



René Sand (Belgium), President 1946 – 1953¹

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The extraordinary significance of the life and work of René Sand lies in his central position as a mediator, promoter and coordinator of social work on an increasingly international level during the interwar-period and it can hardly be overestimated.

To approach the achievements of Sand's life and work you have to work archaeologically as he does not seem to have left any traces in the literature on social history. In Germany, even within the field of social work his name is hardly known. His biographical sketch and his importance for the development of the profession of social work have fallen into oblivion.

The situation is a little different in the French-speaking countries where a biography has been published (compare Anciaux 1988a, b, c) which contains a detailed record of Sand's writings. Altogether this lack of interest is regrettable because it doesn't consider that René Sand is exemplary and in some parts fundamental to the emergence of professional social work in the 1920s in Belgium and Europe. Professional social work was established by a consequent international orientation and an emancipation from neighbouring fields such as social medicine and hygiene.

Therefore it is a rewarding task to draw attention to this pioneer of social work and make the public appreciate his work.

I want to emphasize explicitly that in this portrait Sand's achievements concerning social work will be the main focus, even if this is an inevitable reduction of his accomplishments in the field of medicine and social medicine.

René Sand was born on the 3rd of January in 1877 in Brussels and grew up in the district Ixelles. His father's family came from Luxemburg, his mother had French origins. More information about his home and the social surroundings where he spent his childhood and youth hasn't been published up to today. Therefore we have got to concentrate on his life and writings.

He went to school at the Institut l'Athénée in Brussels. After that he started studying medicine at the Free University of Brussels. He worked very successfully and won a prize in a university contest in 1898. Moreover his studies led him to maritime research institutes in the Bretagne and the Mediterranean area where he studied unicellular organisms intensively. In July 1900 Sand passed his degree as a physician.

Immediately afterwards there was a change in his private life when he married Marie-Thérèse Joris, a sister of a fellow-student, and had three sons and one daughter in the following years.



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In the years 1901 to 1904 he worked in different hospitals in Brussels while he was preparing a graduation on neurological questions. For this purpose he spent some time in Berlin and Vienna to complete his studies at famous hospitals.

In 1903 Sand terminated his graduation successfully with a thesis called „Les fibres pyramidales cortico-bulbaires et cortico-protubérantielles“ and was offered a position at the Free University of Brussels. Rapidly he became a member of several national scientific societies such as „Société de Médecine légale de France“ and „Membre titulaire de la Société royale des Sciences médicales et naturelles de Bruxelles“.

Sand published a series of scientific and medical articles and especially his position as founder and secretary of the „Association Belge de Médecine Sociale“ since 1913 showed that he was increasingly occupied with social questions within the field of medicine.

He got particular insights into the social reality of industrial workers when he took over responsibility as a medical adviser for a big insurance company whose main field were industrial accidents. He travelled intensively throughout Belgium to get familiar with the working conditions and occupational hazards of the industrial workers. Up to the First World War his professional and scientific ambitions proceeded without any problems and a scientific career at the university seemed possible. But the outbreak of World War One interrupted Sand's career. At the beginning of the war he worked for the Belgian Red Cross in an outpatients clinic and then went to a Belgian Army Hospital in London (compare Sand 1919, 4). There he came in contact with the British „Charity Organization Society“ which aimed to improve the social living standards of the British population by “friendly visitors” – a typical contemporary form of philanthropical support in Britain.

In 1916 he returned to Belgium to work in La Panne. After the end of the First World War he travelled to the United States several times and studied Taylorism as a capitalistic form of production. Moreover he learnt about contemporary North American social work and especially the Settlement-Movement.

In 1919 he published his insights and experiences about topics, methods and aims of social work in the United States and in Britain in the small volume “La bienfaisance d’hier et la bienfaisance de demain”. He clearly demanded a more professional social work which could only be achieved by a professional formation. According to Sand social work would have to be analysed on a scientific basis to develop adequate methods and forms of work as they were already being used in “Case Work” and the “Settlement-Movement” in the Anglo-Saxon area (compare Sand 1919, 21).

Because of his acquaintance with Edmond Dronsart, the general secretary of the Belgian Red Cross, he showed interest in the aims and possibilities of the work of the Red Cross. He was one of the leading figures who rebuilt the Red Cross in Belgium after the First World War. Especially in the youth movement of the Red Cross he saw a great possibility to create more healthy and hygienic living conditions among the Belgian population who had suffered much during the war and to raise the living standards considerably.

Sand turned into an excellent expert on contemporary tendencies in social work in the Anglo-Saxon area which influenced his understanding of social work on a national level in Belgium. He studied the post-war social and economic situation in Belgium which had been devastated in great parts. With some leading personalities in Belgium Sand decided to found the first

national institute for the formation of social workers in 1919 in Brussels, the „Ecole centrale d'application de service social“ (later: „Institut d'études sociales d'Etat“). In 1924 Sand travelled to Chili where he held lectures concerning topics in social medicine. In the same way he initiated a school for social work in Chili.

His reputation as an excellent expert on social work on the national and international level led to an invitation by Julia Lathrop – director of the Children's Bureau in Washington – in 1919 who also invited Alice Salomon as a German representative. There he made contact with the North American “National Conference of Social Work” and took part in their annual conference. Gradually the idea of an important international conference on social work developed. In 1923 Sand wrote to Julia Lathrop and asked for her support for such a project. Again he travelled to the USA and presented his project on the 50th annual conference of the „National Conference of Social Work“ which approved and promised financial and personal support. Immediately Sand began to create a preparatory group and initiated national preparatory committees across Europe. The foundation of the “League of Red Cross Societies” in 1919 and the appointment of Sand as general secretary in 1921 proved to be an ideal basis for international cooperation in social work. The “League of Red Cross Societies” had been founded to provide humanitarian and social aid in times of peace whereas the International Committee of the Red Cross had been primarily established for times of war. After a long period of preparation and several postponed dates the “First International Conference of Social Work” took place in Paris in July 1928. Alice Masarykova, the president of the Czechoslovakian Red Cross, accepted the presidency of the conference while René Sand acted as the general secretary. More than 2500 people participated in the conference, among them prominent theorists and practitioners of social work, social politicians and confessional and political representatives from all over the world. The “First International Conference of Social Work” proved to be an excellent revival of international cooperation in the field of social work and successfully continued the tradition of international conferences in the 19th century (compare Sand 1953).

Besides an extensive edition of the conference papers which were published in three volumes René Sand compiled his knowledge about international social work and its contemporary tendencies in his publication “Le service social à travers le monde” in 1931.

He developed a broad publishing activity during the interwar-period anyhow. It obvious that the main themes of his publications dealt increasingly with social and hygienic questions und were addressed to a wider public than before. In 1936 he took a position as a physician at the criminological institute of the Free University of Brussels which underlines his new professional orientation. Nevertheless he worked untiringly in the field of social work and created and coordinated international networks.

The extraordinary echo to the “First International Conference of Social Work” in Paris in 1928 demanded a continuation. The provisional preparatory group changed into the permanent organization “International Conference of Social Work” (ICSW) in 1928 and could provide an uninterrupted cooperation. René Sand took over the position of general secretary from 1928 to 1932 as well as the presidency in 1936. The “Second International Conference of Social Work” took place in Frankfurt/Main in Germany in 1932. The “German Association for public and private Relief” (“Deutscher Verein für öffentliche und private Fürsorge”) prepared the conference in close cooperation with René Sand. The main focus of the conference in Frankfurt was the topic „Family and Welfare“ whereas the conference in Paris had aimed at giving an overview concerning contemporary tendencies in social work,

social policy and social medicine worldwide. Before the outbreak of the Second World War a third conference took place in London in 1936. It dealt with "Social Work and Community" but was already overshadowed by the influence of fascist governments. A fourth conference, planned for 1940 in Prague, could not be held. This had a profound effect on Sand's commitment for an international network in social work.

Besides his activity as a social physician at the Free University of Brussels Sand worked for the ministry of health from 1930 up to the war. Because of the German occupation in Belgium he lost his professorship and was arrested by the Gestapo in September 1944, together with his son-in-law. He was sent to Brauweiler near Cologne/Germany. Afterwards he was imprisoned in Plansee/Tyrol and was freed on the 29th of April 1945 by North American troops.

Sand returned to Brussels and with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation he managed to create the first academic chair for history of medicine and social medicine at the Free University of Brussels which he was offered in 1945 (compare Graffar 1953, 206). Immediately after the end of the Second World War he decided to revive the "International Conference of Social Work". A first meeting with some members took place in Brussels in 1946 which was continued in Scheveningen/Netherlands in 1947. The conference primarily discussed the "Urgent Social Problems in the War-Stricken Areas of Europe". The fourth official "International Conference of Social Work" met in 1948 in Atlantic City/New York in combination with the 75th anniversary of the North American "National Conference of Social Work". It is not surprising that the main theme was "International Activities of Social Work" (compare Blankenburg 1988, 377).

This was the renewed beginning of international cooperation in the field of social work after the Second World War. Even the "International Committee of Schools for Social Work" (ICSSW), founded in 1929 as a direct consequence of the Paris conference and presided by Alice Salomon, was reactivated by René Sand.

Alice Salomon was in exile in the United States since 1937 and couldn't coordinate the work of the ICSSW any longer. Therefore Elinor Black from Great Britain tried to continue Salomon's work under difficult conditions during the Second World War. At a first meeting in 1946 René Sand was elected as the second president of the ICSSW and accepted this presidency until his death in 1953 (compare Kendall 1998, 12). The new beginning of the ICSSW in 1948 in New York was a very disappointing experience for Sand. Only very few former members took part in the meeting and the future seemed uncertain. Sand faced the huge challenge to revive the ICSSW and invite the North-American and Canadian schools for social work to participate once more which he managed successfully. In the 1950s the ICSSW consolidated as an international organization. Moreover there was an obvious shift from Europe to the United States after the Second World War and the headquarters of the ICSSW also moved to the United States. In 1950 an ICSSW conference dealing with the formation of social workers on different levels took place (compare Kendall 1998, 14).

Both the "International Conference of Social Work" (renamed in "International Council on Social Welfare" in 1967) and the "International Committee of Schools for Social Work" (today "International Association of Schools for Social Work", IASSW) form the basis for international cooperation in social work until today together with the "International Federation of Social Workers" which also goes back to the Paris conference in 1928.

Thanks to his reputation as a social physician Sand was nominated as president of an expert committee in 1950 whose aim it was to create the “World Health Organization” (WHO) to which he contributed decisively. All his life Sand travelled throughout the world due to his wide range of activities.

Even shortly before his death aged 75 he visited the sixth „International Conference of Social Work“ in Madras/India in 1952. It is adequate to call him a “citoyen du monde” because of his intensive journeys although he was connected to his home town Brussels all his life.

On the 23rd of August 1953 at the age of 76 René Sand died unexpectedly from the consequences of an operation. Katherine A. Kendall – colleague and secretary general of the IASSW from 1971 to 1978 – remembers:

“René Sand was a truly remarkable person – a medical doctor with a social mission and all the attributes of a Renaissance man, he was knowledgeable about everything from the humanities to the far reaches of science. His faith in social work was deep and enduring; his advocacy of social work education led, directly and indirectly, to the establishment of schools of social work in Europe and Latin America.” (Kendall 1998, 8)

In remembrance of him a René-Sand-Prize was created in 1954 which is awarded to a social organization or personality every two years for extraordinary merits in social work (compare Healy 2001, 62).

It is not sufficient to recall René Sand simply as a theorist of social work since he was originally a physician. He developed the field of social medicine and opened it decisively for social questions all his life. But it is amazing how Sand combined medical and social themes tirelessly and promoted them internationally.

His biography and his writings reflect the development of social work as an independent profession which could be distinguished from other disciplines. Sand’s contribution to international social work hasn’t been discussed until today as he was primarily seen as a promoter of social medicine (compare Anciaux 1988b). His rediscovery as a “social worker” has still to be done and it seems that he is a pioneer of social work like his famous colleagues Alice Salomon (1872-1948, Germany), Helena Radlinska (1879-1954, Poland), Ilse Arlt (1876-1959, Austria) and Jane Addams (1860-1935, USA) during the interwar-period. It is typical of the biographies of these personalities that they didn’t leave many traces of their private life. Therefore some phases can hardly be reconstructed. This is also true for René Sand who wrote about three hundred articles and publications but kept his personal life to himself while he was an outstanding personality in the international social work scene.

Finally the following quotation by the famous German social worker Alice Salomon emphasizes the international dimension of social work which surely reflects Sand’s attitude:

„The essential qualities of relief should, in some way, make us cooperate on an international level. It is in the nature of relief that it cannot be restricted to the borders of a nation.”² (Salomon 1927, 495, translated: K.E.)

² „Der fachliche Inhalt der Fürsorge sollte uns in gewisser Weise zu internationalen Beziehungen zwingen. Es liegt in ihrem Wesen, ihren Motiven, daß sie sich nicht grundsätzlich an die Grenzen der Nation gebunden fühlen kann.“ (Salomon 1927, 495)

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