

The Centenary of the Birth of the Red Cross Idea

On the bloody battlefields of Solferino was born the 'idea of the Red Cross' one hundred years ago.

Here the great humanitarian, Henri Dunant wept tears of compassion for the

wounded and dying soldiers who lay uncared for on those hills of Solferino.

In commemorating this significant centenary, we also pay homage to a great man—Henri Dunant.

The International Red Cross

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A century ago, in 1859, Henri Dunant, an ordinary Genevese citizen, returned from Italy. He had witnessed the battle of Solferino. He had seen thousands of wounded soldiers left lying without care on the battlefield in agonizing suffering.

He described their plight in a book "Recollections of Solferino", which roused a world-wide response. For Dunant, there must be no enemy when the battle was over, but only men, all brothers and ready to help one another. In each country, societies of volunteers must be constituted capable in the event of war of caring for the wounded.

It was this emotion, this programme that gave birth to the Red Cross.

To-day, 80 National Red Cross (Red Crescent, Red Lion and Sun) Societies and two international organizations have headquarters in Geneva. The *International Committee of the Red Cross* and the *League of Red Cross Societies*, constitute what is called the *International Red Cross*.

The functioning of the International Red Cross is assured by:

(a) *The International Conference of the Red Cross* which is the highest deliberative authority of the Red Cross. The International Conference assembles re-

presentatives of the International Committee, the League, and the National Societies, every four years, as well as delegates of the States, parties to the Geneva Conventions. The first Conference took place in 1867 in Paris; the last one met from October 24—November 7, 1957, at New Delhi and the next one is planned for Geneva in the Jubilee Year of 1963.

(b) *The Standing Commission of the International Red Cross* takes care of urgent matters between each International Conference and ensures the co-ordination and harmonization of the activities of the International Committee and the League. It is composed of 9 members, five of whom are elected by the Conference in a personal capacity. Those elected in 1957 are:

Ambassador Francois—Poncet (France)
Chairman

Hon. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur (India)

General Gruenther (United States)

Professor Mitereve (USSR)

Mr. Sloper (Brazil)

2 representatives of the International Committee, one being the President, Mr. Leopold Boissier,

2 representatives of the League, one being the Chairman, Judge Emil Sandstrom (Sweden).

Hon. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur together with Ambassador Francois Poncet were re-elected in 1957 to serve for a second term of office until the next International Conference.

The International Committee of the Red Cross sprang from a small group of five Genevese citizens who were the first to adopt Henri Dunant's ideas.

In 1863, these five citizens began by constituting a Committee whose action led in 1864 to the conclusion of the first Geneva Convention between Governments.

The International Committee has continued to be composed exclusively of Swiss citizens (now 25 in number). It thus has the character of a neutral organ of the International Red Cross. It is the guardian of the Red Cross principles. Its action is international and its role may be summarized as follows:

To maintain the fundamental and permanent principles of the Red Cross, to recognise newly established National Societies and to work for the continual improvement of humanitarian international law ;

To disseminate the Geneva Conventions ;

To contribute towards the preparation and development of medical personnel and medical equipment, in co-operation with the Red Cross organizations, Army Medical Services and other competent authorities ;

To endeavour to ensure at all times that the military and civilian victims of war, civil war or internal disturbances receive protection and assistance.

It is essential for nurses to have a thorough knowledge of their rights and duties under the Geneva Conventions, and to that effect, the ICRC publishes from time to time valuable and readily accessible information which should be part of every school of nursing library.

In time of war, the ICRC will see that the Geneva Conventions are applied;

it will take action, in its capacity as a neutral institution, on behalf of all victims of conflicts, in particular military and civilian wounded and sick, prisoners of war and others.

The delegates of the ICRC visit prisoner of war camps—during the last war the ICRC sent thousands of food and clothing parcels to those in need, in particular to camps.

The ICRC is the universally known centre for receiving and transmitting messages concerning prisoners of war, and civilians in occupied territory.

It is also the duty of the ICRC to improve, insofar as its means allow, the condition of war victims. Unfortunately, its means are very limited and needs are immense—assistance has had to be provided far beyond the post-war years.

The League of Red Cross Societies was established in 1919. Up to then, the Red Cross had had but one aim—that given to it by its founder: the relief of the wounded and sick on the battlefield. During the first world War, the Red Cross Societies of belligerent and neutral countries had given magnificent proof of their usefulness, recruiting innumerable members and enjoying extraordinary prestige.

The close of hostilities would normally have put an end to this work, but there was such wide suffering in the world that several Red Cross Societies felt they could not interrupt their activity which had shown itself to be so useful to humanity. Not only did innumerable war victims still need their help, but there were in addition, at all times, even more numerous victims of epidemics, famine and natural disasters, who deserved help, in the same spirit and with the same devotion.

The National Societies could do much to alleviate this suffering, but still more if they grouped themselves together in order to exchange experience, help one another and unite in a universal federation which would serve humanity as a whole.

Thus it came about that the *League of Red Cross Societies* whose role is to facilitate at all times the humanitarian action of the National Societies and to encourage cooperation among all its members, was created.

There are at present 80 National Societies. Almost every country in the world therefore has a Red Cross Society, or a Red Crescent Society for the Moslem countries, with the exception of Pakistan which has adopted the Red Cross, and Iran where this emblem is replaced by that of the Red Lion and Sun.

They all have the same aim: the alleviation of suffering, without distinction of race, religion, nationality, class or political beliefs.

The League co-operates with the ICRC in fields of action which concern one or the other institution. A special agreement between the two organizations defines their respective competencies.

Generally speaking, the training of Red Cross medical personnel (*i.e.* all members of medical team: doctors, nurses, nurses' aids, etc.) comes within the competency of the two International Red Cross organizations, which consult each other in order to co-ordinate their work and avoid overlapping.

The League's functioning is ensured by its Governing Bodies and its Secretariat.

The *Board of Governors* meets every two years, establishes the League's programme of work and takes all important decisions. It is indeed the international parliament of the Red Cross.

At its last meeting held at New Delhi in October—November 1957, following the XIXth International Red Cross Conference, some seventy National Societies were represented; five new Societies were accepted into membership, bringing the total number of Societies members of the League to 80. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was re-elected as one of the five Vice-Presidents of the Board. Many decisions

were taken concerning the functioning of the League including the nomination of Mr. Henry W. Dunning as Secretary General. Mr. Dunning replaces M. Bonabes de Rouge who has reached the age of retirement after serving the League for some 33 years including 21 years as Secretary General.

The Executive Committee meets between the Board of Governors' sessions and exercises the latter's powers and subsequently reports to it.

The Secretariat of the League in Geneva is the headquarters of the Federation.

In addition to the Secretary General and Under Secretary General, the Administrative and Financial Services, the Secretariat has technical Bureaux specializing respectively in the organization and development of National Societies, information and publicity, and each of the four basic activities of Red Cross Societies: health and welfare, relief, nursing and Junior Red Cross.

The League is financed by contributions from the Member Societies.

The Nursing Bureau

As in the case of all the other League Bureaux, the main responsibility of the Nursing Bureau is to assist National Societies in developing, in this case within the field of nursing, those Red Cross activities which are most needed in their respective countries, and to act as co-ordinating agent between the Societies.

The Bureau is guided in its action by the recommendations of the *Nursing Advisory Committee* which meets in principle every two years. It is attended by a small group of Red Cross nurses delegated by their National Societies and representing as much as possible various parts of the world, and by representatives from the international organizations concerned with nursing such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Council of Nurses and

the World Health Organization. Since its inception in 1919, the Bureau has had four nurse Directors. The present staff is composed of myself, as Director, Miss L. Petschnigg as Assistant Director, and two secretaries.

The programme of the Bureau may be summarized as follows:

(a) To encourage national Red Cross Societies in their efforts to enrol a sufficient number of nursing personnel for service in time of emergency—war, natural disasters, epidemics;

(b) To assist National Societies in their educational programmes for all types of nursing personnel; schools of nursing, basic and post-basic; specialized nursing courses; refresher courses and workshops; the training of auxiliary nursing groups, etc., provided that such activities meet a recognized need in the country concerned;

(c) To ensure in all Red Cross nursing activities the maintenance of professional standards as laid down by the International Council of Nurses.

Practically, the Bureau can assist National Societies in any one of the following ways:

By facilitating exchange of information between Societies and bringing to their notice any documentation relating to current and emerging trends in nursing;

By encouraging National Societies to grant scholarships not only to their own nursing personnel, but also to qualified nurses from other National Societies who may not have the necessary resources for this purpose. The Nursing Bureau acts as intermediary and assists in the planning of such study grants with a view to making the best possible use of the available time and money;

By contributing to the development of Home Nursing instruction (health protection and simple nursing care in the home) based on the use of modern

teaching methods and the accepted principles of pedagogy. The Nursing Bureau, upon request from National Societies, assumes the responsibility of training Home Nursing instructors in the different countries and they in turn teach home nursing courses in their community, adapting in each case the content of the courses to the needs of the people.

An idea of the size of the present-day Red Cross nursing world can be had from the fact that twenty-eight (28) National Societies operate schools of nursing—some 285 in all. From these schools, as well as from among the best graduates of non-Red Cross schools, are recruited the Red Cross nurses throughout the world who serve as branches of nursing in both the hospital and the public health fields, assisted by large numbers of Red Cross trained nurses' aids.

The Bureau keeps in close touch with National Societies through correspondence and through visits paid by the Director and Assistant Director to these Societies. Thus, in 1957, the Director's schedule included a visit to several countries in Asia. This is how, following upon an invitation received from the Indian Red Cross, I visited several Branches of the Society, together with Miss A. Pfirter of the ICRC, from November 7 to December 1, 1957. Everywhere, we were also the guests of the Trained Nurses Association of India and this gave us a very welcome opportunity of studying together how much and in what way the nurses in India could participate in Red Cross programmes and generally contribute to spreading knowledge about the Red Cross and increasing the latter's action.

It became obvious that the Indian Red Cross home nursing programme could be expanded with the assistance of a greater number of nurses participating in the teaching and it is my sincere wish that many Indian nurses will become interested in developing such a programme in their country.