Broader Implications of MCC Programs in Eastern Europe**

On May 7, 1976, a group of seventy-five protestors besieged MCC headquarters in Akron, Pennsylvania. Fundamentalist preacher Carl McIntire and his supporters spent two hours denouncing MCC for bringing Soviet Baptists to North America for a fraternal visit. “They do not represent the church; they represent the Soviet government and the KGB,” he yelled through his bullhorn. He declined to talk to Urbane Peachey, executive secretary of the MCC Peace Section. Similar protests accompanied the visit of the Soviet delegation to Gerald Shenk’s home church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where he recalls crossing their picket lines to enter the church for a program with them. The parallel to recent protests stirred by MCC involvement in the visits to North America by Iranian delegations and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is striking. Some Muslim countries and political organizations have pariah status in North America similar to that of Communists in an earlier time period when at the start of the Cold War over a third of Americans favored killing or imprisoning domestic Communists.45 Reaching out to Iran, for example, by sending workers there to learn about Islam and to seek a better understanding of the Iranian people can be seen as a twenty-first century version of practicing living with the enemy in love.

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Another lesson learned from this program with contemporary applications is the role of the media in stirring up fear and creating stereotypes of the “enemy” that impact North Americans. MCC workers in Eastern Europe found their experiences quite different from what growing up in North America led them to expect. Almost none of the workers who responded to the survey had any meaningful interaction with actual Communists. For example, some workers in Poland are not sure they ever met a single one, an ironic contrast to the perception of North Americans. Most of the population in Eastern Europe was indifferent or hostile to the official ideology, highlighting the fact that those societies were as diverse and polarized during the Cold War as our own. Similar complexity is certainly the case in the Islamic world as well since workers report contact with a wide variety of people in those contexts but relatively few radicals, given their minority status in Islam.

The problem of building a two-way bridge is a final contemporary challenge. How can insights of peace workers in such unique situations best be communicated back home? The MCC Eastern Europe program did not adequately solved this problem. As already noted, the lasting impact of MCC in Eastern Europe as judged by workers themselves was in the individual friendships formed, not in influence wielded back home. The Eastern Europe experience suggests that in order for the insights and information gathered by workers actually to be received and integrated into public life requires a basic level of knowledge and interest in North America of the topic, communism in the one case, Islam in the other, that did not and does not seem to exist. The programs on the ground need broader institutional support and media presence at home to be effective in this goal of making a domestic impact.

One important recent study of the Cold War has concluded that the conflict was not predetermined because the actors involved were clearly making choices at every stage. Until near the end, all of those choices were made out of fear of the enemy, a fear exacerbated by political ideologies that shaped perceptions. Here is one place for peace workers to set their fulcrum in doing peace work. Living with the “enemy” dismantles fear both for us and the “other” we encounter.

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