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UNICEF News

THE YEARS WITH UNICEF

UNICEF NEWS in this issue gives the floor to two UNICEF "old timers", one who spent almost 20 years at UNICEF Headquarters, Comptroller Stanley Sroka and one who was UNICEF Director for Asia for 15 years, Sam Keeny.

The interview with Mr. Sroka was done by staff reporter Joan Liftin. Mr. Keeny, who is now Director for Asia of the Population Council, has written an article of personal remembrances, evoking the highlights of his many years with UNICEF in the field.

I - HE SIGNS FOR 150 BANK ACCOUNTS

by Joan Liftin

In the summer months of 1947, Washington, D.C. was a city furious with activity. Thousands of people had flocked to it, as well as to Lake Success where the machinery of the United Nations was being set in motion, and the atmosphere in both these places was a heady one of excitement and high purpose.

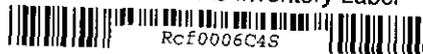
One of the many who arrived from overseas to play a role in these activities was an ex-banker from Warsaw who had more than his share of war. Just recently demobilized from the British Royal Air Force, he had spent one-fourth -- eleven years - of his life in war and his carriage by this time was that of a military man, though Stanley Sroka had not been one by choice.

A Call from Washington

Maurice Pate, barely settled in his position as first Director of the United Nations Children's Fund, had summoned Sroka to Washington to organize and direct UNICEF's financial operations. The assignment, he assured him, would only run about a year.



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Interview Stanley Sroka by Joan Liftin: UNICEF Early years
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"When I arrived," says Mr. Sroka, "we had no personnel, no money, nothing. We were temporarily located in UNRRA (The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency) headquarters which was just then in the process of being disbanded. We didn't even have a bank account and though the residual assets of UNRRA were to come to UNICEF, as well as half a million dollars in UN food collections for destitute children, nothing had been released as yet.

"Mr. Pate and I had to make several trips to Lake Success to persuade the UN Comptroller that the money should be released, that Mr. Pate and I would not run away with it."

In a few short months the persistent efforts of these two men were rewarded by the release of the first installment (\$11 million) of the \$30 million in unexpended UNRRA assets voted UNICEF by the General Assembly.

Real encouragement for the new organization was to arrive next with the announcement of four countries that they would make voluntary contributions to UNICEF on a yearly basis: the United States which in that first year gave \$15 million, Canada which donated \$5 million, France \$168,000 and tiny Luxembourg, \$2,000.



At his desk at Headquarters

UNICEF's aid program, then completely emergency in character (though it shifted to long-term programs in 1950) got underway immediately.

from then to now

As for the man who had come to oversee the Children's Fund fiscal operations for "only one year", eighteen years later saw him still in his familiar position as Comptroller of UNICEF with a staff in New York now grown to 45. Other UNICEF regional offices have financial staff as well.

During Mr. Sroka's years of service, the equivalent of about half a billion United States dollars has flowed through his office. Roughly 150 bank accounts all over the world, in about 65 different currencies ("...some stabilized and convertible, some fluctuating and giving us headaches all the time...") are today required to handle the complicated operation of getting UNICEF supplies and other assistance to 118 countries.

This month, the energetic and personable Comptroller will retire from UNICEF.

Does he regret his impending retirement?

"Well," he says, smiling, "every flower has to be repotted once in a while."

A European life: uncertainty and war

Few people have had to put this philosophical attitude to the test as often as Stanislaw Sroka, whose personal history reflects much of the upheaval and vicissitudes of life in 20th century Europe -- particularly for Central Europeans.

Born in the Eastern Territory of Poland as a Russian subject, Mr. Sroka served under the flags of three different countries in three different wars. From 1916-1918, he was an officer in the Imperial Russian Army in the First World War; from 1918-1920, a Polish officer in the Polish War against Soviet Russia; and from 1939-1947, having crossed half the frontiers of Europe to get to England, he served the Allied forces there as a liaison officer in the Royal Air Force. While in England, he applied for and received British citizenship, changing his name to Stanley.

When asked what rank he held in all these conflicts, Mr. Sroka, who in 1937 was the youngest bank director in Poland, said: "I always started as a lieutenant, because I was always in a different army."

The First World War

Born near Warsaw, he spent his early school years in St. Petersburg, where the family moved when his father accepted a post there as professor at the Institute of Civil Engineers. In 1916, Stanislaw and his older brother, along with thousands of other University students, left school to join the Russian Tsarist Army in the First World War.

"I was a cadet officer at the time and if you didn't volunteer, you would find yourself in the infantry where the life of an officer at the front



IN POLISH OFFICER'S UNIFORM.....This photo was taken in 1939, shortly before Poland was overrun. Many of the disbanded army, including Lt. Sroka, made for England.

lasted on the average about four
.....So I volunteered for the ar

When he had seen action for several months on the Romanian front, he filtered back of the revolution then underway in Russia, and the young officer volunteered into the Polish Eastern Legion. He was captured in the Ukraine and spent six months as a German prisoner of war.

Then, shortly before the Armistice he and other Polish officers, some of them engineers, effected a daring escape while en route to Germany by train. Overpowering their captors, they reversed the train's course -- back to Poland. (Twenty-five years or so later French railway men were to become famous for a similar exploit in which a train bound for Germany with the bulk of France's national art treasures was successfully reversed).

A second and then third try at the University

Decorated with the Military Cross by the Polish Government at the end of the war, Mr. Sroka took up his University studies again only to have them interrupted once more when hostilities between Poland and the U.S.S.R. broke out over the Eastern Territories. This time, another two years of military service were to intervene before he could go back to school.

Finally, in 1920 he enrolled at the University of Warsaw and graduated four years later with an LL.M. (Masters) degree in law and economics.

"I didn't decide up to the last minute what I was going to go into," says Mr. Sroka, "because I always half-expected to be yanked from the University again. When I finally did graduate, I decided on banking."

Hired successively by banks in Poland, France and England, Mr. Sroka moved from department to department within the structure of these banks, learning all he could about each. From the foreign exchange department, he went into arbitrage (department responsible for purchasing in one market for immediate sale at a higher price in another), then to commercial credits, stock exchange, securities, discounts, accounts and economic intelligence.

"The minute I understood the workings of one department, I would ask to be transferred to another."

Anglo-Polish Bank in Warsaw

In 1926, with unique banking education behind him, Mr. Sroka began work at the Anglo-Polish Bank where he remained till 1936. It was at this bank that he first met Maurice Pate, who was a customer there.

His next post was as deputy managing director of Bank Cukrownictwa in Warsaw. In 1937, he became its director.

Two years later, Europe was at war again and geographically vulnerable Poland was invaded. The banker, now married and the father of two sons, became a soldier once more.

Brought a rich banking background to UNICEF

Years later, it was this versatility and all-round knowledge of international banking practices that was to pay off so handsomely for UNICEF when Mr. Sroka became Comptroller. The financial complexity of an international organization like UNICEF which pools contributions from so many different nations to subsidize the buying and sending of virtually anything that can help soothe or save a child, is great. Its financial officer must have a complete knowledge of all facets of banking practices.

Today UNICEF has more than 500 projects underway all over the world. Supplies for these projects must be bought and funds -- in a variety of currencies -- must be made available to pay for these goods. Working closely with the supply division, UNICEF's Comptroller also serves as chairman of the Contracts Committee, which approves all purchases over \$10,000.

Through the years, eleven and a half million dollars has been made from investments placed by the Comptroller's office, providing that much extra money destined for the world's needy children.

Deep satisfaction in working for UNICEF

Mr. Sroka is not a man given much to the "personal statement." Any retirement plans that he and his wife, Beryl, have made were not divulged.

But what he did speak about -- this man who lost both a brother and son to war as well as years of his own life -- was the deep satisfaction of having been able, through UNICEF, to devote his efforts to peace.

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