

THE ISEO WORKERS' MUTUAL AID SOCIETY

The Workers' Mutual Aid Societies (S.O.M.S) were set up to compensate for the welfare state's shortcomings and to satisfy the need for self-defence in the world of work. In the 18th century the Industrial Revolution undermined previous social orders: mechanization no longer required competence, skill and creativity. Urbanized peasant workers lived in the factories all day long in unhygienic and unsafe conditions.

Workers' societies were created by men and women of goodwill who set out with the idea of bringing mutual aid to those who suddenly found themselves in financial difficulty, in particular due to accidents at work or to the fact that they were no longer able to work due to old age. They were centred on a voluntary monthly contribution which could become a small sum to be used in the above circumstances.

Nearly all workers' societies opened out to the middle class in order to introduce other members who might help, with donations or bequests, to make the societies' assets more sounder without receiving subsidies.

Founded during the Industrial Revolution, first in England then in France, they developed in Italy in the mid-19th century.

In the 1880s and 90s mutual aid societies grew rapidly in number and soon branched out all over the country. In 1840 the first mutual aid society was founded in Pinerolo and from there they spread all over the country.

In 1862 when the Unification of Italy took place, 443 societies in the regions of Piedmont, Liguria, Lombardy, Veneto and Emilia were recorded in a census carried out by ministerial offices. The Iseo S.O.M.S was founded on October 1st 1863 with 162 founder members.

On 15th April 1886 a law was promulgated to give mutual aid societies the opportunity to acquire legal personality and regulate their relations with the institutions.

Section 1 defined the operational aims: to guarantee members an allowance in the case of illness, inability to work or old age; to help deceased members' families.

Section 2 added that "Mutual aid societies shall furthermore be able to take part in the education of members and their families; help members to purchase the tools of their trade and exercise other offices peculiar to financial welfare institutions".

Last year the Iseo S.O.M.S celebrated the 150th anniversary of its founding. Thanks to the far-sightedness of local businessmen and politicians, it has always been able to help its members, when

the State was absent, by providing a daily allowance for illness or disability.

The two mainstays of its work:

A) promoting and supporting welfare and assistance for its members. In the 19th century the society had a soup-kitchen for paupers;

B) taking part in the moral, civil and cultural education of members and their families; promoting recreational activities for free time. In 1885 the mobile library was set up with a great variety of books explaining how to carry out various activities. There were books to help members become skilful and expert craftsmen. Today the library has 4,000 books.

Nowadays the Workers' Society deals mainly with cultural activities, such as concerts, opera and theatre performances, cultural trips in Italy and abroad and it supports the town council in twinning events with Tamsweg.

The revival of traditions through exhibitions and events about customs and activities in Iseo and the surrounding area in the last century with special attention for poetry in dialect. Space is also dedicated to poetry in dialect in the society's flagship newsletter, "nòter dè Isé", published quarterly.

In association with the parish and other associations, the patronal festival of Saint Vigilio has been reinstated with historic processions through the streets and along the lakeside, religious services, flower decorations, illuminations and culinary specialities.

The swim across the lake has been reintroduced and attracts a growing number of competitors every year.

Following the Society's tradition numerous scholarships are awarded to deserving students, degree theses are catalogued and guided visits are available for student groups in order to acquaint them with the town's historical heritage.

The S.O.M.S is a voluntary organization, a meeting place which collaborates with other local associations, keeps the community alive through recreational and cultural activities without withholding real, self-financed aid. It is the most long-lived of the associations in Iseo and has become the example to follow in the cultural reality of Iseo life.