

HISTORY OF ICOPA

Ruth Morris, 1995

The Movement to Abolish Prisons is as old as prisons themselves. In the 19th century, voices like Thomas Buxton of the British Parliament and Victor Hugo of France condemned the prison system and retributive justice. In 1976 Gilbert Cantor, a former editor of the Philadelphia Bar magazine, wrote in that prestigious magazine:

"If our entire criminal justice apparatus were simply closed down...there would probably be a decrease in the amount of behaviour now labeled 'criminal.' ...The time has come to abolish the game of crime and punishment, and to substitute a paradigm of restitution and responsibility. The goal is the civilization of our treatment of offenders."

The modern abolition movement has roots in European criminologists promoting abolition, and American (mostly Quaker) abolitionists. Fay Honey Knopp's group in the USA produced a landmark book called Instead of Prisons. This group and this book helped infect Canadians with the abolition call. The Quaker Committee on Jails and Justice, of the Canadian Friends Service Committee, worked for years to educate Canadian Quakers. As a result, in 1981, Canadian Quakers came to complete unity on prison abolition with a statement which read in part:

"The prison system is both a cause and a result of violence and social injustice. Throughout history, the majority of prisoners have been the powerless and the oppressed. We are increasingly clear that the imprisonment of human beings, like their enslavement, is inherently immoral, and is as destructive to the cagers as to the caged."

Humbly grateful for this mountaintop experience, Quaker Committee on Jails and Justice dared to dream in 1982 of the first International Conference on Prison Abolition in Toronto, for 1983. Bob Melcomb, Ruth Morris, Jake Friesen, and Jonathan Ruden were the leaders of a band of 6 or 8 who with God's help made the miracle happen. ICOPA I in Toronto attracted 400 people from 15 countries in North America, Europe, and Australia.

With the vital input of Frank Dunbaugh, a structure was put in place

for an interim committee, and a newsletter (run by Ruth in those early years), with input from 9 different countries. It was agreed that Conferences would take place every 2 years, that the International Steering Committee would have policy responsibility to keep the abolition goal and plan sites and general broad themes for each conference, and that once a site was appointed, local committees would arrange all the immediate details. ICOPA Conferences would not be like others talking about alternatives within the system, and providing a platform for governmental people to defend the indefensible. They would provide the only opportunity for those who knew this system was terminally ill to offer strategies of the future.

It was also agreed that in general Conferences would alternate between North America and Europe, although it was recognized that as soon as we could get participation from other continents it would be good to include Latin America, Africa and other places as ICOPA sites. Herman Bianchi of the Netherlands offered to host ICOPA II in 1985. ICOPA always brings together activists, ex-prisoners and their families, academics, visionary workers in the system and some politicians. ICOPA I included more activists and ex-prisoners, and native people. ICOPA II included many European academics and had a strong base of academic presentations.

ICOPA III in Montreal in 1987 brought a major change, carefully decided by the International Planning Committee. We moved from PRISON abolition to PENAL abolition. The seriousness and the correctness of this change has become increasingly clear. A court and policing system based on revenge would need something just like prisons or even worse, if we got rid of prisons. So it was logical to move to *penal abolition*: getting rid of revenge as the purpose of the whole system.

ICOPA IV was held in Poland, organized by Monica Platek, and was historic because of its location in Eastern Europe in the days when that was very daring. ICOPA V dared again: it was held in Indiana, USA in 1991 when the USA had become the imprisoning capital of the world. Hal Pepinski brought both academic excellence but also radical commitment, and the voice of native people was heard very strongly there.

ICOPA VI in 1993 was another first. A meeting with Ruth Morris

introduced Elias Carranza to ICOPA V. Elias was Deputy Director of ILANUD, the UN research institute on crime in Latin America, and he agreed to host ICOPA VI in Costa Rica. This brought increased respectability to ICOPA, as high level justice and prison officials from many Latin American countries played an active and lively part in the Conference. There was a memorable opening day when Louk Hulsman, Monica Platek and Ruth Morris presented abolition and answered questions about it from these assembled participants, mostly of Latin America, all day.

At about this time the Morris Family established the International Foundation for a Prisonless Society, a small Foundation located in Toronto, Canada, dedicated to supporting the conferences. ICOPA VII is being held in 1995 in Barcelona Spain, organized by Maria Theresa Sanchez Concheira and her Committee. The international spread of ICOPA has increased, and a proposal is coming to ICOPA VII to hold ICOPA VIII in Auckland, New Zealand. The lively Movement for Alternative to Prisons, led by Jean Stewart of New Zealand, has already accomplished miracles and can probably bring off this one very well. The travels and work of Prof. Hulsman and a small group of committed people from many countries have built a movement out of a vision, and the movement continues to grow.