

## **TRACING RECONCILIATION: POST 1945**

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The twenty years between 1945 and 1965 do not represent a terribly long period of time and yet they are years which were full of dramatic events. Before I begin to speak about Tracing Reconciliation, I think it is important to give you an idea of the extent of the desperation, destruction and trauma in which most countries found themselves at this time.

Let us remember that, with the exception of Sweden, Spain, and Portugal, Nazi Germany had the whole of Europe in its power. The Nazis had plundered every country financially and economically not only to finance their war effort but also to save the German population from starving to death. The occupation had lasted many years and, in every country, it left deep scars behind, which still affect people today. Each country has its own tale to tell, not only of humiliation and oppression but also of treachery and collaboration with the occupying forces.

This is not supposed to be an academic paper. Rather I am going to talk from my own personal point of view. I experienced and shared in these years as a child, a student and a young pastor.

### **I**

In the summer of 2007, my wife and I travelled to Norway and I was astonished to see in just how many places reminders of the German occupation are still to be found. Today many of them are tourist attractions, like, for instance, the bunkers, which the Nazis built at the entrance of Trondheim Fjord. Or the city of Hammerfest which no longer has an historical center because when the Nazis retreated in 1945 they pursued a scorched earth policy and left the town in ashes. Hammerfest was not the only place which suffered this fate. In the small town of Honningsvåg the German army only left the small wooden church (built in 1844 in new Gothic style) standing. All the houses were razed to the ground. I visited the church and saw a picture taken in 1945. It was a scene of total devastation, just the tiny church standing alone in the emptiness. Oppressive. These experiences from the Second World War are still very much alive. The tour guides still point them out. Everywhere you can still feel the deep wounds inflicted by the occupying forces on the Norwegian people.

The Slavs suffered more than most under the capricious brutality of the Nazis. The Slavs were regarded as second class citizens. In 1990, I was fortunate enough to get Wladyslaw Bartoschewski, who was at that time the Polish ambassador in Vienna, later he became Foreign Minister and is today Secretary of State, to speak at our first international consultation in Vienna in

1991. We had a long personal conversation and he told me something of his life-story. He had survived Auschwitz and after the Second World War was over spent some years in Russian prisons. He told me Auschwitz was originally built with the aim of wiping out the Polish elite and intelligentsia. The only people who were meant to be left were those who could be used as slave labor. What happened in Auschwitz and the other forty-one concentration camps in Europe is beyond human understanding. However, I want to say a few words about it, so that we are in no doubt about what happened there. In a sermon in the Ruprecht Church in Vienna on November 8, 2003, recalling the night of the pogroms in Germany and Austria in 1938, I said:

We may not forget Auschwitz, the name and the place, which, like none other reminds us of the horrors of the holocaust. We remember November 1938 because the burning synagogues were a symbol of what would follow. We may not forget the many people who were murdered there, who, as Hannah Arendt put it, even “had their own death snatched out of their hands as proof that nothing belonged to them and they belonged to nobody.” “The last ambassadors of dignified dying were those who . . . so as not to be wiped out en masse . . . committed suicide before they could be gassed” (G. Anders. ) The memory of this cruel distortion of human living and dying may not be pushed aside. In Auschwitz we are burdened with an experience which can no longer be explained in terms of the morality of guilt and sin. The killing machine was operated by human beings who didn’t personally feel guilty. They were only doing their “duty.” The evil which took shape above all in Auschwitz has led to contempt for standards and buried the normality of everyday life. Professor Christian Link, who has recently been working on the Puzzle of Evil, especially in relation to what happened in Auschwitz, has compared evil to a parasitic system of rules, through which, by means of an absurd overemphasis on order, it is possible to create a virtual totalitarian world, in which, without any respect for historical, cultural or even natural conditions, an attempt is made to do the impossible—that is, to transform a human being into a perfectly controlled organism. Therefore Auschwitz represents a break in continuity with all previous history. Many people in Europe, who at that time were either the perpetrators or their assenting contemporaries, still seem to live in an “in between” world where penance in unnecessary and forgiveness is not required. Only remembering in a state of horrified penance can help us to escape from the destructive and poisonous power of un-atoned evil, to recognize evil in its present day disguise and to save ourselves from being enslaved by it.

What has been said about Auschwitz applies to all forty-one concentration camps under the Nazi regime.

## II

Here I have given you some idea of what the German people under the rule of the Nazis did to their own people, to the people of other nations and especially to the Jews. And then came the collapse of Nazi rule.

I would like to mention two events which affected the lives of many people for a very long time: the flight of the German population shortly before the end of the war, mostly from East Prussia, and then, in 1945 and 1946, the expulsion of the Germans from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. The National Socialist government had, right to the very end, led the German people to believe that victory was possible. In East Prussia and Silesia it was actually forbidden to talk about flight. Anybody

who did could reckon with the death penalty. Everyone was cradled in a feeling of security. It was a relatively short advance of the Russian army in October, 1944, at Gumbinnen in East Prussia near the Polish border which finally disturbed this false sense of security and persuaded some people to ignore the orders of the authorities and to make a break for it towards the west. When the main offensive of the Russian army began in January, 1945, chaos broke out. All the roads were jammed and it was hardly possible to go anywhere. Many died of exhaustion or hunger or simply froze to death as they fled. It was only by taking the route from several ports across the East Sea that some 800,000 people were able to escape to safety. These events are well documented. Some German writers have written about this terrible and disturbing time in great detail and tried to portray the extent of the human tragedy.

Then the war was over. The states which were re-establishing themselves began to expel their German citizens. That was certainly the case in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. The notice they got to be ready for departure was short, often just twenty-four hours. The expellees had to leave everything behind. In the first few months it was all quite arbitrary and it led to appalling acts of violence. There was an outbreak of a deep hatred towards everything German. Everything which the Poles, the Czechs, the Slavs, the Hungarians and all the other peoples had suffered at the hands of the Germans over seven long years vented itself now. I quote a sentence from a speech made by President Benes on May 12, 1945, which expresses the feeling of hatred and the deep pain. He said, "In this war the German people have ceased to be human, to be humanly tolerable—and they seem to us now to be like a huge human monster . . . we have said to ourselves, we must liquidate the German problem in our republic." The atrocities of the SS units and parts of the German army were now laid lock stock and barrel at the feet of all Germans. In West Germany, between 1945 and 1946, eight million people had to be resettled; in East Germany, four million. I have only given a few hints of what happened in Europe between 1933 and 1945. However, it is only against this background that we can begin to appreciate the Traces of Reconciliation.

What went on between different peoples also worked its way into the church. Post 1945, at first it was as if everybody was paralyzed. The war was over. There were new problems to be encountered and the huge extent of the destruction had to be faced, but at least everyday life could begin again. The Methodist Church quickly busied itself with the reorganization of its work in Europe. Shortly before the outbreak of war a new church had been formed. Three Methodist Churches which had been separated, the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South and the Protestant Methodist Church, came together again in 1939 to form the Methodist Church. I will not go into the reasons for their separation here. This important step of uniting together was celebrated in Europe as well in a European Conference in Copenhagen in August, 1939. However, there was not time for the three separate parts of the church to get to know each

other because in September 1939 Hitler started the Second World War with the invasion of Poland. The new spheres of work for the united church were the Methodist work in Poland, in Czechoslovakia and in Belgium. After the First World War the Methodist Episcopal Church, South had done missionary work in these three countries and, above all, helped people to cope with the consequences of the war. There were various suggestions for a re-organization of the Methodist work in Europe post 1945. North Europe wanted to keep the old structure with a North Europe Central Conference. That excluded the suggestion that one European Central Conference with three bishoprics might be established. Solutions which would have involved the German Annual Conference were rejected by the Belgians, the Poles, the Czechs, the Slavs, etc. There was only one way forward, to extend the existing Geneva Diocese, to which the Swiss Annual Conference and the Missions in Austria, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria belonged, to include new countries, namely: Belgium, Poland and Czechoslovakia. The Geneva Diocese should then become its own Central Conference and elect its own Bishop.

### III

Here I must take a step backwards. The Mid-European Central Conference had been formed in 1925 under the leadership of Bishop John L. Nuelsen. As well as the work in Germany and Switzerland it included the work in the Balkans and the Baltic States. There was a strong sense of belonging together. Bishop Nuelsen described this feeling movingly at the inaugural Conference in 1925 in Freudenstadt. In his opening speech he said:

In this Christian fellowship of faith, hope and love within the Methodist Episcopal Church where we have found our real and highest calling, in this fellowship which is stronger than a blood-relationship, more exalted than the community of nations, more binding than any interest group in human history has ever been, in that it introduces the unifying power of eternal fellowship with God into the divisive forces of human life, we want to begin the work which has been entrusted to us by the Church and, God willing, carry it through.

This fellowship of faith, hope and love was eloquently expressed by the fact that German and Swiss pastors were working together in Austria, Hungary and the various Balkan countries and that the preaching seminary in Frankfurt am Main had students from the whole area covered by the Central Conference. Young men from Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Hungary, and the Balkan States were all studying alongside the Germans and the Swiss.

When the National Socialists took power in Germany in 1933, this fellowship was challenged and put under considerable strain. Bishop Nuelsen had already clearly recognized what was at stake. In a report to the Bishops' Council he stated succinctly: "Today Germany is no longer a free country. It is a rootless and conscienceless dictatorship." What also put fellowship under strain and stress was the German intention of "going it alone." At the Third Mid-European Central Conference in September, 1935, the delegates found out that the German Annual Conferences had worked out a

new constitution which foresaw a German Central Conference and that the Government and Prussian Minister of the Interior had already been made aware of this constitution in a letter of July 3, 1935. The Conference was presented with a *fait accompli*. According to canon law, however, the appropriate steps still had to be taken. Under the pressure of circumstances the Mid-European Central Conference decided to approve the application for the institution of a German Central Conference. In the prevailing political situation of 1936, the General Conference agreed to the foundation of a German Central Conference. The inaugural session of the German Central Conference took place in Frankfurt am Main in September, 1936. With the setting up of the German Central Conference the Mid-European Central Conference was dissolved.

The conferences and missions outside Germany were then brought together in the so-called Geneva Diocese and came directly under the control of the General Conference. At the inaugural session of the German Central Conference Bishop Nuelsen said in his address, "People can no longer accuse the German Methodist Church of being a foreign plant, a strange species, a colony of a foreign organization ... the German Methodists can look their own people in the eye and say: Methodism is German." Is there a hint of painful irony here? This course of events left behind wounds and a sense of helplessness. This background information will help us understand that the constitution of the Central Conference for Middle and South Europe in 1954 was not only a clear and courageous step for canon law but it was also an act of reconciliation which enabled further acts of reconciliation.

#### IV

At the request of the Swiss delegation, the General Conference in 1952 decided that the Geneva Diocese, augmented by the Conferences in Belgium, Poland and Czechoslovakia, could establish itself as a Central Conference and elect its own bishop. That was planned to take place between 1952 and 1956. Bishop Arthur J. Moore was entrusted with the oversight of the Geneva Diocese for this period of time. Bishop Arthur J. Moore came to Europe in autumn of 1952, consulted thoroughly with the brothers and sisters in Switzerland and led the Annual Conference in Austria as well. Bishop Moore was considered to be one of the great leaders of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. He had been leading bishop when, in 1920, his church began its mission in Europe—in Belgium, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

In 1936, he ordained the young Pastor Ernst Nausner in Katowice in Poland as deacon. He had been assigned to missionary work in a small village in White Russia and had been working there very patiently with his wife Erna since 1928. On October 26, 1952, he ordained Ernst Nausner in Vienna as an Elder. The ordination to the Council of Elders could not be carried out in Poland because of the war and could only be brought to fruition sixteen years later in Vienna. That too was an act of reconciliation, because the pastors of the Austrian Missionary Conference had to agree to it. The ordination gave Bishop Moore the opportunity to witness to Pastor Ernst

Nausner's integrity.

Since 1946, Ernst Nausner had worked as a missionary in various refugee camps in Linz and the surrounding area. He had done that on his own initiative. It had not been official church work. He saw the plight of the people who were living in the refugee camps and who could see no future. He began to preach and soon was running five preaching stations every week. As a result of his work as a preacher two congregations were formed—one in Linz and one in Ried im Innkreis. In 1946, he had applied to become a member of the Austrian Missionary Conference but had not been accepted. His application was not accepted until 1951.

Dr. Joseph Bartak, an American citizen of Czech origin and previously a superintendent in Czechoslovakia, played a significant role in that. Dr. Bartak had been expelled from the country by the communists in 1948. Bishop Paul N. Garber, who was responsible for the Geneva diocese between 1944 and 1952, moved him from Prague to Vienna to work amongst the Czechs and for the Czech congregation which had been established there in 1894. He was also to help with the leadership of the Missionary Conference and to be the link man between the Austrian Missionary Conference and the mission authorities in New York. Dr. Bartak got permission from Bishop Garber to use money which had been collected for Czechoslovakia for this work in Austria. The communist regime in Prague would not allow the Methodist Church in Czechoslovakia to receive any financial contributions from abroad. Dr. Bartak used this money wisely and lovingly. Steps towards reconciliation: a Czech supporting work in Austria.

## V

In October, 1954, Bishop Arthur J. Moore summoned the Middle and South European Central Conference to Brussels for its inauguration. He already knew from conversations with the Swiss delegates that the minimum number of twenty pastors and lay delegates anticipated by the church regulations would not be reached. He made a wise decision and justified it like this in his opening statement:

We must recognize that four of our conferences are in countries in which the political circumstances make it impossible to elect delegates and send them to this Central Conference. If it were not for these unhappy and, hopefully, temporary conditions we would have ten more preachers and lay delegates here . . . . The bishop chairman is convinced that even if it has not been technically possible to proceed precisely according to the letter of the law, the spirit and intention of the decrees of the General Conference have been sufficiently fulfilled . . . . I therefore declare this meeting of the Central Conference of Mid and South Europe open for all the business it is empowered to deal with.

The new Central Conference immediately in its very first vote elected Dr. Ferdinand Sigg as bishop. According to Methodist custom the Bishops of the two other European Central Conferences were present, Bishop Dr. Odd Hagen and Bishop Dr. Friedrich Wunderlich. On the third day of the conference Bishop Moore quite unexpectedly handed the chair over to Bishop

Wunderlich. Wunderlich was surprised and deeply moved. It was a sign of reconciliation, a German bishop as chair of an international conference.

The newly-formed Central Conference embraced countries in East and West. Initially only the conferences in the West could meet together. But the Central Conference was an outstretched hand, a strong hope for more, even if that hope could not be realized straight away. Everything went at walking pace. In 1957, for the first time in Geneva guests were present from Poland and Hungary. The conference of Czechoslovakia was officially represented in 1964. Because of the tragic events of 1956, the Hungarian Conference was not able to take part officially in meetings of the Central Conference until 1969. At the beginning of 1956, Bishop Sigg had managed to visit the Church in Hungary and to ordain three men and a woman. It was not possible for him to visit again until 1965. At the Central Conference in 1964, in Strasburg, Bishop Sigg said:

In the current history of Europe at such an important hour there is no other protestant church better equipped to be bridge-builders, mediators in the work of reconciliation between the peoples and bearers of a strong biblical way of thinking. The Geneva diocese lies at the crossroads between East and West, between Africa and Europe, between America and Russia. It has a duty to be a model of what it really means for churches to live together." And then he added, "The Geneva diocese is an extraordinary creation. It was created in 1936 . . . re-established in 1939 and extended in 1954. It has withstood the catastrophe of two world wars and today provides the whole church with the proof that huge differences within a church can be overcome if people show goodwill and God is with them.

In later years it was the Middle and South European Central Conference which set the European initiatives and persuaded the other Central Conferences to take them on. They did the same in the wider arena of the world church. That resulted in reciprocal enrichment and better understanding on all sides. That is how new and effective relationships were established between the General Conference, its various church authorities, and the Central Conferences in Europe.

## VI

In 1948, the World Council of Churches was founded in Amsterdam, its headquarters were established in Geneva, Switzerland. Methodist people were substantially involved. I would like just to mention here the brilliant layman and gifted organizer John R. Mott. He had been the initiator of the World Mission Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 and one of the driving forces in the creation of the WCC. He became the president of the newly-formed WCC. Various initiatives were introduced from Geneva, from now on the various aid measures were bundled together ecumenically. That was a big difference in comparison to the aid after the First World War which had only run along denominational lines. I would like to mention two initiatives in particular.

The first was the establishment of the "ecumenical work camps." Later this name was felt to be offensive and they were renamed "ecumenical re-

construction camps.” From their inception the founders of the camps were pragmatic and impartial. They were all about work. Young people from every country in the ecumenical movement of that time were invited to make themselves available to help in the reconstruction of houses and churches which had been destroyed in the war. They were not paid and most of them even paid for their own board and lodgings. It was an experience of reconciliation in the very best sense of the word. In 1956, in the work camp in Ried im Innkreis in Austria, my own life changed as young people from the following countries took part in the work: East and West Germany, Holland, Great Britain, USA, Lebanon, Jordan, Sweden and Austria.

For one month this diverse group lived together, worked together, planned leisure activities together, prayed together and celebrated through worship, all of which made it possible for the participants to recognize and to overcome the prejudices they held, their hostile points of view and their own fears. Friendships began here which sometimes lasted a whole lifetime. This experience had a positive influence on the lives of the participants which extended throughout their lifetimes. Hundreds of such “work camps” operated in many European countries. I have led many such camps which we then organized and ran within our own church. Worth mentioning in this context are the “caravans,” groups of students mostly from North Carolina who came every year from 1951 to 1961 and left a lasting impression on the congregation in Linz, above all on the young people. While they were not ecumenical groups, they brought young people from the USA who had no experience of war together with young people in Austria who were refugees from various countries.

The second ecumenical initiative was the foundation of the “Conference of European Churches” (Konferenz Europäischer Kirchen—KEK). The inaugural gathering took place in Danish Nyborg. There were two considerations behind this step: on the one hand there was the need to take the pressure off the ecumenical head office in Geneva which was, after all, responsible for the whole world (regional ecumenical councils already existed on other continents), and on the other hand to create a forum in which the churches from the East and the West could take part. The Conference of European Churches was quite deliberately intended to act as a bridge, to seek contact with the churches in the East and to sound out the possibilities for cooperation. I took part in the fourth full meeting of the KEK as a youth leader. It took the theme of “Living Together as Continents and Generations.” It was held in 1964, on a ship cruising in international waters so that delegates from East Germany (DDR) could take part. They were not allowed to travel to Denmark because Denmark was a member of NATO. So the delegates from East Germany travelled to Sweden, a neutral country, and were then brought along the coast to the conference ship. The return journey was the same in reverse. It was an exciting conference. Right up to the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, the KEK fulfilled its task of reconciliation.

## VII

The end of the war in May, 1945, revealed not only the huge extent of the destruction of houses, churches, factories, streets and bridges in all the towns and cities which had been affected by the war, but also the great misery of the refugees. I will restrict myself to the area which I have seen and experienced, Linz and the surrounding area. I can still see the endless trails of horse-drawn wagons moving through the jammed streets from the east to west. I asked myself where all these people would find somewhere to live. Between 1944 and 1946, we too lived as a family in refugee-camps of varying quality with the absolute minimum of space. In 1945, approximately one million refugees were living in Austria. By the end of the war, 43,000 forced laborers from twenty-five different countries who had been working for the Nazis in the armaments industry (then the Hermann-Goering Works, today VOEST) were living in Linz. These people were housed in forty-six camps of huts situated in and around Linz. After the end of the war these people were repatriated and the empty barracks were given to the numerous refugees. In July, 1945, there were reckoned to be 60,000 refugees. Basically, no-one could cope. The situation stabilized slowly but surely. Thanks to generous outside support no one had to starve to death. For eight years food was rationed. Our church made a small contribution here and was able to distribute food and clothing to the needy.

Much more meaningful, however, was the spiritual support which Ernst Nausner and Jan Piotrowski, his White Russian brother-in-law, were able to give the refugees. Jan Piotrowski gathered those who spoke Russian around himself while Ernst Nausner cared for all the others. At first they used the modest premises of the Methodist congregation in Linz. Then Nausner went directly to the refugee-camp and held worship services there. He visited and organized Bible studies and began to work with children and young people. To make it a bit more colorful, I quote from a lengthier report which my brother Wilhelm Nausner put together in 1983 for the Thirtieth Anniversary Celebrations of the Linz congregation. As an employee of the WCC he had a lot to do with refugees and knew what life was like in the barracks from his own experience. He described life in a refugee-camp:

Thousands of people were perched together there in the narrowest of spaces without any respect for their previous social status. In the best cases they had only lost their home and everything they possessed. As if that was not hard enough, there were many though who had experienced imprisonment, humiliation and cruel mistreatment and were sick in mind and body. There were lots of widows with small children who did not know what they would do in the future or where they would go. The men were dead or missing. Everywhere people bemoaning their losses and the injustice they had suffered. There was unspeakable bitterness and a blind hatred towards everyone they blamed for their misery . . . There was thieving and deception and violence in the camp . . . and the fear of infection. Tuberculosis, lice and bugs were unavoidable plagues. There was no work and no school, so there was always a crowd of children and young people hanging around. There was a "culture program" which consisted of the camp cinema and daily dances which were intended to combat the boredom and sense of desperation in the camp.

It was not only a trace of reconciliation but a living sign of hope that people like Ernst and Erna Nausner set out to deal with the needs of their fellow human beings.

With their modest resources and with hearts full of love, they tried to fill not only the hunger of the body but also the hunger of the soul. Not only did they go to the people in their pathetic camp accommodation; they opened up their house too. No one was turned away. On the VOEST site close to Refugee Camp 50, Ernst Nausner had a house with a living area of approximately 100 qm at his disposal. He lived there with eight children and his elderly parents. Ernst Nausner said once at a midday meal with an American youth group which was digging out the foundation for the new church by hand, "Our house is a street." The church was intended for the new congregation which consisted entirely of refugees.

### VIII

After ten years of occupation by the various armies (American, British, French and Russian) Austria obtained a Peace Treaty in 1955 and the foreign forces went home. Many things had been consolidated. And then the Hungarian Crisis broke out. The uprising of the Hungarian people in October, 1956, was put down by Russian tanks. A flood of refugees poured into Austria. Austria kept her borders open and accepted hundreds of thousands of Hungarian refugees. Now the WCC, which had gained a lot of experience in dealing with and caring for refugees, was able to prove its worth. Extensive aid measures were introduced. And, although the Methodist Church in Austria did not have much to eat itself, every congregation opened up to the refugees. For a long time the big sanctuary at 56 Sechshauser Street was a refugee camp. Double beds stood side by side. Living areas were separated with a blanket. Once the immediate need was over and the refugees were put up in better quarters the congregation was able to use their sanctuary for services again. Then at the back of the church premises a house for Hungarian girls was built. The congregation in Linz adapted the big attic room over the church sanctuary to accommodate forty Hungarian boys who had fled on their own and did not know where their parents were. The boys were looked after in the church rooms for more than a year until a house could be built for them in Spatt Street right beside the church. These months with the boys, who were often quite wild, were a great burden and a considerable challenge for the congregation.

In this, to some extent painful, learning process, Ernst and Erna Nausner with great patience helped the individual members of the congregation to understand and to accept that people who came from a communist country also have their own dignity and were to be treated with respect and love. They demonstrated that in the example of their own lives. Most of the boys took an apprenticeship in Linz and were integrated into society. Some emigrated to the USA, Canada and Australia. Out of the home for Hungarian boys the institution "Spatt Street Centre" developed. This was not only a trace of rec-

conciliation; it was a deed of reconciliation with far reaching results.

## IX

I began working with the Geneva diocese and the foundation of the Central Conference for Middle and South Europe. At first it was a movement from the West to the East. However, no human relationship is a one-way street. The feed-back soon came. It was an expression of gratitude that the relationship with the world-wide Methodist Church could not be broken and indeed, through the visits of the Bishop, could be seen and experienced.

Towards the end of the 1960s, it became more and more possible for pastors and, increasingly, for lay people too, to take part in activities on the other side of the borders. The Middle and South European Central Conference, which at first hardly anyone had given a chance of survival, gained an inner strength and profile. In the contributions to the Fortieth Anniversary of the Central Conference, Superintendent Martin Hovan from Yugoslavia emphasized the multitude of gifts in one body, where the preaching was in four languages. Superintendent Freidrich Hecker from Hungary spoke of the joy there is in evangelization, "Evangelization is a work that can only happen in joyfulness. You cannot invite someone to a wedding with a dark face full of worries."

Pfarrer Heinrich Bolleter provided some information about the changed role which the Methodist Church was playing in an area where the established Church was strong, "From Adversaries to Partners." Superintendent Walter Schwarzinger reported on the unbelievable ecumenical changes in Austria where Lutheran, Reformed, Orthodox, Methodist, Old Catholic, and Roman Catholic were learning more and more to engage with each other and to work together publicly. Superintendent Vilem Schneeberger from Prague showed that the Methodist Church as a world-wide community can be a challenge to but also a blessing for the established churches when they thankfully live out their heritage. Superintendent Hugh G. Johnson, a long-term priest and missionary in Algeria, reported on his experience of interreligious conversations in a land dominated by Islam. Superintendent Witold Benedyktowicz from Warsaw underlined the character of the serving church, "From the very beginning the existence of the Methodist Church in Poland stood under the sign of service."

When in 1920, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, came to Poland it was to serve a society which, especially in World War I, had suffered. In the years of war and occupation, 1939-1945, the Methodist Church helped the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto and in other cities. Benedyktowicz said, "Right up to today a priceless little book by Janusz Korczak is kept in the church library with a hand-written dedication to the Superintendent at that time, Dr. G. P. Warfield. The Methodist Church gave the oppressed citizens consolation and hope and helped those who had been expelled." The changed political situation presented new opportunities for service, "A serving church is no stranger in a secularized society, which, even if it does not know it, always stands in need of the ministry of reconciliation."

## X

These short citations reflect something of the wealth of a living society which transcends political, religious and social boundaries as represented by the Middle and South European Central Conference. The twenty years following the end of World War II, which we should not lose sight of, show some new beginnings. However, it was only in the 1970s that further steps could be taken. The foundation of the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which was formed in Helsinki in 1975, slowly but surely changed the atmosphere of the Cold War. The Soviet Union and her allies, all the other Western European countries, the USA and Canada all took part in this conference. As well as disarmament, the economy and trade, the question of religious freedom was a long-running issue for the conference. Between 1969 and 2005, I was the chairman of the Theological Work Group of the MSE Central Conference. From 1973, I quite deliberately held the meetings of this group in Budapest. That drew our brothers and sisters in a country ruled by the Communists directly into our work and gave them the opportunity to be our hosts. For the participants from the West it was an important experience to go through the procedure at a border crossing and to experience the atmosphere in a communist country first-hand. In each of the sixteen years leading up to the fall of the Iron Curtain we saw the small but positive changes which were happening in Hungary.

I have drawn a few traces of reconciliation from my personal experience. I am grateful that God has allowed me to do my service within this Central Conference.

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