

My conscientious objection to army service in 1973 in Switzerland

Ueli Wildberger - Switzerland

Born just after WWII in July 1945, the atrocities of the Nazi-Regime in Germany and World War II were still omnipresent in my early years, growing up in a modest family of schoolteacher in a remote village only 10 km from the German border near Schaffhausen! Since then the horrors of war and holocaust were very vivid in my memory. At the same time I grew up sharing the overwhelming conviction of Swiss people, that our strong militia defense and army had saved our nation from being invaded and destroyed in WWII. So despite my repugnance to take arms and to serve in the army I absolved my recruitment service of 4 months and 5 subsequent yearly repetition courses of 2 weeks due to the strong pressure of my family and friends.

Meanwhile, my studies of theology confronted me with the nonviolent message, life and death of Jesus and his call to love our enemies and overcome evil with good. Luckily I got a stipendium to continue my studies in Berlin exactly at the time, when in 1968 the famous and intensive worldwide student revolts erupted. Endless critical discussions, massive violent demonstrations marked me for life. Positively because I realized that global misery and wars have their roots often in social injustices and exploitation. Negatively because I became strongly convinced that revolutionary violence is more damaging than helping our cause.

Already in Berlin and later back in Zurich, I started to look out for alternatives. I came in touch with the Swiss branch of IFOR, and helped to organize a conference <church and peace> with fellow students from different theological universities in Switzerland. A lecture in Zurich of the well known German IFOR-member Heinz Kloppenburg convinced me further.

In 1971 Swiss FOR president Willi Kobe asked me if I would be interested in taking part in a new <European Working Group>(EWG) of young IFOR-activists from different European countries. When I met them in Holland I was enthusiastic to finally join a small group of

maybe 15 youngsters who wanted to promote nonviolent revolution through Europe! That's what I had always looked for! Our group subsequently met every 3 months somewhere in Paris, Londonderry, Copenhagen, Moneglia/I etc – often by hitchhiking – in order to plan each year a nonviolent campaign, e.g. in 1973 a March London-Paris protesting against French Nuclear tests in the Sahara, in 1974 a European wide caravan for the liberation of Namibia etc. At one of these meetings Jean Goss showed up, and asked at one point: «Are there still people, who claim themselves nonviolent and didn't refuse army service?? This shaming question hit my conscience: How could I advocate nonviolence and still carry a gun? But on the other hand: What would have happened to my Swiss country in WWII without a strong military defense? Are there nonviolent alternatives even against brutal invasions?

I started to look out for historical examples: Gandhi, the refusal of Norwegian teachers under Nazi occupation, the heroic rescue of thousands of Jewish refugees from deportation by the village of Le-Chambon-sur-Lignon and its IFOR-pastors André & Magda Trocmé etc. I discovered, that if we are really ready to offer our lives, we are invincible, and if large movements join together to disobey criminal orders they even can overcome massive and cruel oppression and violence.

Finally, in 1973 I decided to become a conscientious objector and refuse to serve any longer in the Swiss army. By this time the possibility of civil service didn't exist in Switzerland. The night before I was called in to the annual 2-weeks army course I duplicated 200 copies of my «Declaration why I refuse my military service» with my vision of nonviolent resistance. Without uniform and gun I distributed my leaflets to my comrades on the way to our army location. There I was immediately separated and interrogated various times by my commander and by a military inspector and then released for the later trial by a military court. Meanwhile, a lawyer and friend of mine was willing to defend me. Early 1974 I had to appear before the court far away in Küsnacht am Rigi. We had mobilized 200 of our supporters to attend the trial, but the courtroom was too small. The military judges examined me: Wouldn't you defend her, if your girlfriend was attacked by a crazy man in the woods? - Normally I don't carry a gun with me....». And just after the 7-day-war in Israel:» As Israeli wouldn't you defend your country? - If all the 7000 killed soldiers would have risked their lives interposing themselves unarmed as a buffer between the two armies, or even better: If they had prepared themselves to go to the enemy's countries and win them over as friends, I think fewer people would have lost their lives, but won more peace!» After the pleadings of the prosecutor and my defense the judges sentenced me guilty, but accorded severe religious and ethical reasons and a deep conflict of consciousness: 4 month prison.

From oct1st – end of Dec. 1974 I was jailed in Winterthur with normally 3 – 8 other conscientious objectors. After the 1st two weeks we were usually employed during working days in the nearby hospital as auxiliary nurses. Both experiences, in the prison and in the hospital were unique experiences for me! And it was not the end...

In Switzerland militia army meant in these times that every soldier was incorporated in the army between his 20 and 50 age, and had every 2-3 years to absolve military repetition courses (10 times). As I was excluded from the army service I had now to pay each year a compensation tax, which I also refused. So each year the tax was seized by the police in my home, and up to eight times I was sentenced to short prison terms again, starting with 5 days and finishing with 14 days because of lack of insight. These 8 prison terms were short and easy, I took them as retreats...

Of course my conscientious objection marked my further life in many ways: Peace work and nonviolent engagement became my main focus: Many years I served as Swiss FOR member and was elected president from 1974 to 1997, then as secretary till 2010. Since 2017 to this day I act as president again - besides my jobs with Christian Peace Movement/CFD and Peace Brigades Int.

I have always been looking for alternatives to violence and war. Therefore, I engaged 10 years later in 1983 in the Committee launching an Initiative for Introduction of a Swiss Service Civil for objectors without examination of conscience, but that included 6 more months of service. During our campaign for the national vote we organized a huge marathon march on feet of about 750 km (= for the then 750 objectors in jail). During 4 weeks we went from village to village across the whole Switzerland, speaking with people on the streets – unforgettable! 1984 we won at least 37% of yes, but lost the majority. Finally, in 1997 Switzerland introduced officially an unarmed Civil Service - exactly along our formula! 2020 absolved 5254 persons totally 1`708`477 days of unarmed services in homes, farms, environmental or social institutions.

Let's go on with our dream of a nonviolent world without war!



Our NV campaign for the initiative and national vote about introduction of a Civil service.

Fotos above left and below were a relay race in autumn 1983 over 150 km (10 km each team) with a fictive ancient message of our Swiss saint Niklaus von der Flüh and his hermitage near Flüeli-Ranft to the Swiss Parliament in Bern exhorting them to introduce a Civil service (myself on the left).

Foto above on the right shows us on the road of our huge marathon of 750 km through Switzerland in Jan/Feb 1984 (I'm again on the left)