

CHAPTER 17: WE GO EAST

With the start of the foundation Continental Sound in 1969/1970 you will find in the official papers that the target was all of EUROPE. Quite a prophetic vision when the beginning was on more regional scale. So in 1969, 1970 and 1971 all became well organised in the Netherlands. In 1972 and 1973 in Western Europe the tours were well organised. In 1974 it was time for the first Continental group to go into Eastern Europe: Poland. Churches and cathedrals were too small, there was even one example where a large church with 3000 seats got 10.000 visitors. It was great luck that on both sides of that church besides the platform were doors, so that people could move out as for sure some may have been terribly hurt the people at the back so much wanted to press forward.....In Poland the organisers were catholic, so these nice American protestants Conti's had to adapt. A moment of wisdom; When the group arrived in one of those quite dark churches you always will see a few old ladies dressed in black praying. The group was early and had to wait. One of the group members saw one of the ladies lighting a candle and this Conti thought this to be nice idea. So this Conti went up and lit a candle and stood in a moment of thought at this site. The old ladies saw that and suddenly they accepted these strangers in their holy shrine, this church as they had seen that that stranger had lit a candle, so he could not be a barbarian.....word went through the city, that this group of strangers going to do a concert were okay....as result a huge crowd showed up and enjoyed the coming of these young Americans. Since 1974 at least one group has visited Poland every year. Another nation where we gained access was Hungary. Here the cardinal was our 'lord protector' till he died. The communists demanded immediately all the concerts to be cancelled. With great speed Conti's had to go 'underground' and returned within the Reformed churches of Hungary, several pastors have risked their neck to protect Continentals. We even succeeded in 1986 to get an American Conti-director established in Budapest as a student. With a lot of help from Leen and the European-office in Rotterdam slowly a Hungarian group could be formed and was ready to go to do concerts across Hungary. Already that was a huge miracle as it all happened in spite of all efforts of the communists to stop such a thing. Finally how do you get equipment to this group? Well, by chance you have a group performing in Vienna.... and by chance this group wants to see Budapest, but not to perform..... and by chance the group has along all the legal papers so they can take along equipment, so that the borderguards let you pass into their communistic paradise..... and by chance when the group arrived in Budapest there were some friends welcoming them..... and by chance the group found in their autobus a reserve set of equipment, just in case the first set broke down, as it is always good to have spare parts with you..... and as it is good to show solidarity and compassion, not by chance the group left the spare-system behind in Budapest and went back to Vienna after a day of sightseeing in Budapest, and the border-guards let them pass, as the boxes with equipment were matching with the papers..... After the political change the underground-office got official in Miskolc, and Hungarian Continentals and Hungarian CD's/Cassettes have happened since. But how do you get in more difficult nations as Romania, Czechoslovakia and the DDR (East-Germany).....??? Well Romania had for a while a special status with America and an American senator was of great help in establishing contact, so for a few years Conti's could get into Romania until 1989. Leen and the American colleague from Budapest visited one of the key-contacts in Oradea, Romania..... they were stripped at the border..... a car of the Securita was following them from the border till where they had to be.....the house was surrounded by 4 cars of the secret-police with special microphones and the telephon was hidden under pillows, as

this was used by the Securitate to spy. The house was bugged so the radio was turned up loud....now this pastor could tell us, that several pastors were threatened not to accept Continentals anymore....one pastor had on purpose been caught in a terrible accident; the hospital had orders to refuse help and the poor man almost died.....so we decided to stop the operations in Romania till situations would improve. Immediately after the change we went back and even opened an office in Cluj to start the Romanian Continentals and Romanian Cassettes/CD's.

Continentals have also been to former Yugoslavia as example on a transit-route from Hungary to Italy. And on such a transit you visited by chance a church, where by chance a lot of people were present, where was by chance some equipment available and where it was suddenly possible to do a musical greeting and at the moment the (secret) police was arriving, you were already on your way to another musical greeting. Such musical greetings have been done in Csechoslovakia and the DDR. For some time Continentals parked their autobus near Checkpoint Charlie in West-Berlin, went as tourists into East-Berlin, where a guide picked us up and brought the group to a church, full of people waiting and having some equipment and instruments....after the concert the group walked back to West-Berlin. All went well until one day a group member made the stupid mistake to take a flute along into East-Berlin.....nobody ended in prison, but we got near. And no concert could be done that day.

A famous story is how a large-scale concert was prepared in a big church in South-west DDR, not far from the border. The communists had given permission to a choir from Csechoslovakia to perform, as this choir came from their communist kameradski fellow-nation. So that should be okay. So this choir arrived in that church and set up all needed equipment...and started their concert.... By chance a full group of Continentals drove in as 'tourists' to see the great site....where they enjoyed their fellow-singers, who offered their mikes and stages and as it is so inpolite to refuse such a request you want to create bridges of understanding, so you must give your musical 'greeting'. And so the public enjoyed almost a full Conti-concert. After an hour the Conti-tourists left town, where at that moment the police came to check the church as something forbidden seemed to be happen, but this Csechoslovak choir could show all the right papers, yes, it was running late, but see how the public was enjoying it and nobody wanted to disturb thousands of people in this church???

These 'meetings' were well planned by personal visits as via the Christian Artists networks contact got established with leaders of churches, youth, arts-groups all over Europe. And via those personal meetings all was coordinated. Several meetings were held for quite a while in East-Berlin and here delegates from Csechoslovak, DDR, etc were met at a secret spot.

CA has been as well very important to provide information, training, new ways of ministry to delegates from churches and church-movements from all over Eastern Europe. Such preparations took a long time. First the careful negotiations who should be invited.....the formal invitation done by a denomination in the Netherlands to the denomination in such a country.....the request for a permit to leave.....working with Foreign Affairs and Justice for a temporary visa to get into the Netherlands....the guarantee that everybody would travel back, as nobody could use this travel to CA to stay here...that would have endangered the safety of everybody else coming from the East. So we had normally 40 delegates from Easter-European nations each year to visit and study at CA. A wealth of information, studies and developments could be passed in this way to churches and youth in the east. As Leen worked as well on the toplevel with the churches in the East, negotiations with the State ,made finally possible the **official** visit of Continentals and later Adrian Snell to the DDR and Csechoslovakia, which is still

today an immense miracle.

So from 1974 until 1991 we have worked 'underground' in most communist nations, where our initiatives have helped churches, youthgroups, arts-groups, democratic initiatives a great deal. The money for all these operations came from donations of individual persons, offerings at concerts, offerings from churches. Thanks to all those contributions this operation for solidarity and hope was possible. After 1991 all activities got official and public. But as the economy is still so bad in most central and eastern European nations still most costs are payed by donations in the West. The total costs till 2004 are far over 1,5 million Euro, thanks to the financial help of many and the time of many this act of solidarity was possible. Today the costs to do all activities in central and eastern Europe costs appr.50.000 Euro per year.