

## Helvi Sipilä – Past International President, 1968-1970

It is with great sadness I report that Minister Helvi Sipilä, Past International President and long-term Zontian, passed away on Friday May 15, 2009.

Helvi Sipilä was noted internationally as the first woman to be appointed to the UN as Assistant Secretary-General (appointed by Kurt Waldheim). She was head of the Branch for the Promotion of Equality for Men and Women in the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs in the UN Office, Vienna, from 1972 to 1980. In 1978 the Branch was renamed the Branch for the Advancement of Women (no doubt a new title influenced by the formidable Helvi). Her other notable UN posts were as Secretary General of the first International Women's Year in Mexico City in 1975, and she was actively involved in the UN Decade for Women, 1976-1985.

Born Helvi Maukola on 5 May 1915 in Helsinki, Helvi became a lawyer at age 27, then only the 38<sup>th</sup> woman in Finland to do so. She was the only child of successful farmers, and her 'progressive' parents brought her up to think independently. It is said that the seeds of peace activism were sown early as Helvi experienced the transition in her country from being a Czarist regime to a Republic, resulting in the Civil War of 1918 and its aftermath. Her marriage in September, 1939, was celebrated at the same time as the outbreak of World War II. Her philosophy was that "the only way to prevent war is to strive for justice in the world by reducing discrimination and injustices."

Helvi began her legal training at the Turku Appeal Court in March 1939 and, along with other women jurists in Finland at that time, constituted a significant labour reserve at the courts when men were forced to leave their civilian jobs. She got to sit as a judge at sessions in the Turku Appeal Court as well as at district courts in outer municipalities to 1941, when this workload was sufficient for her to be granted the title of Deputy Judge. From 1943 to 1972 she was an attorney-at-law in her own office in Helsinki, with her four children being born between 1940 and 1949.

Her international activities began in 1960 as the Representative of Finland on the UN Commission on the Status of Women 1960-68 and 1971-72, and as a member of the Finnish delegation to the UN General Assembly, 1966-1971.

Other duties and posts within the UN framework included:

- Vice Chairman (1963-66) and then Chairman (1967), UN Commission of the Status of Women
- Vice Chairman (1969) then Chairman (1971), Third Committee (Social and Humanitarian Affairs) of the UN General Assembly
- Special Rapporteur on the Status of Women and Family Planning, UN, (1968-72)
- Consultant (to 1981) promoting the UN Voluntary Fund for the Advancement of Women (now UNIFEM).

The symbol developed to represent the IWY decade (1976-1985) became the symbol for UNIFEM, and Helvi saw to it that it was legally copyrighted so that any use of it for commercial purposes would raise funds for UNIFEM. Helvi founded the Finnish UNIFEM National Committee in 1981, the first in the world.

One year later, in 1982, she was the first woman to contest for the Office of President of Finland.

Helvi's membership of Zonta dates from 1 April 1950 and she was International President from 1968 to 1970. This period of her International Presidency coincided with her very active participation as Special Rapporteur on the Status of Women in the UN. The Zonta International project at the time was the UN Relief and Works Agency for the Vocational and Teacher Training Centre for Women in Ramallah, Jordan (supported by ZI during 1962-1974) and in which Helvi took great interest. Her role in the UN and in Zonta at that time certainly enhanced Zonta's prominence as an organisation committed to empowering the status of women.

Many Zontians all over the world have fond memories of Helvi not only as a Zontian and PIP, but as a woman who was totally committed to improving women's rights and peace in the world. By her own admission she "started out as a female lawyer, but soon turned into a promoter of women's rights. This was primarily due to my practical experience of the weaker position of women in society rather than any sentimental position" (*Interview in Norden Newspaper, 2 March 2008*). Apparently she had a reputation of being the husbands's nightmare when she handled divorce cases as a lawyer. She took no 'backward steps' in any of her roles and believed that although women's rights had been neglected in many societies (and still are), the change had to start specifically with women.

From her early work as a lawyer, then through almost 50 years of involvement on the international stage, she embodied all that is good in outstanding leaders and peace-loving people. The UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, on hearing of her death, stated that "she was a life-long champion of the rights of women and that she powerfully demonstrated the effectiveness of women's leadership."

We in Zonta rejoice in Helvi Sipilä's many achievements for women, and commit to continuing her legacy through our work to improve the status of women everywhere. *To live in hearts we leave behind, is not to die*. Helvi's influence will continue in Zontian's hearts for many years to come.

To her family we express our heartfelt condolences.

**Beryl Sten**

President Zonta International

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Helsingin Sanomat, 5 May 2000  
IWTC Women's Globalnet, 19 May 2009  
Norden Newspaper, 2 March 2006  
The Finlander Forum, 13 March 2006  
UN News Centre, 20 May 2009

**Extract from *'History of the Past International Presidents' Bienniums***

By Wilma E. Swantz, (1988)

**HELVI SIPILÄ, Past International President 1968-70**

*"Widening Our Vistas in the Service of Mankind"*

It was the first period in Zonta International's history when a person from a country other than the United States and Canada served as the International President.

A decision to that direction had actually been made when I was first elected as the Second Vice-President in 1964. (No office of a President-Elect existed at that time.)

One of the doubts at that time had been the question of expenses in bringing the President to meetings, including the District Conferences, from another continent "overseas". The other alternative had been thought to be the absence of an International President at Conferences and Meetings.

The years from 1964 to 1968 had actually shown that there was no ground for either one of these fears. I was internationally involved in many organizations, including my membership in the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and my annual participation in the United Nations General Assemblies as a member of Finland's official delegation. For these reasons, I was often travelling in other continents and staying annually in New York for a period of three months (September – December) during the most important period of the Fall Conferences in the United States and Canada. Actually I could accomplish a great deal in many parts of the world with very little cost to Zonta International.

Among the highlights of my biennium I may mention: our promotion work (organization of Zonta clubs) in Africa with the result that we were invited to participate in one of the most important Conferences organized for the advancement of women in African countries; another result was the Charter presentation to five Zonta clubs in Ghana, Liberia and Nigeria just prior to the Convention in 1970; our continuous successful support for the vocational training of refugee girls at Ramallah Centre in Jordan; the celebration of Zonta's Golden Anniversary in 1969; the celebration of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Zonta club in Europe in 1970; and the International Convention in Chicago 1970, which appeared to be one of the happiest ones.

The most important thing for me personally was the feeling of confidence and of true sisterhood among Zontians from many different countries and many different walks of life. For all that I would still like to express my deep gratitude to all those with whom I had the privilege to work.

Extract from *History of the Past International Presidents' Bienniums*, by Wilma E. Swantz, (1988).

(Past International Presidents were asked to share their memories of being International President – this is Helvi's contribution.).