

From Lint to the Inspection of Vessels :

The Amazing Development of Red Cross Tasks ¹

Just as the tree obtains nourishment at its roots, so we come to draw strength and inspiration at the very source of a noble idea, where the Red Cross was born and where it has grown.

Delegates of 90 Societies, representing 157 million members, have flocked here from all parts of the world to celebrate and pay tribute to one hundred years of service and unlimited devotion to the welfare of mankind.

This commemoration is a suitable vantage-point from which to review the road which has been travelled in the course of a century by a great movement and also to look ahead in order to study the future, its prospects and its limitations.

Recalling the past history of the Red Cross leads us to its starting point : a battlefield where the cry of thousands of wounded resounds and one man alone stops to heed it ; one man alone resolves to help. For he is filled with compassion ; not passively, but actively, in a manner calling forth the best which is in every man. And who was he ? Just a visiting stranger !

It is this visiting stranger who summons us here today ! A young man braving the dangers of war in his desire to be received in audience by the Emperor in order to obtain a concession. And suddenly his plans are changed ; the plight of 40,000 wounded men and their plea stops Henry Dunant in his tracks. This Genevese is no longer the business man in a hurry. For the rest of his life this plea was to resound and he in turn launched an appeal to which millions of men and women are still responding.

¹ In its number of February last, the *International Review* published the text of the lecture given in August 1963 by Mr. F. Siordet in the Lecture Hall of Geneva University, in the programme of public lectures organized on the occasion of the Red Cross Centenary.

We now produce the text of Mrs. S. Gabru's lecture within the same programme. (*Edit.*)

Who were these wounded ? Strangers ! For what cause had they been fighting or defending ? Dunant cared nothing for the reason behind the fighting, he only saw these men as brothers, brothers who had been bent on destroying one another.

The sight of so much suffering touched Henry Dunant to the quick. But what could one single stranger do in the face of so much suffering ? He appealed to the population of Castiglione and thus improvised the first volunteer relief service.

Later, when Henry Dunant appealed to the heads of States and to ordinary men and women, he was convinced that all men, high or low, have at heart the same noble sentiments as those which moved him at Solferino.

He realized the greatness of his discovery and its limitless possibilities.

Shortly after, the author of " A Memory of Solferino " was to see his idea embodied in a Convention and symbolized by an emblem sanctioned by treaty, for, five years after Solferino, twelve States signed the first of the Geneva Conventions, named after that historic city.

From then on the emblem of the Red Cross could be seen on every battlefield, a bastion of humanity, sometimes shielding the wounded, the medical personnel, buildings and vehicles, sometimes acting as a passport opening the way for volunteer workers to go beyond the front line.

Wherever there is war or conflict, the Red Cross hastens to the scene as a messenger of peace, humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality. Its delegates are the human link where formerly none had seemed possible. They save hostages and persons condemned to death.

Whilst belligerent strategists section off parts of the world on which to direct their destructive power, there is another organization studying another form of strategy for the purpose of salvaging what it can in the wake of devastating might ; and the men, women and children who owe their lives to it are legion.

The voluntary workers of the Red Cross walk amidst chaos, deaf to the canon's roar, oblivious of the danger which threatens them and indifferent to the passions which fan the ardour of battle. Their only protection is a Convention and an emblem as they tend the wounded of both sides with equal devotion, for doctors and nurses know that life is a divine gift of equal value to all men.

The women of Castiglione beside the wounded had the same qualities of the heart as the nurses of today. But how much progress has been achieved in medical science over the past century !

We have said that the Red Cross volunteers are neutral and bestow their care equally to all wounded, whereas the combatants on both sides of the conflict justify their work of destruction. The workers of the Red Cross remain neutral and yet they are not from another planet. The majority of them come from the very countries which are engaged in the fatal struggle and the outcome of the fighting affects that which they hold most dear : their country and what this word represents for every man.

Yet they remain neutral. They must do so in the accomplishment of the work they have promised to undertake, a work of brotherhood in spite of differences of nationality, religion, political opinions and so forth. For this purpose, they must act in a manner which appears to them to be just. It is almost total sacrifice.

It is certainly no easy matter to serve the Red Cross. There are times when it seems almost impossible to raise oneself above differences of nationality and politics. However, this has to be possible ; it is the only means, as has been demonstrated by a century of hard work.

The Red Cross must triumph over all differences ; it is the last stronghold of humanity and independence ; it is hope for the world.

And yet we know that those who work for the Red Cross are neither demi-gods nor supermen, but mere mortals, vulnerable like all men, recruited among volunteers in every country, from all levels of society. Their cause alone is great and sacred ; it is that which gives them strength to persevere. What they have accomplished seems incredible. Their deeds are unostentatiously recorded in the annals of the Red Cross.

The Red Cross has had its martyrs, for unfortunately the Geneva Convention has not always been respected. Volunteers who have fallen innocent victims to bombs and bullets are many. The world is indebted to them. If humanity is precious, they have been its finest jewels. They have generously given their lives for persons unknown to them throughout the world. Their dedication has taken them far from their homes, into the heart of the jungle, into the sands of the desert or into the snowy wastes.

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Such is the spirit which should inspire those in the service of the Red Cross. Before reviewing the evolution of our great movement's mission, it was I think essential to emphasize this aspect, for not all of the manifold activities which I shall now describe could really achieve their objective if they were not conceived and impelled by such a spirit.

Since the time when lint was the mainstay of the dressings for the wounded on the battlefield of Solferino, the Red Cross has developed in scope and action to an amazing degree. After taking up the cause of the wounded and sick abandoned on the battlefield and after making sure through the Geneva Convention that they would be cared for, the Red Cross turned its attention to the condition of prisoners of war, in order to ensure respect for the lives of those who have no protection and who are entitled to humane treatment. Behind barbed wire, hundreds of thousands of prisoners, although belonging to a civilized world, have had to live in deplorable conditions, where subsistence and the need of food and water precluded any other consideration. To these destitute victims, only the delegate of the Red Cross brings real hope and even their guards hesitate to discard all respect in the presence of these representatives of humanity.

Even more are the prisoner's moral torments of separation from his family alleviated by the messages which the Red Cross is able to transmit ; by this means, prisoners and their families are given comfort and especially the courage to go on hoping. But at the beginning, what caution was necessary in the extension of our work for the benefit of prisoners of war ! In 1870, when an information bureau was set up in Basle, to deal with victims of the Franco-Prussian war under the patronage of the International Committee, it was not then placed under the sign of the Red Cross. This is a precedent which is worthy of note.

All these activities on behalf of victims of war reached their culminating point during the First World War and at that time a new phase of activity was undertaken—assistance to civilians who had been affected by hostilities and had been forced to flee. In order to cope with these innumerable tasks, the National Societies have to recruit thousands of men and women of goodwill prepared to serve the Red Cross.

Then in 1919, a wonderful thing happened. It was realized that these thousands of voluntary workers should not be disbanded, but

should remain close to the Red Cross and continue their good work in other fields. Thus it was that the world federation of National Red Cross Societies—called the League—was born for the purpose of carrying out, also in time of peace, tasks calling for a spirit of devotion equal to that which had fostered the assistance to victims of war.

Henceforth, nurses whose training is a constant major concern of the Red Cross, will tend hospital patients ; not only the wounded and sick victims of man-made conflicts, but those stricken by illness, accident or natural disaster.

An innovation of capital importance to medicine came to their assistance, that is : blood transfusion, which saved thousands of otherwise hopeless cases. This was a development which must be mentioned straight away, in view of its outstanding importance among the activities of the Red Cross. Anonymous volunteers freely give of their precious blood ; the Red Cross collects and stores it until it is transfused to the unknown person in need.

Donation of this kind is particularly important when numerous casualties occur all at once, as happens when natural disasters take place. We have all a recent example of this in mind. More than in any other field does the solidarity of National Societies and their instructions to first-aiders become evident in events of this kind when the ever-vigilant resourcefulness of the Red Cross brings assistance to the victims.

But although the Red Cross is known for its activities which catch the public eye, such as those I have just mentioned, there are within its scope a thousand humble tasks which are no less necessary. We have but to recall all the old people, left to their solitude, the war wounded and the people who suffered injury in natural disasters, condemned to lead a life without joy or hope. The Red Cross does not forget them. Its voluntary workers, often young people, keep them company, reading to them, making themselves generally useful and, with the co-operation of entertainers, restore laughter to hearts from where it had been long absent.

The work of the Red Cross on behalf of the disabled, is aimed at enabling them to return to an active life and a normal place in society, through the patient devotion of nurses and the ingenious appliances designed to help them.

To some extent, is not the plight of the thousands of refugees thrown into internment as a result of conflict similar to that of the

disabled ? The international institutions of the Red Cross, particularly the League, assume the burden of bringing them relief. It is at times striking that such difficult tasks are performed by so few people, and with such speed. The financial outlays for these activities are astronomic and constitute an eloquent reflection of the generosity both of the members of the Red Cross and of private or public donors who, although not belonging to the Red Cross are in sympathy with its ideal.

For a great many of its tasks, the Red Cross calls upon young people and the importance of the Junior Red Cross movement cannot be over-emphasized. It seems to me that it is essential for children to grow up in an atmosphere where a spirit of mutual assistance prevails and for them to become familiar at an early age with the various means of providing relief, beginning with first-aid which may be given in the event of accident, at school, on the roads and even at the swimming pool or beach. By directing the interest of the young towards their comrades in other countries, through correspondence or the sending of personal parcels, a basis of friendship among peoples is laid ; is not adult mentality dependent on upbringing during childhood ? The Red Cross, accepted in all countries, no matter what the prevailing political atmosphere, teaches children love of one's fellows and mutual assistance irrespective of race, creed or politics. And this is the school of that tolerance which is so necessary within and among nations.

Today, it seems to me that the Red Cross has gone beyond the stage where it needs to propagate its ideals. Its benefits are so greatly appreciated and its principles so widely known that the calls made on its international institutions—the League and the ICRC—requests for assistance, advice and suggestions, are ever more numerous. Since the end of the Second World War, twenty new national societies have joined the institution. Most of them are from the continent of Africa. As soon as they became independent they hastened to apply for admission as members of the International Red Cross, particularly of the League, for to them membership of our great organization is identified with one further necessary attribute of independence.

There is a considerable field of activity open to all these new Red Cross Societies and also to others which will come to their aid; for there is a crying need for them. Apart from the beneficiaries of the traditional activities which will continue to be carried on,

people in need of education, care and tuition in hygiene are legion, and the problems besetting the young National Societies are nothing short of titanic.

What are the limits to their tasks? The activity of the Red Cross must always be commensurate with human need and suffering, otherwise it would be quite out of character. But this means that the Red Cross must heed the needs and sufferings of a type quite different from those which spurred on the pioneers of our movement. For example, there are the illiterates, with no technical skills, who are potential victims of conditions prevailing in the world of today, and they must be enlightened in order for them to be less dependent on others.

As the yardstick by which to measure the limits of its activity, the Red Cross has a reliable criterion—that is, its set of principles, universally accepted by all its members. Provided these are interpreted not in a narrow-minded way, but with a full view of all their possibilities, these principles are the surest guide to the action which comes within the scope of the Red Cross ideal. It is not by chance that the Geneva Conventions, which have been ratified by nearly all States, stipulate that only activities which are consistent with Red Cross principles may be carried out under the aegis of the red cross emblem.

We need not recall here all these principles, but let us mention the most essential: that is to say humanity, as defined and unanimously adopted by the Council of Delegates in 1961 in Prague:

“The Red Cross, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours—in its international and national capacity—to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, co-operation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.”

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The peacetime activities of the Red Cross, co-ordinated by the League, have been extended to include the promotion of mutual comprehension amongst young people, and of health and hygiene, with the aim of preventing rather than alleviating suffering.

Alas, the Red Cross has still to attend to suffering which is all too current ; that of the victims of all sorts of armed conflicts which never cease. The Second World War was a testing ground on a large scale for the accomplishment by the Red Cross of the tasks that it had assumed for the benefit of both military and civilian victims. But well before 1939, the Red Cross was called upon to widen the scope of its activities during conflicts, and from 1945 onwards conflicts have become more and more frequent. I am referring here to civil wars and other internal disturbances which are the more cruel because of the furious passions of the antagonists. The International Committee and the National Societies underwent a hard apprenticeship, particularly in the Spanish civil war, a tragedy related by Dr. Junod in his fine book *Warrior Without Weapons*, where he says :

Everywhere throughout Spain, with the Whites and with the Reds in Burgos and in Madrid, in Valencia and in Barcelona, the delegates of the International Committee of the Red Cross were doing the same kind of work. The web we weaved endlessly over a torn and divided nation was a network of misery and suffering, of despairing appeals and heart-breaking tragedies.

Not only the relatives of the missing and the mothers and wives of the executed came to us, but the prisoners themselves wrote. Terrible revelations and heart-rending plaints came to us from the dungeons in which so many men were cut off from the outside world.

What could we do ? We had no authority and no right to intervene. It needed a lot of courage to say to those men who were holding on to the reins of government in the general chaos : " This and that atrocity is being committed in your prisons...? "

I cannot mention the name of Dr. Junod without recalling him to mind during the war in Ethiopia. It is thanks to this noble servant of our movement and to numerous National Societies such as those of Sweden, Great Britain, Egypt, Holland, Norway and Finland that the Red Cross was introduced into my country. At the time of the greatest danger their presence, the help which they brought to us and their deeds of bravery, have fired Ethiopian hearts with the Red Cross ideal, even before the principles of the movement were known to us. I would like to pay them a tribute on this occasion, a tribute which they have richly deserved.

Yes, this is the type of conflict which the ICRC delegate so rightly spoke of as having unceasingly necessitated the International Committee's intervention. There was, for instance, the conflict in Palestine, the war in Algeria, the Hungarian revolution of 1956, the conflict in Cyprus, in the Lebanon, in the Congo and in Cuba. Humanitarian tasks in these cases are much more difficult to carry out than those which have to be performed during international conflicts, for they are based not on the Geneva Conventions as a whole, but only on a single provision contained in these Conventions. This provision is contained in Article 3, which merely lays down the essential humanitarian principles and enables the International Committee to offer its services.

Finally, let us recall the latest phase, that is to say, the recent evolution of the Red Cross activity during times of international tension, about which yesterday's speakers spoke at length. The aim of this activity is to intercede on behalf of the people who have to suffer from such a situation and even to prevent the outbreak of hostilities which would give rise to suffering on a vast scale.

Because of its independent and neutral character, States have had recourse to the International Committee. For example, during the repatriation of Koreans from Japan. Similarly when diplomatic relations were recently broken off between the Netherlands and Indonesia, elderly persons who remained in Indonesia were able, through the intermediary of the National Societies and the ICRC to receive their pensions which were so vitally important to them.

Again last Autumn, during the Cuban crisis, the Great Powers wished to entrust to the ICRC the task which was eloquent testimony to the confidence which the Red Cross and the International Committee have been able to engender. This confidence demonstrates the extent of the possibilities available to the Red Cross, of preventing incalculable suffering. When it accepted this task, the International Committee laid down certain conditions and strict guarantees. There was surprise in some quarters that the ICRC did not refuse outright to intervene, for they were concerned lest a breach be made in the organization's character of strict neutrality.

But has it not always been the rôle of the Red Cross to accept resolutely such missions as a neutral intermediary, when there is a chance, no matter how slight, of avoiding a catastrophe ?

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At the beginning of this talk, we heard how Henry Dunant moved Heads of States and thousands of private individuals to pity for the wounded, so ignominiously abandoned on the battlefield. Since then civilization has been more concerned with the individual : the child receives care not only from its mother but also from nurses and doctors ; and a whole series of persons and institutions are occupied in taking steps to ensure hygienic living conditions for the child, watching over its feeding and physical development ; governments organize the educational system from which it will derive the most benefit and its cultural inheritance springs from thousands of years of experience which will enable it later to make a contribution to society.

To-day man enjoys the fruits of civilization which he requires for a happy life, yet in fact he lives under the constant threat of a war which could reduce to nought the progress which has been achieved by dint of so much labour. And it is I think the fate of man to-day which must be the subject of our concern. His life is a profound contradiction, for he seems to observe the paradox of our times, powerless to do anything about it and often resigned to it, whereby millions are spent on medical research in order to isolate the bacteria which are noxious to health, whilst at the same time even more millions are allocated to means of mass slaughter.

Let me say that those of us who have come from far and who aspire to modern civilization are confounded by this contradiction. I have admired, to the point of envy I must admit, the meticulous care devoted to your babies, but it seems to me that all this care is futile if it has to be accompanied by the passive acceptance of weapons which will make of your sons both target and killer. From this point of view it would seem that man's forward march over thousands of years has not taken him far ; he has even been doing nothing more than mark time.

The Red Cross has drawn up Conventions to protect the wounded. Could it have a convention for the protection of mankind today which would eliminate this contradiction and for ever prevent men sound in mind and body from becoming wounded ?

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