

FOLK HIGH SCHOOL WORK AND RESIDENTIAL ADULT EDUCATION IN THE HISTORY OF THE EUROPEAN BUREAU FOR ADULT EDUCATION

**Written by C. Stapel, Retired Secretary, the
Association for Dutch Folkhighschoolwork and
the Agency for European Folkhighschoolwork**

The problems of European cooperation have always found their reflection in the history of the Bureau. The ups and downs of cooperation in the field of residential adult education offer an example.

A.

In the first years after the second world war relations that had existed before between Folkhighschools in Europe were resumed. In the Scandinavian countries contacts were restored already in the forties and in 1948 the Dutch were represented in the first post-war "Hoejskolemoetet" in Sweden. Danish and Swiss Folkhighschools (Wartenweiler !) had offered help and rehabilitation to their Dutch colleagues immediately after the liberation of that country. In particular in the Netherlands the rapidly growing Folkhighschool movement, supported by the government policy which expected it to contribute, in the Danish tradition, to "building a new society", from its revival in 1945 opened its windows to Europe.

For the very reason of their residential character Folkhighschools were considered to offer the best possible opportunity for international education programmes: while living together common – or controversial – issues could be discussed and solutions or new perspectives be worked out cooperatively. Situated on the cross-roads of Europe with its relations to Scandinavia, France, to Britain and Germany, the Netherlands Folkhighschool movement saw it as her mission to strive for a Europe-wide cooperation of Folkhighschools and residential colleges. And how else could this best be started than organising a Folkhighschool conference?

So in 1951 a first European Folkhighschool conference was convened by the Dutch Agency for European Folkhighschoolwork to take place at the Bergen Folkhighschool, to discuss the question of international cooperation and exchange ideas concerning the task and methods of residential adult education in this respect. Here already one of the most persistent problems of European cooperation in the field of education became apparent. Strongly felt differences of opinion existed between those who had in mind to help building "Europe as an entity" and those who were afraid of losing their traditional identity in doing so.

It was agreed however that visits of groups from one country to another and offering special "making acquaintance" Folkhighschool courses to them would be a first step to make people conscious of the

European way of life in its different social and cultural aspects.

Both the aspect of exchanges and that of the cultural diversity were the topics of a second conference held at the French-Netherlands Cultural Centre (Folkhighschool) "Mérillon" at Chevreuse in 1952. It cannot be denied that the Dutch, with a certain missionary zeal not particularly alien to them, stubbornly stuck to their idea of realising European cooperation! This conference was organised together with the "Confédération Nationale de la Famille Rurale", CNRF, and with financial support from the European Youth Campaign. With CNRF the Dutch Folkhighschools had already developed an extensive exchange programme of rural groups, so that could serve as an example. And the large number of representatives from many European countries offered a "live" experience of cultural diversity as an enriching element in Europe.

This experience evidently caused the Danes to drop their initial hesitant attitude and made them accept to host a third conference at their famous Askov Hoejskole in 1953. It was set up in cooperation with the Danish Folkhighschool Association. This time main issue were the short-term courses in residential adult education centres. The choice of this subject demonstrates the doubt which in those years still existed in Scandinavia about this type of courses practised in Britain, the Netherlands and Germany: was that real Folkhighschoolwork? However, according to Schouten: "A better understanding was developing between European Folkhighschools and residential colleges and (...) there was a basis for common philosophy and shared action". "Nevertheless" – he stated – "the Scandinavian and British approach to European cooperation remained essentially different from that of the central European countries in respect to support for European political or economic action". Has anything changed after 40 years?

Yet - the initiators did not give up and a fourth conference was organised the next year (1954) in Denmark again at Koebmandshvile Hoejskole, not only together with the Danish Folkhighschool Association but even with the support of the Danish government. And as before the matter of European cooperation in the field of adult education was the crucial issue. It had already become clear in earlier meetings that it was not too difficult to find individual Folkhighschool people (directors, teachers) willing to join in European cooperation; but to have (national) organisations to

commit themselves to a more structural cooperation was another question.

And without that, depending on a number of constantly changing good-willing individual only, a solid and lasting basis for this cooperation would not be realised.

After these four conferences in which reconnaissance of the possibilities of cooperation between Folkhighschools as such had been the main theme, another one was held in 1954, this time in Britain, the country in which residential adult education had developed a specific character, i.e. that of liberal adult education. It took place in Avoncroft College and was organised with the Residential Colleges Committee together with the Standing Conference of leaders of short-term residential colleges, and with financial support of the British government. "Liberty in adult education" was the main subject. The choice of this topic marked a change in emphasis in the sequence of Folkhighschool conferences: no longer the question of cooperation between Folkhighschools was the most important issue, but a more specific philosophical and methodological theme pertaining to adult education in general. It in fact meant the end of a consistent policy of the Dutch Folkhighschool movement, pursued particularly by Oscar Guermonprez and Bob Schouten during the years immediately after the war to create a solid European cooperation between Folkhighschools and other residential colleges.

B.

When in 1954 the Bureau, as an international organisation with a number of other member-organisations than Folkhighschool associations only, had come into existence, it would follow another less clear-cut line in organising conferences - although in many cases these were held in Folkhighschools. But it mostly were no longer their own affairs that were under discussion; they were used as suitable venues for conferences on (adult) education in general. The first of these conferences in 1954 again was held at the Bergen Folkhighschool in the Netherlands, and was convened by the Dutch Agency for European Folkhighschoolwork, the Bureau still being in its infancy. In a way this conference was intended to give some "birth help", its subject being "Adult education in Europe", and its objective to explore the possibilities of cooperation between European adult education organisations, 29 people from 13 different countries attending.

Another conference at Bergen a year later showed however that Guermonprez and Schouten had not yet given up their European idealism, the theme this time subtly being titled: "Adult education and Europe", and the discussion centering around the necessity of a European education!

From then on however the subject matter for the conferences being organised by the Bureau, usually (because of the money!) in cooperation with other institutions in the different countries, varied widely, and Folkhighschools as venue for the meeting, gradually alternated with other centres. So e.g. in Marly-le-Roi (1955) "The cultural and social needs of a big city" was topic for discussion; "Automation and nuclear energy and its implications for adult education" in 1956 was discussed in Bergen; in Visingö (Sweden) the Bureau could introduce itself in a conference on "Adult education and international problems" (1956). And in that same year the European Coal and Steel Community hosted a conference of the Bureau in Luxembourg in which (already then!) the role of adult education in relation to professional training and the needs of young industrial workers were the main areas of interest. A fourth conference on Rural Reconstruction took place at Marly-le-Roi, and yet another one on "Residential adult education in a changing world" at the Heimvolkhochschule Fürsteneck in Germany. It is hardly believable that they all could be held in one and the same year and attract wide interest. Evidently "Europe" was no longer going to be a matter of "whether or not" but rather of "how and what".

The important position of European residential adult education was still more clearly put forward in its confrontation with American colleagues which - after a first meeting in Bryn Mawr (PA) in 1955 - took place at the Bergen Folkhighschool in 1957. According to the Grundtvigian idea, in this dialogue with their American counterparts European residential adult educators became more aware of their own -common- identity. This undoubtedly helped to strengthen their will to cooperate more intensively as was proved in the next year when a follow-up meeting took place again at Bergen in which the organisation of study-tours and exchanges between Folkhighschools was worked out.

It is evident that within the Bureau's sphere of activities residential adult education still played a dominant role. In the conference in Aasa (Sweden) in 1958 ("How can Folkhighschools be a guide in the problems of modern times") some doubt however was voiced: one of the discussions centered around the question of advantages and disadvantages of Folkhighschools!

Yet, for some years residential adult education remained still one of the more important subjects for conferences organised by the Bureau, and in particular in those together with its American partners: '59 in Tiengen (Germany); '60 in Saugeen (Canada) at the occasion of the UNESCO conference in Montreal; '62 in Rendsburg (Germany). And in 1963 a conference in Loughborough, organised together with the Residential Colleges Committee, concentrating on the problems confronting adult education in highly urbanised societies and countries in rapid state of development, for the first time saw participants from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the USSR and Yugoslavia!

C.

But after those years conferences and meetings more and more focused on non-residential adult education - the first one being held in Haus Rief (Austria) in cooperation with the Verband Österreichischer Volkshochschulen in 1964. In the following years this subject matter in its different aspects was treated in conferences in Hannover, Moor Park College and Helsingör. Other, more specific issues were subsequently discussed in a variety of locations. In '65 e.g. the Council of Europe hosted a conference on "Status recruitment and professional training of adult educators" and in '67 one in which the changing context of work and leisure was on the agenda. The subject of "Adult education and contemporary industrial training" was discussed in Brussels under the auspices of the European Communities.

This development clearly shows that the scope of subjectmatter covered by the activities of the Bureau had been widened and the venues for its conferences were no longer found in Folkhighschools and the like. It evidently has been difficult to pursue a consistent policy with these conferences, probably due to the fact that one had to depend financially on constantly changing partners with their own priorities and wishes.

But in 1973 residential adult education once more turns up - and this time as a hot issue! In the European Parliament in 1972 a report had been discussed requesting that residential courses be set up for young people not having had the opportunity of secondary or university education. For that purpose a European Folkhighschoolwork should be established in Luxembourg.

The Agency for European Folkhighschoolwork and the Bureau tabled this report as the main item in a

conference on residential adult education held in Dillington House (UK). A resolution was handed over to the Parliament and subsequent lobbying by the Bureau eventually led in 1982 to the acceptance by the Commission of a specific budget-line (643) to promote cooperation between Folkhighschools and residential colleges in order to offer European courses in subjects considered to be of importance for European cooperation.

D.

Successful as this may seem - and in fact was for the many Folkhighschools and colleges that until 1992 profited under this scheme from financial support - for the Bureau it meant a sort of Pyrrhus victory.

Confronted with the financially and bureaucratically powerful European Commission service it lost its grip on Folkhighschools and colleges individually seeking their own way in the Brussels bush. It did not succeed in bringing together its residential member organisations to develop with them a common policy towards this anyway promising European perspective.

The "field" itself meanwhile had tried to attain some form of self-organisation when in 1974 (One Year after "Dillington") on the initiative of the Dutch Agency for European Folkhighschoolwork representatives of Folkhighschools and residential colleges from all the countries where these existed, met in the Bergen Folkhighschool and decided to create the "Network of Residential Colleges for Adult Education throughout Europe"; its "Central Point" should lie with the Agency in Bergen. The Network meant to enable partners to further the educational exchanges of groups as well as study-courses cooperating with each other, avoiding any institutionalisation or formal structure. Several times the Network did seek authorization under the Bureau - the last time in 1978, when a conference of the Network held in Kungälv (Sw.) recommended a.o. "that the Bureau be asked to revive its section "Residential Adult Education" and thus be given possibilities to be more active in the field". Again - unfortunately - in vain.

It seemed as if the Bureau, having grown in membership and diversity was not as much interested in residential adult education as it had been in the past, and, notwithstanding efforts to that effect made by members of the Steering Committee, could not bring itself to paying adequate attention to this specific type of adult education that certainly in the

perspective of European cooperation could offer such an important contribution.

Would perhaps in the background a deeply rooted fear for "Europe" in some countries play a role? The present problems of European cooperation would – again – find their reflection in the history of the Bureau! Anyway, having played a dominant role in the first years of the Bureau Folkhighschoolwork and residential adult education today have – unjustifiedly so – fallen into negligence.