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Autor: Scherz, Bernhard / Willumat, Heidi
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Swiss participation in the UN Namibia mission

Perfectionism not appropriate

UNTAG's mandate was to ensure the peaceful transfer of Namibia (once German South West Africa) to independence and to guarantee free and fair el-

of the policies of the whole of Europe" and that this neutrality was to be "perpetual".

After the final neutralisation of our antagonistic religious passions in the nineteenth-century conflicts of the "Sonderbund" and the "Kulturkampf", we were able in 1920 – between the two great massacres of the First and Second World Wars – to confirm once more the treaty of 1815 "in extremis" and with a concept known as "differential" neutrality. This was proclaimed in the London Declaration at a time when it was thought that international order was to be the guiding light of the future. In 1938 the principle was again transformed, this time into "integral" neutrality.

Today we are approaching the eighth century of our great adventure. We now intend to put ourselves at the service of a pacific strategy which has been determined without our participation by the United Nations and its peacekeeping forces. We are also hoping to reach a privileged arrangement with the political and economic conglomerate which is known as the European Community – to the point of accepting that one day the value of our work will be measured in the same coin as that of our neighbours.

This means of course that even perpetuity must one day have an end. The community of nations now feels less than previously the need for that free area of mediation, of welcome, of negotiation, of humanitarian aid – known as Switzerland. And in putting us back into our rightful place they are restoring to us a role in our own continent. We must return to the geographical, linguistic, cultural and trading elements which in the past gave us so many temptations to break apart. We shall have to think out anew the subtle balance on which Pax Helvetica has always rested mid-way between the needs that others have of our services and the needs which we have of others.

Jacques Matthey-Doret

ections. Switzerland took part in this peacekeeping operation from April 1989 to March 1990 by sending a Swiss Medical Unit (SMU) to Namibia – the first time Switzerland had participated in a UN military operation since Korea.

Swiss Review has been able to interview Major Bernhard Scherz, head pharmacist and materials officer in the SMU from March to July 1989.



Medical care is part of good offices either with the ICRC (our picture) or on a UN-mission.

Swiss Review: Major Scherz, what exactly led you to take part in the UN mission?

Bernhard Scherz: The director of the Federal Office of Army Medical Services, in which I was running a military pharmacy section, had been a project leader within the SMU.

What were your functions in Namibia?

I was head pharmacist and responsible for materials, mainly military materials. Since we could bring only a limited selection from Switzerland we often had headaches in meeting the usually very difficult demands of the doctors and nurses. It is not given to everyone to be able to improvise at third-world level and, to take an example, to use one type of injection needle when you are accustomed to another.

Generally speaking, what were the best aspects of the Swiss operation in Namibia?

The SMU was very well received, and its work was highly valued. And it was extremely good for us Swiss to work in daily contact with people from more than 40 nations. There was a very friendly family atmosphere.

And your negative impressions?

In view of the fact that the whole mission went off surprisingly peacefully and that Switzerland had in fact prepared too much – I mean too many clinics and too wide a range of services – there was very often a problem of under-employ-

ment. This problem was partially solved when we decided to start treating the local population. Also, there was very little opportunity for spending leisure hours outside the camp. The distances were simply too big, and our immediate surroundings were unattractive.

What lessons do you think Switzerland can draw from the Namibia operation?

Well, Swiss super-perfectionism is simply not appropriate: as I have said, the huge distances involved and a fear that there might be a big influx of patients led to too many clinics being set up which were then not used. This experience has since been of value to the latest SMU operation in Western Sahara. On the whole, however, Switzerland is in a position to render very valuable services to such UN missions.

Interview: Heidi Willumat