

NEWS OF NATIONAL SOCIETIES

Formerly: International Bulletin of Red Cross Societies, founded in 1869

Belgium

Centenary of the Belgian Red Cross

The Belgian Red Cross has recently celebrated its Centenary. On Saturday, May 30, 1964 a commemorative meeting was held at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, in Brussels, attended by members of the Government, the diplomatic corps, magistrates, senior officials, army officers and representatives of some of the country's most influential organizations. These as well as delegates from the ICRC, the League and many National Societies, were received by the Belgian Red Cross national and provincial leaders.

The meeting opened with the reading of a message from Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, Honorary President of the Belgian Red Cross.

For almost a century, the Belgian Red Cross has unceasingly developed its disinterested mission in our country. To all who devote their time and energies to this movement which I hold dear, I address a heart-felt message of admiration and sympathy.

I express the wish that our Belgian Red Cross, heir to a long tradition of devotion, may continue to set an example of productive and generous fellowship and to bestow the benefits of its universal charity for the relief of human misery and suffering in all its forms.

Then H.R.H. Prince Albert, President of the National Society, briefly outlined the history of the Belgian Red Cross and recalled its many tasks in war and peace. He explained how the Society of Aid to the Wounded, founded in 1864, developed into an important organization for relief, protection of health, education and medico-social action. The Prince expressed the desire to see the Red Cross working ever more closely with the population and he appealed to

all Belgians to show their sympathy for the Red Cross. He declared his faith in the institution's future and his confidence that youth will carry on the good work for generations to come.

We now quote the main parts of his speech, which met with long applause :

The first really important display of Red Cross efficiency in Belgium was the work it carried out during the First World War. Within a few days ambulance units had been organized throughout the country ; staff and equipment for 20,000 hospital beds were collected.

Of all the missions undertaken by the Red Cross in favour of the Belgian army and population, one stands out in particular, it is the Hôpital de l'Océan which was set up under the impetus of Dr. Antoine Depage and was made possible thanks to the far-sighted support of Queen Elizabeth. The new methods which were put into practice in that hospital enabled the mortality rate to be reduced from 20 to 5% and were subsequently adopted in the allied armies.

When peace was restored, the Red Cross had to face up to new demands, with the experience of four tragic years to inspire it.

The general programme which it then drew up and subsequently completed is still today the basis for its activity. It provides for co-operation with the Army Medical Service in time of war ; the protection of public health through education ; the organization of an emergency relief service. This systematic organization was developed and consolidated over a period of twenty-five years and it was this which enabled the Red Cross to meet the exigences of the Second World War with the necessary means at its command.

All our countrymen know the work of the Red Cross from 1940 to 1945 : they saw it in action. I would merely mention a few salient points such as the running of military hospitals and the setting up of 157 new ones ; relief to prisoners of war which entailed in particular the despatch of millions of parcels to Germany, as well as material and moral assistance of all sorts ; help to the civilian population ; whole train-loads of supplies and pharmaceutical products received in Belgium under the aegis of the Red Cross ; to mention but a few examples.

This dry prosaic list does not convey much idea of the incalculable total of benevolent dedication, courage and also heroism which, in the course of those five years, enabled the Red Cross to accomplish a task of unprecedented scale.

Then came the peace-time readaptation with new tasks and responsibility born of the confidence which the population had placed in the Red Cross over all those years, so that not only was relief expected from it, but also interventions of all kinds, and sometimes even miracles! At that time its emergency relief services were reorganized: with a network of first-aid posts on the highways and a fleet of ambulances; the training of thousands of first-aiders and ambulance teams; the inauguration of blood transfusion services; the health education campaigns; comforts in hospitals through library services and welfare; the Junior Red Cross and its programme of action for education and international solidarity.

If, on this day when our institution celebrates the Centenary of its foundation, I have briefly to recall a century of its activities, I am fully aware of the inadequacy of mere words in so short a time to convey a picture, even an imperfect one, of these innumerable tasks. Many examples, more ably than my words, could have illustrated these historic pages of technical and rapid interventions, of fellowship and human solidarity.

If I have not quoted any names, it is because I desire to pay collective tribute to all those who, throughout a century of Red Cross activities, have given of their best, so that we might achieve our aims and our ideals and I wished to include all of them in a single expression of profound gratitude.

If we have had the opportunity on a number of occasions in the course of this year of commemoration to survey a past rich in events and fertile in achievements—if we have been able to look back with pride along the road we have covered—we have also wanted and want particularly today to reveal reasons to believe in the future. For this, it is essential that the Red Cross should live in close contact with the whole nation and that it should maintain permanent and constructive ties with the population, which is itself entitled not only to count on help from the Red Cross, but also to participate in its numerous activities.

Let all our fellow-citizens join us on the threshold of this second century of activities, that they may help us to start out anew with unshakable faith in the future of our institution. And to whom better than youth could we entrust the task of taking over from those who have made the Belgian Red Cross what it is today ? The youth of our country is sound and industrious ; it is resolutely idealist and imbued more than is believed with the spirit of peace, tolerance and fellowship. Ninety thousand young people of this country today form the strength of the Junior Red Cross. I have confidence in them : when the time comes they will take the helm of the Belgian Red Cross and will in their turn contribute to the building of a better world.

Messages to the Belgian Red Cross were then read from His Eminence Cardinal Suenens, Archbishop of Malines-Brussels, who was represented by Monseigneur Van Wayenbergh, from the Reverend Pichal, President of the Synod of the Evangelic Protestant Churches, the Grand Rabbi Dreyfus of Belgium and Maître Robert Hamaide, President of the Commission of Lay Philosophy and Ethics. These four eminent representatives of different beliefs were unanimous in stressing the universal character of the Red Cross and the importance of its impartiality in the effective accomplishment of its mission in the midst of conflicts.

Mr. Martin Bodmer of the ICRC conveyed a message of congratulations and good wishes from the Geneva Institution in which he said, inter alia :

It was on February 4, 1864, that the " Association belge de secours aux militaires blessés en temps de guerre " (Belgian Association for Assistance to Wounded Servicemen) was born ; it subsequently changed its name to the Belgian Red Cross. Of the sister Societies which exist today, yours is the oldest, as the first two, Württemberg and Oldenburg, founded slightly earlier, were incorporated into a German Central Committee in 1869.

You may be sure that today's ceremony is as dear to the heart of the 18 members of the International Committee as was the birth of the Belgian Red Cross to the five founders of the Committee at that time, for in the course of these hundred years your Society,

like your country, has never ceased to give its support and to display its understanding for our work. I wish to bring to you a testimony of profound gratitude.

When our founder Henry Dunant attended the wounded at Solferino after one of the most gory battles in history, he was assisted by a few volunteers who joined their exertions to his. One of these was a Belgian and when a splendid relief committee was founded in Brussels under the patronage of His Majesty Leopold II, Dunant was elected an honorary member.

In August 1864 plenipotentiaries from 16 countries met to draw up the Geneva Convention. Belgium was represented by Mr. Visschers who, before his departure, had been enjoined by the Duke of Brabant to express in Geneva—and here I quote—“all his sympathy for and his sincere desire to contribute to the work of an institution whose highest ideal meets his full understanding”. Today, we can appraise the foresight behind these words. The Government in Brussels was amongst the first to ratify this fundamental treaty—a real corner-stone of international law.

In April 1865, Mr. Uytterhoeven, President, was able to announce the definitive adoption of the new Society's by-laws. At the same time he reported the gesture made by a group of 300 retired army officers who, impressed by this ideal, decided to swell the Society's ranks.¹ By March 30, 1867, the Brussels Committee, with 27 influential members, drew up and adopted its regulations.

Then the Franco-Prussian war broke out. Immediately throughout Belgium the Red Cross sections gathered relief supplies and

¹ In February 1864, Mr. Uytterhoeven wrote to Gustave Moynier in Geneva ; we give below our translation of his letter :

Dear Mr. President,

I have the honour to acknowledge receipt of the Journals which you sent and for which I thank you.

We have just founded a Relief Committee along the lines of your own. We will communicate with your Central Committee as soon as we have received from His Majesty's aide de camp his acceptance of our offer of the presidency.

Only one thing is delaying matters ; we are short of bulletins giving the resolutions adopted at the International Conference. May I therefore ask your permission to have them reprinted in Brussels ? This is an indispensable document for the propagation of your fine and much needed initiative.

Please accept the assurance of my high consideration. I would be obliged also if you would convey to Mr. Dunant my esteem and admiration for his magnificent work and active charity.

André Uytterhoeven.

generously distributed them to the victims of the conflict ; doctors hurried to the front lines ; Belgian ambulance units went into action, particularly at Metz, Saint-Justin and Cambrai ; Brussels itself took in evacuated wounded and sick and on the high ground overlooking the city an impressive array of field hospitals sprang up. Thereafter, whenever similar disasters occurred, the Belgian Red Cross assisted belligerents in the same way.

In 1876 the high patronage to the Society was shared by the King and Queen, whilst the office of President was held by the Royal Heir. In 1889 the Red Cross was established in the Congo. The King himself took a lively interest in this new Society which developed in a remarkable fashion.

Unfortunately, in 1914 Europe was plunged into a war on an unprecedented scale. But although it divided the world it gave added strength to the spirit of solidarity in the Red Cross. Countries which were spared sent donations to the International Committee in favour of Belgium which was so sorely tried. The Committee in Geneva endeavoured to offset the greatest distress by setting up a Prisoners of War Agency and by instituting a system of visits to internment camps. We in Geneva have preserved with devoted care a particularly precious testimony of gratitude ; it is a medal portraying Queen Elizabeth, a sovereign who during these dark years was the very personification of limitless devotion to the alleviation of suffering humanity.

In the course of the war, on April 14, 1915, the occupying Power pronounced the dissolution of the Central Committee of the Belgian Red Cross, whereupon the International Committee, through its President, Gustave Ador, protested vehemently. The Red Cross, he stated, " claims the right to exist and to act in complete liberty . . . It cannot give way to an administrative measure which, reducing it to a mere cog in the machine of State, would deprive it of its autonomy or would even suppress its directorate."

Mr. Bodmer recalled the ever-growing work of the National Red Cross until the outbreak of the Second World War, when its work, assuming proportions hitherto unknown, was to be the forerunner of present-day tasks. He concluded with the words :

After a century, I think we are entitled to pause a while, to look back in order to evaluate the distance covered. As far as Belgium is concerned, we have seen that the achievements are great. The people of Belgium have a right to be proud of its Red Cross and we share that pride.

Let us now also look to the future. The work begun by Henry Dunant will call for renewed effort, will demand new victories. Those who devote themselves to the service of their fellow-men never remain idle. And we may look forward with confidence to this future, so long as there are men and women, as there are here in this hospitable country, who are ready to do their duty and even more than their duty in order that the world shall not be destroyed by hate. With the incomparable support of its illustrious patrons, under the masterly chairmanship of H.R.H. the Prince of Liège, with its network of steadfast volunteers, ever active and keen, the Belgian Red Cross can march to its destiny with its head held high.

The Countess of Limerick, on behalf of the League, of which she is Vice-President, then expressed her profound pleasure in conveying the congratulations and sincere best wishes of this world federation of Red Cross Societies. She recalled the Belgian Red Cross' place of honour among National Societies and also its magnificent work, particularly during the Second World War. She continued :

I cannot here recall all the rôles which the Belgian Red Cross has played at the international level, but I would stress its constant and effective presence at International and Diplomatic Conferences as well as at the League Meetings. May I also draw attention to its long-standing co-operation within the Executive Committee.

I would like to thank your National Society for the generosity with which it has always responded to emergency relief appeals launched by the League. I feel that I should underline its invaluable help and its presence on the scene of disasters. There is no service action undertaken by the League in which the Belgian Red Cross has not participated. May I make special mention of its assistance to the victims of earthquakes, floods and tidal waves, as well as to refugees all over the world in the form of large supplies of medicines, foodstuffs, clothing and generous cash gifts . . . not forgetting all

the other interventions. You may rest assured that the League is deeply grateful for this faithful co-operation.

That is why the spirit of solidarity, which inspires you and which leaves the way open to reciprocity, was strikingly illustrated when your country was so severely stricken by terrible floods in 1953. Almost all National Societies responded to the League's appeal and, in spite of this trial, you nevertheless made a point of sending relief supplies to the Netherlands and the United Kingdom—a truly fine example of human fellowship.

The Belgian Red Cross is the finest example of an old-established Society, which has known how to adjust itself to each situation, branch out into new activities at the right moment and meet the needs of today and to-morrow. It is in a leading position, thanks to its spirit of renewal and youth as well as its dynamism. Doyen of the National Societies, the Belgian Red Cross is today celebrating its centenary. On this anniversary, the League, the young federation of 102 National Red Cross, Red Crescent and Red Lion and Sun Societies, is proud and happy to pay tribute to the Belgian Red Cross, the oldest of all its members.

In this new century opening before the whole movement, may it continue and develop its work with the enthusiasm and faith which have so far guided it. I have pleasure in assuring it once more of my great admiration and in extending to it my sincere best wishes.

It then fell to Mr. J. Custers to say on behalf of the Belgian Government, in which he is a Minister, how the entire country is conscious of the great service rendered to it by the Red Cross since its inception and is deeply grateful for its constant efforts for the ever-greater effectiveness of its operations. He concluded :

We are convinced that the Red Cross will carry on its activity in the same splendid manner as it has so far and the Government will not fail to give all the support needed. Indeed, it has decided to give its financial support to the establishment and equipment of the National Blood Institute. As you can see, the place held by the Red Cross in medical and social assistance to the population is extremely important and is of greatly varied scope. I don't think there is any need to mention any other examples.



In the royal enclosure, the Royal Family (from right to left, Princess Paola and her children, H. M. the King and the Queen, Prince Albert, President of the Red Cross) present...

BELGIAN RED CROSS

... at the Centenary display.



In spite of its hundred years of age, the Belgian Red Cross is still young, alert and dynamic. Throughout its long and productive career it has always been in the forefront of progress, continually adapting its methods and operations to the circumstances and needs of the time. Its achievements are unquestionably remarkable and worthy of praise. It is my pleasure to speak for the Government to congratulate the Red Cross most warmly, to assure it of the solicitude of the public authorities and to wish it another century of constructive medical and social leadership, not only for our country but in all charitable endeavours in which our country is associated at the international level.

Under the enlightened guidance of its President, H.R.H. Prince Albert, it will undoubtedly respond to the call of its noble vocation.

After a performance by the orchestra of the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, a brilliant reception was offered at the Brussels town hall by the Collège des Bourgmestres et Echevins, the Brussels City Council and the General Council of the Belgian Red Cross.

In the evening the members of the Central Committee of the Belgian Red Cross, as well as the representatives from the ICRC, the League and sister Societies, were received at the Château du Belvédère by Their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Liège.

The grand fête organized by various institutions as a demonstration of amity for the Red Cross, and which took place at the Heysel stadium in Brussels on the following day, Sunday May 31, attracted some 30,000 spectators.

After hoisting the Red Cross flag, the Centenary Flame was lit and to the sound of Theban trumpets King Baudoin and Queen Fabiola took their places on the tribune of honour, after being welcomed by Prince Albert, President of the Belgian Red Cross, accompanied by Princess Paola and the young Prince Philippe¹. A procession of school children paraded before the tribune and made an offering to the Red Cross with the wording "By youth for youth". The public was then regaled with a programme of singing and dancing as well as a demonstration of a rescue operation involving a helicopter, several ambulances and lorries: in a matter of minutes several simulated

¹ *Plate.*

injured were carried off. Finally, to the strains of the March of the Red Cross followed by the National Anthem from three military bands, hundreds of balloons were released, carrying the emblem of the Red Cross high in the sky.

This concluded the days of commemoration of the Belgian Red Cross Centenary, thanks to which all the country together was able to manifest its attachment to the National Society, today representing within the nation a living force of human solidarity.

Great Britain

The British Red Cross News Review published an article by the journalist Jean Soward on WERN. We reproduce this below and readers will see how one of the works of the British Red Cross was instituted in a new field of mutual assistance¹.

The British Red Cross Society has over thirty homes for old people; but Wern, the home run by the Society's Caernarvonshire Branch at Portmadoc beyond the Snowdon range, must surely be unique. Or does one find, too, in the other Red Cross homes the same wide cross-section of old people living under one roof, each as far as possible in the manner to which he or she is accustomed?

Among Wern's inhabitants I was charmed to find an eighty-four-year-old gipsy who, since he treasures above all his freedom, has a cottage in the home's grounds and who, since he also prefers to cook for himself, is given a small weekly allowance enabling him to buy his own food.

There, too, a friend of the Princess Royal had a private room and her own small garden, and lived to the end of her days in a sort of gracious isolation, discouraging all intimacy and politely nodding to the other inmates if she happened to meet them.

¹ *Plate.*