

A STUDY OF VOLUNTEERISM
IN FIVE FOREIGN COUNTRIES

Submitted by:

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Volunteering, as a part of the American way of life from the days of the pioneers until the present, has formally and informally helped to shape this country's destiny. Today, more than ever, the complexity of American society seems to be the perfect background for the continuation of traditional volunteering as well as the ideal setting for spearheading new programs to meet the present needs of an increasingly complex society with varied interest groups. From the Red Cross driver to the pro-abortion advocate, volunteering is visible in every aspect of American life. Americans should feel proud that the spirit of giving and concern for fellow man has created despite a multitude of problems, a country enviable to the rest of the world.

The purpose of this paper is to show, in contrast to the history of American volunteerism, the view of volunteerism in the native countries of several foreign born interviewees: Margit Roelofsen from Murnau, Germany, Irja Ciluffo from Zurich, Switzerland, Reiko Kasamoto from Tokyo, Japan, Diana Paramidani from Barking, England, and Jenny Cheong from Hong Kong. These women are between the ages of thirty and fifty, middle to upper-middle class, and married. The questions asked of them were as follows.

Thinking in a time frame to 1945, answer the following questions:

1. What was the general attitude towards volunteering?

Was it seen as an elitist role? Or, did all segments of

the society participate?

In answering the above, do not forget areas of volunteerism like:

Culture

Social Services

The Arts

Youth Groups

Recreation

Education

Health Care

2. Was social change seen as coming about as the result of the strong influence of one person (eg. Clara Barton, The Red Cross; Margaret Sanger, Planned Parenthood), or group efforts, or both. What part did industrialization play? The government?
3. How did World War II change attitudes towards volunteering and voluntary efforts? Did government become more involved in social legislation? How did people band together in the war effort? What difference did this make in the voluntary sector?
4. Are volunteers and voluntary agencies visible now? Where? Again, do not forget the areas mentioned above. How has the feminist movement affected volunteering? How has the increased number of senior citizens? What are your attitudes towards the voluntary sector in

the United States? Compare this attitude with the one you had in your native country.

Margit Roelofesen, who has resided in the United States for the past thirty years, recalls that the attitude towards volunteering in her small resort town in Upper Bavaria was very negative. Only "old maids" or widows did traditional volunteering, and then only in the hospitals. These women were looked upon in the community as "poor souls" with nothing else to do. The tasks assigned to them were menial. Emptying bed pans and making beds were the norm. Upper class women confined their voluntary efforts to administrative positions in the hospitals. Fund raising efforts were unknown, with the exception of a rare event such as a ball or gala given by and for the aristocracy for the benefit of a worthy cause. There was no parental participation in school programs and church services. Then, as now, everyone was tithed so no fund raising efforts were needed.

The Second World War brought about massive activity in the classic "good works" sense, such as making bandages, visiting hospitalized soldiers, and providing for orphans. After the war, people turned to the task of rebuilding the country, volunteering wherever necessary. However after 1950, the rebuilding done, volunteering reverted to its former low status. People were then, and are now, more

interested in paid positions. Leisure time is spent in recreational activities. Senior Citizens spend their carefree years traveling and enjoying themselves. Volunteering is just not done. Today, organizations such as the Red Cross are still around, but paid staffs do all the work and volunteering usually occurs only at a time of disaster.

Margit's personal view of volunteering in the United States, in contrast to the view held in Germany, is that volunteering does bring a better way of life to the family and the community. She is very active in hospital fund raising, her church council and the P.T.A. Her husband is a volunteer fireman and has been active in Boy Scouts with his son. Margit plans on continuing to be a volunteer to complement her activities as a Special Education Teacher.

Irja Ciluffo, a native Estonian, spent most of her life until twelve years ago in Zurich, Switzerland. She remembers that volunteering was not seen as the same type of effort as it is here in America. Women who were felt to have "nothing better to do ran Church bazaars or were 'friendly visitors'". Switzerland is a most affluent country and there has always been a great emphasis on both men and women being professionals with little interest in volunteering. Since Switzerland is also a neutral country, there has never been any cause to rally around a war effort,

but there has been a tradition of extending financial help in time of a catastrophe. This fund raising is usually organized by the Church. For example, to help the victims of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, the Church organized fund drives. Buttons bearing the Swiss flag were sold with proceeds going to the cause.

Children and the youth of the country are responsible for much of the volunteer work. Beautiful, collector item stamps are sold by the youth to support the "Pro-Juventute", an organization designed to help orphans and to provide scholarships. Christmas cards are also sold door to door by young people with proceeds going to charitable causes.

Lord Baden Powell, the founder of the Boy Scouts, has always been held in high esteem in Switzerland. Both Boy and Girl Scouting is regarded as a very desirable activity. Unlike the American tradition, the leaders of the troops are not parents, but young men and women who have risen through the Scout ranks.

Volunteering in Switzerland today is done on a very individual basis. With almost all the adult population working, time devoted to others is on a very personal level. A teacher might become involved in an individual case of child abuse, (parents still have the right to do what they want with their children here), or a teacher might take a group of troubled youngsters on a picnic. All formal volunteer activity continues to be done on a very organized level.

Irja, as a wife and mother, has chosen to combine the Swiss attitude towards greater professionalism for women and the American attitude of doing significant voluntary work, and among her many voluntary activities is her position as Editor of Shorelines a Junior League newsletter.

Reiko Kasamoto was born in Tokyo, Japan, and has been in the United States for three and a half years. She states that the basic Japanese philosophy towards helping one another has always been on a very individual basis. The Buddhist religion reinforces this philosophy by stating that the individual has the sole responsibility for his own destiny. These beliefs have helped to shape the Japanese attitude towards volunteering. Other influencing factors in Japan are overcrowding, competition for a better way of life, growing materialism, and continuation of the low status of women.

However, there are certain areas where volunteer efforts can be seen. During World War II women made bandages and visited the wounded. After the War, in an effort to become "Americanized", organizations like the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts and the "Y" were formed. Now, as in times past, each town and city is divided into a block of twenty-five to thirty families with an elected voluntary "chief". It is a self-governing group responsible for decision making policies for the block.

The status of women remains low, but women feel they have "hidden power" within the family structure, and on a whole are happy with the existing situation.

Living in America today, Reiko is anxious to learn more about volunteering and is taking a course in The Fundamentals of Volunteerism at Adelphi University. She is active in the homebound programs sponsored by her local library. She hopes to bring her new found knowledge about volunteerism back to Japan, where she plans to return in several years.

Diana Paramidani, a native of Barking, England, a suburb of London came to the United States nineteen years ago. She remembers the voluntary sector as being very much divided by class structure. The lower, working class did its volunteering on a very personal, neighborly basis. For example, members of this class would help out a sick neighbor by bringing in dinner for the family. The middle and upper-middle classes would tend to be more involved in an organized way. There were fraternal orders like the Masons and business groups like the Rotary with their accompanying Woman's Auxiliaries. Middle and upper-middle class women ran bazaars and "Jumble" sales to benefit the hospital. Boy Scouts and Girl Guides were very popular and enjoyed by all classes of children. Church involvement was confined to attending services.

World War II saw great volunteering efforts. Among the most noteworthy was the huge undertaking of evacuating mothers and children to the countryside. Chaperones were provided for children alone and whole families were taken in by fellow countrymen. It was a time of great coming together by all classes.

After the War, the country set about rebuilding and the attitudes towards class structure and volunteering reverted back to what they had been before the war. Today, as before, the various classes have their own separate activities. The middle and upper-middle classes, in addition to the previously mentioned activities, have become more involved in programs involving the prevention and cure of drug and alcohol abuse.

In coming to America and settling in the suburbs, Diana continues to be involved in volunteer activities much in the same way she would probably be doing in England. Her special interests are fund raising for the local hospital and volunteer involvement in programs for the handicapped.

Jenny Cheong from Hong Kong has been in the United States for two years. She finds life here much like her life in Hong Kong. It is perhaps only a little bit quieter here and there is less air pollution. Hong Kong has been a British Crown Colony for approximately one hundred and fifty years,

and is ruled by a Governor appointed by the British Queen. It is a very industrialized and westernized country so there is a mix of East and West in attitudes and activities in the volunteer sector. There is little involvement in politics by the Chinese people. This is left to the British subjects. Working conditions on a whole are good so there are no unions.

Volunteering is seen mostly in organized groups like the Red Cross, the Lions, the Kiwanis, and the "Y". There is no parental involvement in the schools, and attending a church or Chinese Temple is the extent of the people's participation there. Most women work today in Tokyo, and if there are no grandparents at home, children are placed in privately run child care centers. These centers are operated solely by paid staff. Women confine their activities to their families and their jobs and there is little time or interest in volunteering.

Young people do volunteer in the hospitals on their summer vacation if they are interested in pursuing a career in the medical field. The young people also led a rally in 1978 to make public officials more aware of the growing concern over air pollution. As a result of this effort, anti-pollution controls have been put into effect with the hope that this situation will be improved.

Jenny is a young working wife and has not given much thought to volunteering in America. She feels she is going to be

living here permanently and would like to experience the independence of American women. Where volunteering will fit into that role is something to be left to the future.

The five interviewees have now told us their views on volunteerism in their respective countries. Each country with its history, culture and mores, brings a very individual approach to the subject of volunteerism. Each story told is not to be judged, but rather as experience for those interested in the study of volunteerism. As a result of this study it is apparent that volunteering in the United States, as in all countries whether done formally or informally, is unique. This spirit of volunteerism in the U.S. is captured in the words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

"No man is so poor as to have nothing worth giving: As well might the mountain streamlets say they have nothing to give the sea because they are not rivers. Give what you have. To someone it may be better than you dare to think."