

### **Soteria Bern is 40 years old.**

In 1984, Luc Ciompi founded Soteria Bern. In doing so, he brought the model of the Soteria house, which Loren Mosher had developed in California, to Europe. A Soteria house is an ordinary house in a village or town where people in psychotic crisis receive appropriate care in a small-scale setting. There is a context that provides safety without isolating these people from society. The framing is done by professionals, people with lived experiences and family members who provide a continuous presence and a qualitative approach for a person in crisis. In a Soteria home, both guests and team members take on all aspects of daily life in a warm, homely environment. The persons in crisis and the team members share responsibility for the ins and outs of the home. There is minimal use of medication and arrangements in this regard are always made by mutual agreement. This approach brings a number of substantial personal benefits. The absence of coercive measures, the approach and the homely setting contribute to less distress and alienation during the crisis.



Soteria Bern anno 2024

### **Integration of a Soteria house in the local mental health system.**

Luc Ciompi greatly adapted and significantly broadened the operation proposed by Mosher. In San Francisco, Soteria had emerged from an anti-psychiatric movement and was envisioned as an alternative to mainstream care without medication. Luc Ciompi worked to integrate the Soteria home in Bern into the local mental health system and prescribed medication when needed. The therapeutic residential community in Bern, which was originally the smallest independent hospital in Switzerland, grew into a wider integrated offering of a day centre, outreach treatment at home and the possibility of

sheltered living facilities. In addition to the milieu therapeutic elements of 'being with' and 'doing with', psychodynamic and Open Dialogue approaches were systematically added. Involving people with psychosis experience in the working alongside the Maastricht interview from the Voice Hearers movement were also integrated into the working. All these elements ensured that Soteria Bern continued to exist for 40 years and has become an integral part of mainstream psychiatry in Bern. All this development process also contributed to Soteria Bern being declared in 2021 by the WHO as one of 28 'Good practice' examples worldwide, where person-centred psychiatry is offered with respect for human rights.

### **Need for a broader international network of Soteria.**

The 40th anniversary of Soteria Bern could not go unnoticed. The chief physician of this house, Walter Gekle, together with his team, organised an international meeting on 20 June 2024 for people all over the world, who are involved in a Soteria operation in one way or another. The aim of this meeting was to get to know each other and brainstorm about Soteria in the future. An important topic was the need to validate the Soteria Fidelity Scale to enable more rigorous scientific research. This scientific research is necessary to realise wider support for Soteria in the world. The expansion of a Soteria working group around the world can also play a role in this. There is already a German-speaking Soteria network IAS (Internationale Arbeitsgruppe Soteria) in which staff from Soteria houses in Germany and Switzerland participate. The idea of expanding this network to a wider Soteria network across different countries in the world where English is used as the working language is suggested, and this under the umbrella of ISPS (International Society for Psychological and Social approaches to Psychosis). Indeed, both organisations advocate humane, destigmatising care for psychosis with strong emphasis on psychosocial approaches where dialogue between professionals, people with psychosis experience and family members is highly valued.



International meeting Soteria June 20<sup>th</sup> 2024 Bern

A scientific conference was organised on 21 June 2024. The aim of the day was, on the one hand, to highlight the current state of Soteria projects in various countries around the world and, on the other, to look ahead for possible further development of the Soteria idea.

**Persons with lived experience of psychosis and ‘Angehörigen’ get the first word to speak. The WHO stimulates Soteria and highlights the human, no coercive approach.**

A welcome by the chairman of the day, Walter Gekle and by Pierre Alain Schnegg, policy officer of the government responsible for health and social integration in the canton of Bern, was immediately followed by a moving interview with Simona Hartmann and Simone Fasnacht, who experienced the shelter in a Soteria home as decisive for their recovery at the time of a major crisis in their lives. In a second interview, family carers Peter Marti and Markus Berner told how strongly they experienced the difference between regular psychiatric treatment and their son's welcoming reception at the Soteria House. We learned the beautiful German word ‘angehörigen’, a word difficult to translate in English. Angehörigen are people who live close to a person and can be a family member, a good friend, a good neighbour or someone else who is very involved with the person.

Via online streaming, the audience was joined by Dr Michelle Funk, head of the WHO's policy unit, Law and Human Rights, Department of Mental Health. She explained how the Soteria approach fits into the framework of the UN Guidelines for Community Mental Health Services. When she accentuated the WHO Quality Rights objectives she demonstrated that Soteria Bern fully meets these objectives. She appealed to reform national policies and legislation in line with the CRPD and other international human rights standards.

**Luc Ciompi as inspirator of Soteria Bern highlights the importance of scientific research.**

When 94-year-old Luc Ciompi himself took the stage, it became extremely silent. The inspired way in which he highlighted the roots of Soteria was received with a standing ovation. He deserved this not only because of his engaging lecture but also for what he realised in Europe.



Luc Ciompi conference June 21<sup>st</sup> 2024

In his presentation, Luc Ciompi called for further thorough scientific research so that the Soteria approach can be incorporated as the standard for a psychotic crisis in every health system worldwide.

Prof Dirk Richter of the Zentrum Psychiatrische Rehabilitation UPC Bern und Berner Fachhochschule Pflege BFH explained how this scientific research will be done on a qualitative basis within Soteria Bern. In their enthusiastic contributions from the Soteria houses in Reichenau (Germany) as well as in Zeeland (Netherlands), Dr Daniel Nischk and Dr Pien Leenderste respectively told about the specific functioning in their houses. In her combination of quantitative and qualitative scientific research, Pien Leenderste was able to show convincing figures and illustrated what lessons we can learn from the Soteria operation in the Netherlands.

### **The Soteria approach for young people in transition, continuity and humanity.**

During the afternoon, prof dr med. Dusan Hirjak with his associate from Mannheim gave a talk on '*Soteria as a transpsychiatric form of treatment in early psychosis*'. The audience was rather at their discomfort and frowned when technical interventions such as Transcranial Electric Magnetic Stimulation as well as Oxytocine inhalation were presented to these young people. The moving story of the psychotherapist who went fishing with a young man with psychosis in order to gain confidence for further treatment contrasted with this.

The vision of the Soteria approach was more recognisable in the presentation by Prof Dr med Michael Kaess of UPD Bern, who proposed an integrated treatment path from early recognition of psychosis to rehabilitation for these young people where humanity and continuity of care are central.

## **Connection and warm closeness as common elements in Open Dialogue and Soteria.**

The contributions from UK and Belgium, two countries where groups are emerging to establish a Soteria home in their countries, illustrated that both people with psychosis experience and their family members, together with professionals are taking the helm to strengthen their advocacy. Rita Horgan, lived experience researcher and Chair of Soteria Network UK, Kate Allsopp, psychologist and researcher at University of Manchester and Jen Kilyon, family member and President of Soteria Network UK, hope to motivate government agencies to establish Soteria homes in UK through research. Dag Van Wetter, staff member and Open Dialogue Companion at Psyche and core worker at El Camino Bekegem, explained how from Open Dialogue and Open Circles at El Camino, a Soteria house is being worked towards by bringing 'companions' together. He emphasised that the seven principles of the Open Dialogue approach go hand in hand with the 'being with' and 'doing with' elements of the Soteria approach. Connection and warm closeness are central levers.



Dag Van Wetter, conference

## **Soteria Israel as an example to convince the national policymakers.**

Finally, Prof Dr med Pesach Lichtenberg, Director of Soteria Inpatient Unit in Jerusalem spoke and inspired the whole audience by proposing solutions to every obstacle faced in establishing a Soteria house. The research proposed by his associate, Avraham Frielander, which was also presented to the parliament in Israel, managed to mobilise this country to establish 30 Soteria houses in less than 10 years in Israel. The scientific day was concluded by a panel consisting of people with lived experiences and 'angehörigen'.



Chair of the day, Walter Gekle, tired but satisfied, ended the conference to thunderous applause. All attendees were invited to a dinner and after-party at a Swiss dance hall on the outskirts of town where we enjoyed delicious Swiss food accompanied by an accordionist and where we could chat about what drives the Soteria community. Ties were forged informally, photographs taken and promises made to see each other again soon.



Delegates from Belgium with El Camino's connecting cord with Luc Ciompi in the middle. From left to right: Alan Veys, Dirk Snauwaert, Dag Van Wetter, Luc Ciompi, Rika Rotsaert, Jan Godderis, Ludi Van Bouwel and Stefaan Huyghebaert.

## **Conclusion**

It was an extremely fascinating two-day event. Both the testimonies of people with psychosis experience and those of their relatives, and the scientific research in Switzerland, Germany, Israel and the Netherlands complemented by the encouraging words of the WHO delegate argued that the Soteria approach should be offered as a standard approach for people in psychotic crisis. The great enthusiasm of the professionals who work in Soteria homes with great satisfaction and who do not want to go back to their former workplaces, had a connecting and stimulating effect. Yet it seems that much remains to be done before the Soteria approach will be widely adopted. Presumably, fear of the unknown among professionals as well as policymakers plays a role in this.

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