

**Declaration of the Rights of the Child (Declaration of Geneva)**, by Kathleen Freeman, *The "World's Children," London, Vol. 41, No. 2.*

In view of the United Nations Declaration of November 20th, 1959, when the General Assembly unanimously adopted and proclaimed a Declaration of the Rights of the Child we felt that something of the history of the International Union for Child Welfare, of which the British Save the Children Fund was the founder member should be more widely known ; especially in relation to the Declaration of Geneva—the original Declaration of the Rights of the Child.

The background of events against which this history unfolds is November 1918 when Dr. Frederick Ferrière visited war-scarred Vienna for the International Committee of the Red Cross. His report on the condition of the children there and the reports of other I.C.R.C. missions in Central and Eastern Europe—reports of famine and distress, widespread epidemics and mounting tuberculosis (which was then termed 'a volume of human misery')—together with too little organized government help, all emphasized the urgent need to speed up voluntary effort. Out of such need the International Union for Child Welfare was founded.

Two important dates are associated with the creation of the Union—December 28th, 1919 and January 6th, 1920. The first is the date of the world-wide collection of funds made before the official birth of the Union, for the child victims of the war in Europe. The second date marked the official birth of the Union. At the meeting held on this date the following organizations took part as founder members : International Committee of the Red Cross, Save the Children Fund (created in London six months earlier) and the Swiss Save the Children Committee (dissolved in 1928). There were also other organizations present and their numbers were increased still further at the conference convened on February 25th to make a survey of the needs and to draw up a programme of relief work. It is interesting to note that among those early organizations which joined the Union and are still vigorously active today were : the French Save the Children Committee, the Netherlands Red Cross and the Radda Barnen Association of Sweden. Most of the other members were relief committees which disappeared when the acute distress resulting from the First World War had been relieved, or were absorbed by other bodies dealing with child welfare in a general way.

Etienne Clouzot, the first Secretary General, set up the Secretariat of the newly formed Union, a task for which his activity as Chief of Staff of the I.C.R.C. Secretariat had particularly fitted him.

During that first year the grants (made among others by the churches and by organized labour) were devoted chiefly to the relief of the children of Central Europe (Germany, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland), but aid was also sent to the children of the devastated areas in

France, and from the outset an allocation was made to the Armenian children.

The Union and its members ran extensive feeding programmes for Russian children during the famine in 1921-3. Assistance was also given to Greek children from Asia Minor and to Turkish children whose country had been laid waste by the war. Meanwhile, in Central Europe, the original field of action, the needs were still great, aggravated by the collapse of the currency in Germany and elsewhere. The Balkans, the Baltic States, Poland and Czechoslovakia, which had begun to recover their economic stability, could not deal unaided with the heavy burdens created by the refugees that poured into their countries.

From the emergency distribution of foodstuffs the Union passed on to other forms of activity of a more lasting nature, for example the setting up of various kinds of institutions. It inspired the system of sponsorships which has penetrated to all parts of the world and which today, under the auspices of many different kinds of organizations still continues to provide children in distress with the individual help of a foreign sponsor.

The Union gradually began to have its own workers. These were often those who were previously serving I.C.R.C., who had first operated on behalf of the Union. Among those early workers the Hungarian Vajkai sisters deserve special mention as they remained at their post until 1949. Both realized very soon that the relief actions would serve but a temporary purpose if they were limited only to relief. Rozzi therefore turned her attention to setting up nursery schools, a key factor in the social and moral rehabilitation of the families living in the poorest quarters of Budapest ; while Julie-Eve's work-schools for girls helped to bridge the gap between school and factory and gave them an opportunity of enriching their lives.

To Eglantyne Jebb, founder of the Save the Children Fund, emergency relief was not an end in itself ; for she believed that with it the building up of peaceful relations was a vital necessity. The idea found expression in the Children's Charter, the first detailed text of which was framed by the Save the Children Fund. The final text, very much shorter and known today as the Declaration of Geneva, was adopted by the General Council of the Union on February 23rd, 1923. It immediately became very popular and was widely endorsed and translated into many languages. Packed into a short preamble and five brief articles, Eglantyne Jebb managed to condense all that a sorely-trying generation, which had endured eight years of war, revolutions and economic upheavals, desired to guarantee for children everywhere.

The adoption of the Declaration of Geneva was the turning point in the policy pursued by the Union and indeed in international child welfare. Progressing from its original mission as a crusade against famine, disease and death, it developed into a campaign for the well-being and health of the child, which was less spectacular perhaps, but aimed at

long-term results. Many organizations adopted the Declaration of Geneva in 1923 : space does not permit of their enumeration.

On September 24th, 1924, the Declaration of Geneva was approved by the Fifth Assembly of the League of Nations, on the proposition of Mr. Valdez Mandeville from Chile, under the Presidency of Mr. Giuseppe Motta, former President of the Swiss Confederation, who commented that the Assembly in thus voting had consecrated it as the 'World Child Welfare Charter'. Member states were urged to accept the Declaration's principles. Even at this early date it was available in thirty-seven languages, and many government delegates spoke of its potential value and influence on national legislation and child welfare programmes.

Ten years later, on September 26th, 1934, Dr. Ingeborg Aas (Norway) speaking in the League's Fifth Commission said : "I want to point out that this year marks the tenth anniversary of the adoption by the Fifth Assembly of the League of Nations of what we call 'The Declaration of Geneva', formulated by the Save the Children International Union... The Declaration of Geneva goes a step further than Part XIII of the Treaty of Versailles which foreshadows in its preamble the protection of children and young persons ; it embodies the fundamental principles of Child Welfare—the term child welfare being used in its broadest sense. It does not enter into details, since measures to be taken must vary according to the needs and conditions of each country. In approving and adopting the Declaration of Geneva, the League of Nations and its members recognized the value of the principles therein embodied and implicitly bound themselves to put these principles into practice. The tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Geneva by the Assembly should be the opportunity of reminding the Assembly and the states members that they are all called upon to put into practice the principles of this Charter, and that they must therefore support the work of the League in this domain—through its Child Welfare Committee—as well as sustain and encourage the efforts of public and private bodies in the various states..."

We have travelled far today, but the Charter of the Rights of the Child has still to be recognized and observed, although the original Charter written by Eglantyne Jebb in 1922 on the Mont Salève overlooking the Lake of Geneva expressed the principles which have guided men and women in their work for the world's children irrespective of race, colour or creed—wherever those children may be.

In April 1946 the Social Commission of the United Nations gave renewed authority to the Declaration by asserting that 'the welfare of children, physically, mentally and spiritually must be the first concern of every nation, particularly having regard to the ravages of two world wars. The terms of the Declaration of Geneva should be as binding on the peoples of the world today as they were in 1924'. In 1948 its essence and some of its phrases were incorporated in the United Nations Declaration

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of the Rights of the Child and, with certain verbal revisions, the Declaration of Geneva was reaffirmed as the charter of the International Union for Child Welfare.

A year later the United Nations adopted and proclaimed its own Declaration of the Rights of the Child, thus establishing the great principle that voluntary effort can, and in fact does, sometimes inspire governmental action. While admitting that many of the rights and freedoms proclaimed in the United Nations Charter were already mentioned in its Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the General Assembly in 1948, the special needs of the child can justify a separate declaration which many believe has its roots in the original Declaration.

