

**From June to December 1963 :
more than six thousand visitors !**

For some time past a considerable number of visitors from countries near and far have been coming to the headquarters of the ICRC. In 1963, in this year of celebration of the institution's Centenary, their numbers were to increase from June onwards to reach a figure of 4338 during the period July 15 to September 15. The number of visitors between June and December reached a total of over six thousand, to whom should be added delegates to the Congress (400 persons).

Visitors arrived from all over the world, by car, train or air. Some of the young even hitch-hiked their way to the ICRC. Delegations of National Societies were often of some considerable size and travelled in organized groups : 200 members of the South African Red Cross, 120 members of the Japanese Society, 150 representatives of the Mexican Red Cross. The Baltic countries were also well represented. There were 150 members of the Swedish Red Cross, 120 from the Finnish Society. There were also groups of from 50 to 80 of the British Red Cross. National Societies of eastern Europe, the Middle East, the Far East and Africa also sent many of their members.

A special visitors' service was organized which, as can be imagined, was kept extremely busy. To each person announcing his arrival in advance an account was given in French, English, German or Spanish ; a film was shown and arrangements were made for a visit to the Central Tracing Agency which, by itself, represents a veritable synthesis of the practical work which is carried out in Geneva. Throughout the summer from morning until the evening there was a colourful flow of people : female and male nurses in their smart uniforms, members of the Junior Red Cross, schoolchildren and students of all nationalities, who had come in groups from Paris, Algiers, Warsaw, Zurich, scouts, etc. Many telephone calls and enquiries had to be answered, hotel reservations dealt with, arrangements had to be made for meetings for delegates of the Congress,

transport and various events needed organizing, the drawing up of a daily time-table, the sale of publications, cards, badges, etc.

Much effort was also involved in answering all sorts of questions, some of which, naïve as they were, showed what exceptional interest was aroused in the Red Cross amongst the general public by our movement's Centenary.

For many veterans of the National Societies, the visit to Geneva was like a pilgrimage, a kind of "act of faith". An aged member of the German Red Cross, for example, said to us: "Now that I have seen the town where Henry Dunant was born, I can pass the last days of my life in all tranquillity". For him as for many others advancing in years, who have known the suffering and the ideological torments of the two world wars, the Red Cross fulfils man's innate need to attach himself to a "moral absolute". Young people often find difficulty in understanding this permanent ideal represented by the Red Cross in an ever-changing world. They prefer rather to assert it through action and facts. They want to be informed, they ask questions, they reason. How many questions there were during those visiting hours!

We would mention just a few of these. Five English boy scouts, members also of the Junior Red Cross, on entering the ICRC's meeting room asked "What is the International Committee's programme for the next hundred years?" A question which it might seem somewhat rash to answer, but which is not a really surprising one; for if, generally speaking, one turns to the past on the occasion of a great anniversary, the young, on the other hand, look first of all towards the future and readily imagine a new century ahead...

The following questions were often put to us: "Will voluntary work always be possible in the modern economy which continues to expand?" . . . "Ordinary day-to-day life at present demands a great effort. Has one the energy or even the time to help others, as the Red Cross asks us to do?" And, "does free service still satisfy the requirements of an effective and up-to-date organization? In an international organization like the Red Cross, does one not have more need for professionals and not only for people of goodwill?"

However, the view was also expressed that the rise in the standards of education induces people of different classes of society to

interest themselves in humanitarian problems. Another question was asked in much the same sense : " Will not the Red Cross be gradually replaced by such organizations as WHO, UNESCO, etc. ? " It was then the right moment to explain to visitors of little experience the exact rôle of the ICRC, which, by reason of its neutrality alone, can intervene in time of war and during internal armed conflicts. Several seemed to fear the gradual disappearance of charitable institutions because of new economic and social conditions.

Amongst the leaders of National Societies one sometimes felt a certain anxiety about voluntary work and several of them made use of their fortuitous meeting at the ICRC to discuss this subject. Two local leaders of a national Red Cross, for example, one from a large town and the other from the country, had an exchange of views. It was thought that a difference exists in humanitarian work in towns and in the country. In a town Red Cross personnel consist of an increasing number of professionals engaged on a commercial basis, the directing staff continuing to remain voluntary. It seems, on the other hand, that in rural areas workers are often voluntary without in any way affecting their efficiency.

In conclusion, we would mention two examples, one humorous and the other moving, to show the diversity of the problems which the ICRC Visitors' Service had to face during this Centenary year. A small group of school children showed a keen interest in the 45 million card-indexes of the Central Tracing Agency, and above all in the life of prisoners of war. Many questions were asked and at the end a little voice was heard : " Was it very dark in those prison camps ? " On leaving the Agency a boy of twelve asked the guide : " How are your ambulances marked ? "

The inhabitants of Hanau in Germany discovered that Louis Appia's father had been a clergyman at their Cathedral. It was then decided to send a representative of the town to Geneva to pay tribute with a wreath of flowers to one who had a hundred years ago been one of the Five Founders of the Red Cross. A small ceremony duly took place in the International Committee's meeting room, in which hangs a portrait of Louis Appia himself.

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