

TESTIMONY TO THE ACTION OF THE FRENCH RED CROSS

We all know the magnificent work accomplished by the French Red Cross during the Second World War. This National Society has just published a booklet describing its activities in the Paris region. It was written by Mrs. Jacqueline Mallet, Directress of the French Red Cross and of the Treatment and Functional Rehabilitation Centres for handicapped children. Under the title *Du Joug à la Délivrance*¹ she recalls the war years from 1940 to 1945 when she was in charge of hospital centres and medico-social services for released prisoners and their families.

In his preface, the Vice-President of the French Red Cross and General Medical Inspector, Dr. Raymond Debenedetti, of the Paris Academy of Medicine, in a few lines of concentrated information, describes the author's character, her modesty and her devotion to duty, and he gives great praise to the spirit of mutual assistance and self-sacrifice displayed throughout that difficult period by those who, under the sign of the red cross, pursued their humanitarian task with tenacity in spite of the hardship of the times.

In her foreword, Mrs. Mallet states that her intention is to recount "the initiative shown by the French Red Cross in the Paris area under enemy occupation, and the self-denial to which its army of volunteers submitted in the face of events which affected civilians and combatants alike..." But readers cannot fail to observe the need which the writer feels, as she describes these often tragic misfortunes, to pay tribute to those teams whose members, daily in conflict with themselves, had to call upon their innermost resources to face up to tasks which they knew to be difficult and dangerous. The author has arranged her work into three natural divisions: 1) The French Red Cross as an auxiliary of the Army Medical Service; 2) The French Red Cross in the service of the Ministry of Prisoners, Deportees and Refugees; 3) The French Red Cross during the struggle for liberation.

In the first of these three sections, the author recalls the mission accomplished from 1940 onwards by numerous volunteers in hospitals and convalescent homes. After 1945, one of the other impor-

¹ French Red Cross, Paris, 1964.

tant activities of the French Red Cross was tuberculosis control in prisoner-of-war camps, the organization of a central registry of post-war tuberculosis patients and the setting up of sanatoria in the Black Forest for prisoners unfit to travel.

The second section of the book deals with the repatriation of prisoners, for which purpose the Ministry of Prisoners, Deportees and Refugees was set up in August 1944. The Red Cross took an active part in this.

"... Nurses, social workers, emergency teams, ambulance drivers, first-aiders and airborne nurses of the Auxiliary Service" co-operated in the work on behalf of these war victims of every nationality: Russians, Hungarians, Poles and others. "... Our work is by no means easy", one of the nurses wrote in her diary at that time. "We must organize housing arrangements in as short a time as possible for all these sick people, many of whom are typhoid or tubercular cases; we must also look after the able-bodied whom we group according to their nationalities and see to the feeding of all these people who have been deprived of food to such an extent that their sole consideration is the alleviation of their hunger..." Some of the photographs illustrating the book show scenes of emaciated people, their faces sunken with hunger, but reflecting a ray of hope at the sight of the Red Cross.

The third part of the book takes us into the thick of the struggle from 1942 onwards; with the Allied air-raids, the invasion in 1944, the ambushes and the street fighting. The French Red Cross is everywhere, setting up tracing services for missing persons, services for assistance to interned civilians, for relief to children, for food distribution. It intervenes to obtain the release of prisoners and its women ambulance-drivers transport the wounded and the sick at the peril of their own lives. Nationality is not a matter for consideration; what matters is to save those in peril. It was from this time on that first-aid began to develop in France until it achieved its present-day importance.

The most fascinating pages of the book are perhaps those which describe Red Cross action at a time when obstacles were arising which were to be overcome at any price; the author quotes many examples of a modest Red Cross branch led by courageous people breaking down opposition which might have been thought insuperable.

J. Z.