

This manuscript was written in the autumn of 2008. It brings some facts - like names of persons and places, and dates - which I have carefully checked up. You'll also find some rather subjective judgments. I am sure you'll easily distinguish between facts and opinions. Have a good time!

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An Outline of the Early History of

EURODIACONIA

EURODIACONIA was founded on 20 February 1992 in Brussels.

How it came about: In my capacity as chairman of the Danish Diaconal Council – an umbrella organization of 15 Danish diaconal organizations - in early September 1991 I received a short letter with a request to attend a meeting in Brussels on 8 and 9 October of that year with a view to, possibly, establishing a 'diaconia-representation' at the Common Market, as it was named at the time. The senders were: dr. **Karl Heinz Neukamm**, president of Diakonisches Werk Deutschlands, Rev. **Bert Boer**, secretary general of the Diaconal Council of the Netherlands Reformed Church, and Rev. **Daniel Lestringant** of the Entraide Protestante Fédération Nationale.

A meeting of the Danish Diaconal Council was already arranged to take place on 17 September 1991 in the town of Århus (sometimes spelled Aarhus), so I brought the letter and, as we arrived at the last item on the agenda, 'any other business', read it aloud. To my astonishment, there was a spontaneous, unanimous response: I must take part; the Common Market were to become a reality as from January 1, and who could tell which consequences this might mean to diaconal activities?

So I attended the meeting. We were 15 persons from Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, Switzerland, and Denmark - I was the only Dane.

A second meeting, likewise for two days, was agreed upon, this time with participation from Italy, Portugal, and England, too. On 19 – 20 February 1992, we painstakingly worked out

a document of seven pages, and as we signed it with our names or initials, EURODIACONIA had come into being.

A Co-ordination Group was at once formed. Members were: journalist and editor **Jean-Jaques Peyronel** from the Waldensian Church, Italy; Professor, Dr. **Walther Specht** from Diakonisches Werk Deutschlands, which at that time was located in Stuttgart; Rev. **Bernard Rodenstein**, who had taken over as president of Entraide Protestante, France; secretary general **Bert Boer** of the Diaconal Council of the Netherlands Reformed Church; and Rev. **Hans Jørgen Torkelund**, the Danish Diaconal Council; I used to say, only half jokingly, that all of us had been democratically elected by president Karl Heinz Neukamm.

Bernard Rodenstein and Karl Heinz Neukamm were two very different personalities. While Bernard Rodenstein by nature was a kind and soft-spoken man with a nice sense of humour, Karl Heinz Neukamm was rather blunt and straightforward. However, they had one characteristic in common: you could always rely on them and trust them; a promise was a promise. Not exactly a matter of course, even in the world of diaconia.

Simultaneously, as from New Year 1992, Diakonisches Werk had established an office of its own in Brussels, situated in the office building of the German Evangelical Church (Evangelische Kirche Deutschlands, EKD) at Boulevard Charlemagne 28, and under the leadership of the jurist Axel Führ. EURODIACONIA now bought 10% of the capacity of this office, but in reality, we got far more. The newborn EURODIACONIA had an annual budget of 40.000 Deutsche Mark, which today would correspond to 20.000 €. The Danish Diaconal Council paid 3.000 DM – which necessitated a drastic increase of its memberships yearly dues and was accepted by everyone without any debate.

This story I have described in detail in the annals of the Danish Deaconess Foundation (Den danske Diakonissestiftelse) 1993/94, p. 13 – 17. If you happen not to read Danish, find a teacher right now, and get going – you'll enjoy yourself.

Annual General Meetings (AGMs), conferences, and persons.

The first Annual General Meeting of EURODIACONIA took place on 16 - 18 March 1993 at the Danish Deaconess Foundation, Copenhagen.

In May 1993, EURODIACONIA arranged its **first conference**, in the town of **Colmar, in Alsace**. The theme was "**Urban structures and social problems: interaction between public**

services and private initiatives". Seventy persons attended, from Denmark secretary general, Rev. Jens Christian Nielsen from the Association of Parish Homes (Samvirkende Menighedsplejer), who was vice-chairman of the Danish Diaconal Council, and I. English, French and German were the official languages, with simultaneous translation.

The AGM of 1994 took place in March at Driebergen, near Utrecht, home of the diaconal centre of the Netherlands Reformed Church.

On 23 – 25 March 1995, the AGM was held in Rome at the theological faculty of the Waldensian Church.

It was a treat to listen, as **Paolo Ricca**, a most able professor of church history, read a paper on the titles of Jesus. He pointed out that up through the centuries, the Church – any Church – has spoken and preached about Jesus as "the Son of God", "the Lord", "the King", "the Saviour" and "Christ" (although 'Christ' to day is commonly understood as a name, in fact it is a title, 'Christ' being the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew 'Messiah', meaning 'the One Anointed by God'). What is wrong with this? In itself, nothing. However, one title is conspicuously missing. According to John's Gospel, chapter 13, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. And on the night of his arrest, when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, he told his disciples "I am among you as *he who serves*" (Luke's Gospel, chapter 22, verse 27). Especially the latter text is fundamental to all diaconia. How come, that in the usage of the Church, Jesus is very rarely proclaimed as "the Servant"?

The European Commission calls for new thinking and ideas.

Several Churches and diaconal organizations have a representation in Brussels, trying to catch the attention of the European Commission. In 1995, for once it was the other way round. A Portuguese lady, **Madame Louro**, who was working with the Commission, gained a hearing for the idea of asking Churches for some input. This led to a project called "**Consultation among the Churches and their Organizations in the European Union on Issues of Poverty and Social Exclusion**". The Commission offered to finance the consultation, provided that Churches and organizations, Catholic and non-Catholic, in all of the then 15 Member States were involved. The aim was to provide the Commission with information on

- what was being done by the Churches and their organizations to combat poverty and social exclusion;
- how they viewed the existing policy of the European Union in this field;
- what suggestions, proposals, ideas, and visions they might have.

For the Consultation, four organizations agreed on a close co-operation:

- European Ecumenical Commission for Church and Society, EECCS, headed by secretary general **Keith Jenkins**;
- Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community, COMECE, headed by secretary general **Noël Treanor**;
- CARITAS EUROPA, headed by secretary general **Hermann Icking**;
- EURODIACONIA, headed by secretary general **Axel Führ**.

Those were the four bosses, the **Steering Group**. None of them wanted to be more boss than the others, and it wouldn't have worked, either. A **coordinator** was needed. I was fascinated by the project, applied for this one-year job, and got it. The Danish Deaconess Foundation agreed to a leave of absence. I moved to Brussels. On 15 February 1996, I started working in the office of EURODIACONIA on behalf of four organizations.

It took one month to organize a **Working Group** of 26 persons. They came from all Member States, except that, in spite of several attempts, we never really succeeded in drawing the Greek Orthodox Church into the process. The Working Group met in Brussels with the Steering Group for a session of two days in March 1996 and defined four themes as being central: Social Security and Restructuring of the Welfare-State; Redefining the Concept of Work; Equal Opportunities for All; and Macro-Economic Constraints.

During spring and summer, throughout the Member States **10 regional Workshops** discussed these themes and then submitted a report each. On the basis of the reports, and of more than 100 already existing documents obtained from the Churches and their organizations, the Working Group gathered for a second session in Leuven 18 – 20 October to prepare a draft for a final report.

A Final Meeting took place on 27 – 28 January 1997 at the European Parliament in Brussels, gathering about 90 participants from the Churches and their organizations together with representatives of the EU-institutions and the media. Here, the conclusions of the consultation process were presented and debated.

There was, however, still a lot of paperwork to be done.

The main paper produced, called the "**Final Report**", was delivered, together with many other papers, on 30 April 1997 to the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of Europe, in Strasbourg. The report was officially submitted in English, French and German, whereupon translations into Finnish, Swedish, Italian and Spanish were made in the respective countries.

So, my task as coordinator was completed. Evidently, there must have been one or two persons, who did not find my performance too bad; I was offered permanent employment with EURODIACONIA as assistant to secretary general Axel Führ. This I gladly accepted, and I retired from my work as director of the Danish Deaconess Foundation in Copenhagen. One year in Brussels became four and a half years.

EURODIACONIA was indeed very much involved in the Consultation process. The involvement was well under way, and quite independent of, when a merger took place in the summer of 1996.

At the 1995 AGM in Rome, Madame Louro made a speech. She had winning manners and a forceful personality. Speaking of the diverse cultures of European countries, she said: "People from the Nordic countries – they are the kind of people who will lift up a glass of water and say 'this is a glass of water!' I laughed and laughed and laughed. To this day, I am not sure whether I have fully grasped what she meant – but I still hear her voice and am still laughing.

Well, how would I characterize people from the Nordic countries, including the Danes, including myself? In this way: "Whenever you take part in an international gathering, or are engaged in some international co-operation, make sure you leave your superiority complex at home!"

A merger.

The days of **30 May – 2 June 1996** became an important milestone. Two organizations met in **Diakonie-Zentrum Salzburg**, which is run by the only Lutheran Deaconess House of Austria, situated in Gallneukirchen, near Linz. Here, both of them had an AGM, met for joint deliberations, worked out a set of new, united statutes, and **merged**. They were **EURODIACONIA** and **Europäischer Verband für Diakonie** (European Federation for Diaconia).

Until shortly before, the latter organization was known as 'Internationaler Verband für Innere Mission und Diakonie'. During the Cold War, it played a useful and important part in facilitating contact across the Iron Curtain. Then the Iron Curtain disappeared, and the organization was left without any real identity. They changed their name. As soon as EURODIACONIA was founded, Europäischer Verband attempted to buy us, proposing, in writing, that we become a branch of the Federation, in return for which they offered to pay the costs of our secretariate.

To me, this proposal was more than a little cheeky; it was not my cup of tea. The opinions within EURODIACONIA were divided. Some were members of both organizations; they saw a chance of reducing their membership dues.

This offer was turned down, but the two organization agreed, in writing, to a series of joint meetings, and a number of matters were talked through. I began reconsidering. Not least the French were in favour of a merger - for financial reasons, they said; however, maybe they worried a bit about too strong a German indfluence over EURODIACONIA. As deliberations progressed, I changed my mind.

To EURODIACONIA, the merger meant a completely different structure.

At the foundation in 1992, we created a small, flexible organization: each country was to be represented by one person only, who must be central to the diaconia of his or her native country. Membership was not restricted to countries within the European Union. Also, it was open to Orthodox and Anglican as well as Protestant diaconia.

We immediately learned that England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland are four countries, and if we did not respect that, there would be no member from Britain at all. Nobody objected. Church of England was a member right from the beginning, represented by Rev. **John Bradford** from The Children's Society. Very soon, the Scots arrived, represented by director **Ian D. Baillie**, the Board of Social Responsibility, The Church of Scotland. Whenever we gathered for conferences, Ian D. Baillie was accompanied by Mrs. **Ann Allen**, who was convener of the Board. A few years later, Wales joined the party. It is always a pleasure to work side by side with the British: they love understatements, detest endless and detailed explanations, and when they say "Oh, how interesting", what they mean is "you are boring me stiff".

In May 1996, until the merger, the original EURODIACONIA had members representing Finland, Denmark, The Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, the Czech Republic, Spain, England and Scotland, i. e. thirteen countries. Not bad for an organization founded just four years previously.

The statutes adopted in Salzburg enabled individual diaconal organizations like International Blue Cross and Kaiserswerther Generalkonferenz to become members. To me, this was great fun. In 1995, I had been elected president of the Kaiserswerther Generalkonferenz, so now, I was an employee of EURODIACONIA *and* a delegate entitled to vote at AGMs. Of course, I entrusted Rev. **Reinhold Lanz**, secretary general of the Generalkonferenz, with the voting. Up til then, EURODIACONIA had been headed by a small Co-Ordination Group, or Steering Group. Now, a rather large **board** was formed, and a smaller **management committee**, headed by **a president and two vice-presidents**. Rev. **Sylvia Michel** from Switzerland was elected to be president, while secretary general **Bert Boer**, the Netherlands, and Rev. **Jürgen Gohde**, who had succeeded Karl Heinz Neukamm as president of Diakonisches Werk Deutschlands, were elected to be vice-presidents.

For a time, there now were **two general secretariats** – one in Zürich, run by Secretary General **Paul Haug** and dealing with matters of organization and administration, and one in Brussels, run by Secretary General **Axel Führ** and representing the organization before the European Union and other European organizations.

Of course, it was irrational to have two general secretariats. However, from a human point of view, it made sense. Paul Haug was a most kind man, who had been Secretary General of the "Internationaler Verband für Innere Mission" for years and was approaching the age of retirement – to dismiss him shortly after the merger in Salzburg in 1996 would have been a cruel and unchristian thing to do. After a couple of years, he retired, and the office in Zürich was closed down.

Growth and more growth.

At the merger in Salzburg, the Reformed Church of Hungary joined EURODIACONIA, represented by Rev. **Judit Csoma** from the small town of Berekfürdő in eastern Hungary, near Debrecen. Right away, she was elected to be a member of the Board. Judit Csoma being an extremely kind and intelligent woman, nobody's fool and not one to lose her cool, her election was very valuable to the organization.

I was entrusted with a service at the end of this AGM. All of us gathered in the modern, yellow brickwork church of the Diakonie-Zentrum on Saturday 1 June 1996. For my sermon, I chose the text on the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, the Gospel according to Saint John, chapter 3, verses 1 – 15.

The merger now being a fact - or to be exact: by November 1997 - EURODIACONIA counted members from nineteen countries: the above mentioned plus Hungary, Luxembourg, Poland, Rumania, Slovakia, and Sweden. From some countries, e. g. Hungary, Germany, and Finland, there were several members, so all in all there were 36 member-organizations.

By the time of my retirement, in the summer of the year 2000, at least ten more members and six more countries had joined: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, Wales, and Yugoslavia or rather Serbia. All in all **forty-six member-organizations from twenty-five countries**.

In Salzburg, the official name had become "European Federation for Diaconia – EURODIACONIA". This still is the correct name of the organization; however, it takes up a lot of space and printing ink. I stick to "EURODIACONIA" – no more, no less, just EURODIACONIA.

With regard to recent history, there was a similarity between the European Federation for Diaconia and the **Conference of European Churches, CEC**, based in Geneva. During the Cold War, CEC had been useful for facilitating connections between Churches on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The disappearance of the Curtain left CEC with a question: what to do now? This was the moment when CEC spotted diaconia. **13 – 18 October 1994, there was an "All-European Diaconia Consultation" in Bratislava**, the capital of Slovakia. It was attended by 90 persons, coming from 26 countries. I was the only Dane, taking part by virtue of being a member of the Co-Ordination Group of EURODIACONIA (this was nearly two years before the merger in Salzburg). CEC was fortunate in getting skilled assistance from EURODIACONIA, and the European Federation, and Unit IV of the World Council of Churches – otherwise, this conference would have had little diaconal quality.

However, the days spent in Bratislava were worthwhile and even exiting. The best about international conferences very often are not the lectures, but rather breaks and meals,

sometimes group work, because there you have the opportunity of becoming acquainted with people you haven't met before. For my part, I got to know Mrs. **Margarita Neliubova** from the Department for Foreign Relations at the Moscow Patriarchate. This proved to be a benefit for many years; it was through her that a deaconess from the Danish Deaconess Foundation, **Sister Gunny Petersen**, was introduced to Russian deaconesses in Moscow. Also, Mr. **Andrzej Wójtowicz** from the Polish Ecumenical Council in Warszawa became a good and valuable friend.

Thanks to Margarita Neliubova and Andrzej Wójtowicz, the Department for Foreign Relations at the Moscow Patriarchate and the Polish Ecumenical Council joined EURODIACONIA early on. Likewise, the diaconia of the Evangelical-Augsburgian Church in Poland – a Lutheran Church – was quick to join, represented by director general, Mrs. **Wanda Falk**.

More AGMs and conferences and persons and et cetera.

EURODIACONIA held its 1997 AGM on 3 – 7 October in Berekfürdő, Hungary – the small town near Debrecen, where Judit Czoma was a vicar. The AGM itself was over in about two hours, so why did we need three full days plus days for arrival and departure? Because the AGM was combined with a **conference called "FAMILY – NEIGHBOURHOOD – COMMUNITY, Commitment for Solidarity and Social Justice"**. Nearly 100 persons attended. Among the speakers were **Margarita Neliubova** – it was in October 1997 that the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church decided to become a member of EURODIACONIA - and **Mrs. Margaret Burns**, who was invited as a guest-speaker. This most capable and charming lady was a Catholic from Dublin, with whom I had become acquainted during the "Consultation among the Churches and their Organizations in the European Union on Issues of Poverty and Social Exclusion", which took place in Brussels 1996 –1997.

During the lively and positive debates, in groups and in plenary, it became clear that in many ways, all of us had much to learn. Our church-background varied; the diaconal traditions were very different in different countries; accordingly, the way in which we spoke about diaconia differed; we had to take care not to divide ourselves mentally into countries within and countries outside the European Union; the political division of Europe by the Iron Curtain was a tragedy of far-reaching consequences that could still be felt; the attitudes towards state and

society varied in Northern, Southern, Western and Eastern Europe – they still do – and it did (does!) make a difference whether you came from a majority or a minority church.

In 1998, a combined AGM and conference took place in Brussels on 26 – 29 June under the heading "One Europe in Peace and Social Justice" – a brilliant formulation by secretary general Axel Führt, which should be the motto/slogan/policy statement of EURODIACONIA to this very day – and tomorrow.

This AGM was the occasion when the diaconia of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were unanimously approved as members of EURODIACONIA: Mrs. **Viive Soone** was supervisor of the Diaconia Centre of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, in Tallinn. Mrs. **Iveta Berkolde** headed the Diaconia Centre of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia, in Riga. Rev. **Victor Kiauka** was chairman of the diaconal organization "Vilnius Sandora", in Vilnius – a pious and extraordinarily gentle and polite man, utterly dedicated to diaconia. The admittance of the three Baltic countries was a source of great joy – especially to those of us from the Nordic countries. No Danish government had ever officially recognized Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as member-states of the Soviet Union. To Denmark, they were countries under military occupation for fifty years, and this was exactly how they saw themselves. No Danish ambassador to the Soviet Union ever went to Tallinn or Riga or Vilnius – it being no business of an ambassador to the Soviet Union to pay a visit to non-Soviet States.

Previous to the conference, EURODIACONIA had mailed a rather large questionnaire to all members, including the Baltic ones. Among other questions, they were asked for an appraisal of whether they saw their country as being characterized by 'social justice'. The replies clearly showed that 'social justice' and 'social security' are not of necessity identical. A high degree of social security depends, among other things, on the wealth of the country. This, however, is not the case, when it comes to whether you see your country as marked by 'social justice' or not.

Citizens of countries, which compared to Denmark, for instance, are poor, may very well be of the opinion that their politicians actually are doing their best to distribute the meagre means in a fair way.

For the conference and AGM, we stayed at Couvent des Franciscains on the corner of Avenue des Franciscains and Avenue du Chant d'Oiseau, in the district of Woluwe Saint-Pierre. The

monastery was capable of accommodating and providing meals for all participants, and there was a meeting hall and rooms for group work. The standard was definitely not luxurious, but it was adequate. As we were dealing with topics of social justice and poverty, we were not looking for luxurious surroundings, you see. The price charged by the monastery was extremely low.

The AGM and EURODIACONIA-conference on 26 - 30 May 1999 was a rather special one, as it was combined with the 4th Baltic Sea Conference on Diaconia. It took place at **Mikolaiki, a popular tourist resort in the north east of Poland. ('l' is a Polish letter, which is pronounced in the same way as an English 'w', like in 'we were always wise'.)**

Digression on the "Baltic Sea Conferences on Diaconia".

The idea of organizing conferences on topics of diaconia for all countries bordering on the Baltic Sea originated from the Diakonisches Werk Schleswig-Holstein in Rendsburg. The general purpose was to strengthen ties across the Baltic Sea between Churches and persons, thereby encouraging the re-awakening of diaconal initiative and activity in the Eastern countries, as this had become possible after the downfall of the former, communist regimes. For practical reasons, the substantial support provided for the Baltic States from all of Germany was channelled through the Diakonisches Werk in Rendsburg – or, in some cases, through the Diakonisches Werk in der Pommerischen Evangelischen Kirche in Greifswald, near the German-Polish border.

Director – in German called 'Landespastor' or 'Landespfarrer' - of the Werk in Rendsburg was **Jens-Hinrich Pörksen**. He certainly deserves a lot of credit for this initiative. However, his staff member, Referent für Auslandshilfen **Dieter Christiansen** was the one who for years time and time again travelled all over Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. When in need of information on what was going on in the diaconia of the Baltic States, you called Dieter Christiansen. Landespfarrer of the Werk in Greifswald was Rev. **Roland Springborn** – a man you could trust at any time on any matter.

There is no Norwegian coast on the Baltic Sea, but of course Norway was invited to join the party, belonging to the family of Nordic countries as it does. For once, it did not take the Norwegians decades, not even years, to make up their minds; they went along right away. The Norwegians are very good at organizing diaconia, and over the years, they engaged themselves

most actively in several Estonian and Latvian projects. Maybe they also helped in Lithuania – I just don't know.

The **1st Baltic Sea Conference on Diaconia** took place in Rendsburg as early as 1990. At that time, the very existence of the Danish Diaconal Council was unknown to Rev. Jens-Hinrich Pörksen, so I did not attend. However, in 1992 we met each other at a conference of Kaiserswerther Generalkonferenz in Speyer, and Rev. Pörksen was quick to inform me on what was going on.

The **2nd Baltic Sea Conference on Diaconia** was held on 25 September – 1 October 1992 in Tallinn, being prepared by the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church in collaboration with Diakonisches Werk Rendsburg.

It proved to be an overwhelming and unforgettable experience. The name of 'Tallinn' in Estonian means 'the Danish town' or 'the town of the Danes'. Why? Because of what happened on 15 June 1219. The conference took place in quite a nice hotel – except that for lack of fuel oil, there was hardly any heating, and the Estonians were anxious about food provisions for the approaching winter.

Archbishop Kuno Pajula summed up the legacy of the Soviet empire: "During the Soviet occupation, Estonians learned to avoid any initiative, avoid any responsibility, never to trust anyone, exemplified by a new proverb: *Whoever does not steal from the State, is filled with hatred for his family*".

Several Danes attended the conference, and we agreed to offer to host the next one.

The **3rd Baltic Sea Conference on Diaconia** took place on 23 – 27 September 1995 at a conference-centre in the town of Slagelse, 90 km west of Copenhagen. It was prepared and organized jointly by the Danish Diaconal Council and DanChurchAid.

There were some "firsts" about this conference, both in numbers and in its ecumenical character:

The Eastern countries were represented by more persons than earlier: Estonia 5, Latvia 6, Lithuania 6, Poland 5, Russia 10 – a total of 32. From the Western and Northern countries, a similar number attended.

For the first time, Russia was represented, and this with no less than ten persons: eight from St. Petersburg and two from Kaliningrad.

For the first time, there were participants from the Russian Orthodox Church and from the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania – the latter being young women from the 'A. C. Patria Youth Social Service Organization' in Kaunas; I was amazed by their high level of education and their fluent English.

The themes were summed up under this heading: **MEETING PEOPLE OF TODAY: Diaconia – seeing God's presence in your neighbourhood.**

Two theologians from the Danish universities read very solid papers on the subject of diaconia. There were other lectures of a more personal kind, e.g. one by Rev. Victor Kiauka: "My work – how and why". Rev. **Ane Hjerrild** from the Church of Denmark Council on Inter-Church Relations gave a masterly introduction to the Danish Evangelical-Lutheran Church – always a complicated subject to foreigners.

The main emphasis, however, was to focus on the practical side of diaconia, especially by introducing the participants to local projects that in fact work without having required an investment of much money. Initiative and perseverance of individuals, groups, and parish communities are what really counts in many areas of diaconal work. This was demonstrated by an all-day excursion to the Copenhagen area, with stops in two suburbs and a choice to see one or two of a number of diaconal activities in distinctly working-class districts of the city.

On the final morning, the future was discussed. There was a unanimous wish for another conference, and an offer from the Polish delegates to host this coming 4th Baltic Sea Conference on Diaconia was accepted with applause.

After the conference had come to an official close, nearly all of the Eastern participants took advantage of an offer to spend some days as guests in the homes of Danish vicars. All things considered, this event was rather comprehensive; it would never have become a reality, were it not for a generous financial support provided by the Danish government through its 'Fund for Democracy'.

End of digression

Now, I take up again the combined EURODIACONIA- and 4th Baltic Sea Conference on Diaconia. Among the Polish delegates to the 1995-conference in Slagelse was Mrs. Wanda

Falk, so this was when we became acquainted with each other. The organizational preparations for the 1999-conference at Mikołajki were taken care of by the two of us through phone and fax, Wanda Falk working in Warszawa, and I in Brussels. On Wednesday 26 May 1999, nearly all delegates met in the capital of Poland and by bus went on to Mikołajki; we had supper, and the conference was on.

Rev. **Piotr Gaś** from Szczecin had attended the 1995 conference in Denmark. Now, in Mikołajki, he was among the speakers. Piotr Gaś led us in two carefully prepared and thoughtful Bible studies, one on *Luke 9,23-25, where Jesus says "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me"* – truly a command by our Lord Jesus Christ, which is not exactly consistent with the self-centred spirit of our times; and one on *the parable of the good Samaritan, Luke 10,25-37*.

It was an honour that a very highly placed German government official had agreed to come all the way from Bonn to Mikołajki: permanent secretary (Staatssekretär) dr. **Werner Tegtmeier**. He read a paper on '*Social Market Economy in Europe – now and in the future*'. It was hard to imagine a better qualified speaker on this subject. Dr. Tegtmeier stayed with us for a couple of days; he was a most likeable man, who obviously enjoyed finding himself with a motley crowd of highly committed Christians from many and ever so different countries.

The topic of a speech by Mrs. **Iveta Berkolde** from Riga was '*Relationship between the Church, its Message, and Diaconia*'. She told of the challenges and difficulties of building up organized diaconia, starting from scratch after the end of Soviet occupation. Yet, in one way the conditions were easier in Latvia, I think, than in Estonia and Lithuania: in Soviet times, congregations were allowed to gather for a service in church, while everything else was forbidden: no Sunday schools, no diaconia, no nothing. So at least one generation of pastors had got used to this; to them, diaconia was completely unknown. This even applied to the bishops in Estonia and Lithuania, but not to the Archbishop in Riga; he and the Church leadership fully accepted diaconia; they took the initiative in organizing the work and pushed for it with understanding and support.

Landespfarrer **Roland Springborn** from Greifswald gave a speech on '*The Relations of Diaconia with the Church and its Preaching*'. His principal and fundamental theological deliberations were based on the experience of his Church in the northern part of the former 'German Democratic Republic', where the atheistic propaganda of the regime had left the

Church with a membership of only 20-25% of the population. Still, sentences like 'Church is Diaconia, and Diaconia is Church', 'Diaconia is Bible in hands', and 'Diaconia and Church are like the two sides of a coin' hold good in all countries.

Rev. **Kimmo Saares** was head of EU-Office of the Church Resources Agency in Helsinki. Eloquent and movingly, he told of what happened in Finland following the collapse of the Soviet Union:

"In the beginning of this decade, Finland was hit by the worst economical depression in almost 60 years. Finland – which was called the Japan of Europe, at least by its inhabitants – was suddenly in the spin. This may sound ironic, because I'm talking about one of the richest countries of Europe. I know that what happened in Finland is like children's play compared to the situation of many central and eastern European countries.

But from the Finnish perspective, the recession caused big changes. Our Scandinavian model of welfare started to break down. The level of unemployment rocketed, especially among youth; disparity in income has risen, and we have become aware of the new face of inequality. A large number of middle-class people lost their work, then their apartment, and eventually their dignity. Social problems started to pile up, and TV news started to screen growing 'bread-queues' at the door of the Salvation Army: we faced a poverty problem, something we thought belonged to the past".

Kimmo Saares went on to tell of the many reactions by churches and diaconal organizations. Some initiatives were traditional, many innovative. He gave a balanced account of the various points of view taken by traditionalists and pragmatists: "If we want to use the words of preachers, we should talk about 'angel-service' – diaconia being a life style, where you are messengers of God's love. I have my own background in more down-to-earth surroundings. For me, it is enough to say that in diaconia, we are sisters and brothers for our fellow men in the struggle for life".

While he was speaking, suddenly a strange noise was heard from Kimmo's pocket. Someone was calling on his mobile phone. He looked at me, his face painted with embarrassment and a little confusion. I smiled at him and raised my index finger in a good-natured reproach. Out of the corner of my eyes, I felt Dr. Werner Tegtmeier watching us. Kimmo switched off his phone. Isn't it funny and strange, how five seconds may stay forever in your memory?

Oh yes, with all my heart I should have liked to see Kimmo Saares elected to be president of EURODIACONIA. Certainly, he was capable, and you could trust him. Do Kimmo and I always agree? Maybe we do. Maybe we don't. It isn't crucial. His Christian faith is real, he is bright, he knows how to compromise, and he likes joking. What more can one ask?

The last evening of the conference was sunny, no wind, very pleasant weather. Our Polish hosts had prepared an outdoor grill party. Polish sausages, kielbasa, are delicious, Polish beer, piwo, is strong, Polish vodka is the best in the world. We were a company of friends. What a beautiful party!

The Baltic Sea Conferences on Diaconia were never meant to live forever. They were most helpful in a period of transition. As far as I know, the Mikołajki conference of 1999 was the last one of its kind – certainly not the last EURODIACONIA-conference.

There is a lady in Novi Sad and she is called Mrs. Anna Bu.

A letter with an application for membership of EURODIACONIA arrived. It bore the signature of Mrs. Anna Bu on behalf of the 'Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization' in Novi Sad, in the then Yugoslavia. When was this? It certainly was relatively shortly after the merger in Salzburg in 1996, i.e. during the transitional period when there were two general secretariats, one in Zürich and one in Brussels. So, this was a matter, which should be attended to by secretary general Paul Haug. Being a deeply honest and conscientious man, Paul Haug never did anything without green light from the president of EURODIACONIA. The application must have arrived either in the last months of 1997 or very early in 1998; on 6 and 7 February 1998, the management committee gathered for a meeting in Birmingham, hosted by Rev. John Bradford; for this meeting, Mrs. Bu's letter was enclosed with the agenda. However, its consideration was postponed.

Why? I have no idea, except that the then president never cared much for small member-organizations; they were not important.

So, for a year or so, nothing happened. And Paul Haug retired. The office in Zürich was closed down. Membership applications now were my field. I was ashamed of the way the EHO had been ignored. Without telling anybody, I wrote a letter for Mrs. Anna Bu, suggesting that

we start all over again: would she please send a new application, cutting out in cardboard the fields of work of the EHO and the reasons for their wanting to join EURODIACONIA.

Mrs. Anna Bu had no hard feelings. Soon, a comprehensive reply arrived. I enclosed it with the agenda for the next meeting; everything went smoothly; membership was approved.

This turned out to be the beginnings of a friendship by correspondence – and it hasn't ended; at least we exchange greetings for Christmas. Unfortunately, I have never had the privilege of meeting Mrs. Anna Bu and shake hands.

Once, I posted a manuscript for a speech in March 2001 at an Eastern Regional Conference of Kaiserswerther Verband in the House of the Deaconess Community in Berlin – Teltow: "Tasks and Aims of Kaiserswerther Generalkonferenz in the European Context".

In her reply, Mrs. Anna Bu asked for more. She was preparing a book – the first book on diaconia to be published in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia for sixty years. The reason for the word 'humanitarian' in the name of the EHO is, that when this organization was founded in 1996, the word 'diaconia' was unacceptable to the authorities, while 'humanitarian' was OK.

In July 2001, I sent six more manuscripts, most of them in German as well as English – Mrs. Anna Bu being fluent in both. I added: "You are not obliged to use any of this material at all! I know I am sending too much – but you know your country, I don't; and you know exactly for which purpose you want to produce a handbook on Diaconia, while I can only guess. If you prefer to bring just excerpts from any manuscript, please, feel free to do so".

In September 2002, a copy of the book arrived: "DIJAKONIJA – Zbirka tekstova. Ekumenska Humanitarna Organizacija, Novi Sad, 2002".

Mrs. Anna Bu had made use of material from three of my manuscripts – three! I felt – and feel – pleased and proud and humble and honoured. This book I count one of my greatest treasures. It is a deep satisfaction when you feel that some of your work has not been in vain, but is actually found useful – at that in a country to which you have never been, with a language of which you don't understand a word.

What might it be that appealed to Mrs. Anna Bu in her pioneering work? I can only guess. Maybe this sample is a key:

"Countless times, and for years, when the issue was about supporting the rebuilding of Diaconia in former communist countries, I was listening to this: "We must deliberately aim for building *structures* of a persistent and sustainable kind. Small, scattered projects, like here a hospital, there an old-age home, there a nursery, are of no interest".

In the beginning, I agreed. It did sound logical. Then for a while, I kept silent. Today, I say no. I believe in small, very concrete steps. When, and where, was a sustainable Diaconia ever built from above and then downward? I know of no instance. What we are talking of is growth; growing takes time and happens from the bottom. This is how it was everywhere; it is going to stay that way.

Frequently, the straight road is not the fastest one; it only appears to be. Come to Copenhagen and let us board an aeroplane; we want to go to New York. So, we'll be flying westwards, or a little southwestwardly. Not so. We'll be going *northwestwardly*, and we shall enjoy a view of Scotland and the southern tip of Greenland – that is the shortest and fastest route.

Rules are part of life. Why? To make exceptions a possibility. Without rules, there can be no exceptions. And without exceptions, no life.

Rightly understood, any genuine Diaconia is carefree. "Let not your left hand know what your right hand is doing". Carefree, the sower sows everywhere, by the way side, on stony ground, among thorns, on good ground, and he "sleeps, and rises, night and day; and the seed springs and grows up, - *he does not know how*. For the earth brings forth fruit of herself".

This pragmatic way of thinking is, I presume, why I speak more about tasks than aims. Grand and shiny aims make me nervous. Whenever they are taken seriously, there will be an exercise in futility."

P O S T S C R I P T

For twenty-seven years I was active in various kinds of diaconal work, in Denmark and other European countries. I visited deaconess sisterhoods in Korea, India, and Brazil. On a study tour of the U.S.A., I was impressed by diaconal activities in many states. And practically every year,

there were international meetings and conferences. I met a lot of people, and while listening, observing and learning, I became familiar with a variety of points of view.

So, my dear Hans Jørgen: what do you yourself stand for? What are *your* opinions and convictions? Oh, their name is legion. In order to keep within reasonable bounds, I'll restrict myself to two.

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Near the end of the All-European Diaconia Consultation in 1994 in Bratislava, something to my mind very interesting happened. An Orthodox priest from Slovakia went to the microphone and said something, which unfortunately did not get the attention it deserved – because the debate on a 'Bratislava Declaration' was over, and many participants were obviously preparing to leave. Yet I think it was no accident that when the official minutes of the conference arrived, his words were nowhere to be found.

However, I took notes on the spot, and what he said was this: "I am somewhat sceptical about us using too big words. During the many years of Communist rule in my country, I noticed again and again that the vocabulary of papers coming from Church-organizations based in Geneva was very much similar to the vocabulary used by the Communist rulers in Moscow: peace, friendship, justice, disarmament, et cetera".

Those words have stayed in my mind ever since.

The international Christian organizations based in Geneva are the *World Council of Churches*, WCC, the *Lutheran World Federation*, LWF, and the *Conference of European Churches*, CEC. Each one has its *raison d'être*, as long as they stick to it: matters of theology and faith, facilitating contacts, dialogue, and cooperation among Churches. However, and unfortunately, the Geneva organizations love to behave like having some divine calling to pass on their wonderful advice to democratically elected politicians. The more free from responsibility, the cheaper your advice. During the Cold War, time and again they raised their voice. No wonder that quite a number of Christians living under repression behind the Iron Curtain felt forsaken by Geneva. Thank God, this wonderful advice never influenced world politics the least bit – otherwise, the Berlin Wall, the Iron Curtain, and the Soviet Gulag would still be with us. The Slovakian priest was right. In world politics, the Geneva organizations were and remain amateurs. Cobbler, stick to your last.

At the 1997 AGM in the Hungarian town of Berekfürdő, a first draft of a Charter on Diaconia was debated. Later, the paper was mailed to all members of EURODIACONIA. Two reactions have stayed with me.

The first one came in a kind letter from a friend highly placed in a Swiss organization. He said, in a Diaconia Charter we should not put so much emphasis on the love of God – rather, the word 'justice' ought to occupy a prominent place.

I think, to a large extent I understood what he meant. People in need should not be put in a position of begging for their rights. That is not just. Justice in the Christian sense has to do with restoring people's self-respect. I totally agree.

A Dutch member of EURODIACONIA read the draft and spontaneously said: "I thought you were going to write something new! Is writing about the love of God something new in a context of Diaconia?"

Yes. It is. The love of God is *always* new. The word 'gospel' (= euangelion) means 'good news'; and these good news are about the love of God, personified and incarnated in His Son, Jesus Christ.

Experience has taught me that many, many faithful workers in diaconal activities keep coming back to the basic question: what is the ultimate foundation, inspiration, and motivation of Diaconia?

It is the love of God. Not *our* love, but *His* love. Our love is but an answer, a response. "We love, because he first loved us" (1. John 4,19).

This is what any pastor must preach to his congregation Sunday after Sunday. It is *always* news – that God loves us. It is the *only* starting point for a Christian life and, consequently, for Diaconia of any kind. It does not come naturally to any grownup that she or he is loved by God. Fear – being afraid of God – comes naturally. That is what the word 'sin' means. Fear may very well be a motivation for doing one's utmost, even in diaconal work, in order to prove oneself – a road straight to burnout. The love of God roots out fear.

So, the love of God is the only starting point. But not the starting point only. It is the fundament for walking in faith day by day for life, until and through death, on to resurrection and eternal life.

Thursday, 13 November 2008. Ulstrup near Kalundborg, Denmark.

Hans Jørgen Torkelund
