

Still no time to kill

We have great pleasure in publishing this article by Miss Evelyn Bark who occupies an important position in the British Red Cross. She has not only undertaken a considerable amount of humanitarian activity in a practical sense, but she has also written a most interesting book which appeared two years ago, entitled No time to kill¹.

Members of the Red Cross certainly have occasion at times during their day-to-day work to live through moving moments filled with rich human experience. Mostly, however, they do not describe these in either books or articles, being content to keep them locked up within themselves as comfort and support for the dark days, when the very circumstances cast doubt on man's worth and greatness.

Miss Bark for her part has described the best of her memories and thus her book is a lesson in hope. In a series of rapid pictures she recalls her service to the Red Cross in various countries.

We therefore thought it to be of interest, and with her permission, to include, after the article, certain short extracts of her book, thanks to which our readers will be able to become better acquainted with an author who demonstrates in her writing the continuity and practical presence of the Red Cross ideal in the world today. (Editor's Note.)

When the second World War broke out I was the humble possessor of one First Aid certificate, and had little knowledge of the Red Cross outside the London area.

It was several months later—when I sat for a preliminary examination on Red Cross administration—that I gathered there

¹ Robert Hale Limited, 63 Brompton Road, S.W.7, London, 1960.

was something called the "International Committee". At that time, however, my major occupation was keeping on the right side of a formidable matron, in whose hospital I was learning the hard way to nurse the sick and wounded, so that my paper on the Geneva Committee, which is composed of a maximum of 25 Swiss citizens, was far from adequate.

Shortly after that I joined the staff of Clarence House, where the British Red Cross had its Foreign Relations Department. Outside, the grounds were being used for an exhibition to show the public how the Red Cross looked after prisoners-of-war. The layout was an exact copy of a German prison camp, complete with exercising yard, cookhouse with Red Cross parcels, notices on the walls concerning prisoners' rights under the Geneva Convention and crowded hutments in which figures on tiered bunks were reading, studying, playing musical instruments or writing letters home on the official forms. The whole thing was tragically realistic, even to the tall "German" guard, standing with his rifle at the ready at the entrance of the camp. Actually he was a wounded British infantryman who had volunteered for this unusual duty during the last days of his convalescence before returning to his unit. Perhaps in civilian life he was an actor; at any rate I remember he played his part so well—staring sternly and coldly ahead—that one day a woman visitor was seen to rush up and hit him! The work of some Swiss citizens, of the International Committee which had been such an ordeal to me during my examination, began to dawn on me.

Inside Clarence House I realised still more the vital part the International Committee played throughout the war and the invaluable help it gave towards the welfare of my own compatriots.

When the exchanges of desperately ill British and German prisoners took place in 1943 the excitement was intense. Some evenings I was on Red Cross duty in a packed cinema where a film of the hospital ships arriving in Belfast, Liverpool and Southampton was being shown. There was a white blur of handkerchiefs dabbing away in the darkness as the audience watched anxiously waiting relatives meeting the stretchers with their sad loads. VAD nurses, with the Red Cross emblem on their white veils blowing in the breeze and their smart dark blue red-lined capes swinging from their shoulders, were supporting the blind and limbless. As the picture faded from the screen to the accompaniment of an unseen choir singing "God send you back to me . . .", my Red Cross colleagues

and I went down the rows with our collecting tins. There was no need to shake them, for cheques, five and one pound and ten shilling notes were eagerly pressed into the slots.

The Red Cross parcels which were carried across enemy infested waters and channelled through Geneva are still talked about. Not so long ago I was travelling by train to one of our Branches, where I was to give a talk on the Geneva Conventions. As the train drew out of the station I took the first bite at my pencil in an attempt to make some notes. The only other occupant of the carriage—an army officer—was however eager to talk.

“As a matter of fact,” he began, “I always speak to anyone in Red Cross uniform because, without wanting to be dramatic, your parcels were my salvation when I was a prisoner of war.”

“That’s grand,” I responded, “It’s nice to meet a satisfied customer.” And I tried to go on with my notes, but it was no use.

“We had time to do a lot of thinking in those days,” he went on. Accompanied by the rhythmic click of the wheels and the rattle of passing trains the colonel continued to reminisce. He told me of the study he had made of the Geneva Convention for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, and before long we were back in the middle ages.

“What a shocking time prisoners-of-war had then—your fate depended entirely on the caprice of your enemies. They could leave you to die, or sell you into slavery, that is if they could get any price at all for you. It is thanks to the Red Cross and the Geneva Conventions that we got rid of some of the most vicious practices of warfare.” I fervently wished that he was going to address the meeting instead of me!

Today the British Red Cross is back on its peacetime basis, and we can easily reach our sister Societies in most corners of the world by letter, telegram, telephone and aeroplane, but I often think, as I open my post, of the times when the International Committee was the only bridge linking nation to nation.

The daily contents of my in-tray never fail to show the universality of the International Red Cross. There is perhaps a telegram from the International Committee of the Red Cross concerning a troubled area. The League of Red Cross Societies is launching an appeal for victims of famine. The headmistress of a school would like someone to talk to her pupils on the “Red Cross internationally” at the annual prizegiving, and a hospital in difficulties over two foreign patients inquires about our language cards. A

refugee has lost his one remaining treasure—a violin, and special drugs are needed in a remote part of Asia. In South America an oil company is sending home one of its employees in an iron lung; we must fly out a trained nurse and keep in touch with the Red Cross in the countries through which the invalid with his BRCS escort will pass. The telephone buzzes—Geneva is on the line—“ Un instant, s'il vous plaît. . . ”

Sometimes I have to hand over everything and take a study visitor from abroad to see the British Red Cross in action at home.

We set off by car to a Branch, and one activity within fairly easy reach of London is our school in Cambridgeshire for disabled girls. Our journey takes us through acres of low country to Ely, where the age-old tower of the Cathedral rises to overshadow the Bishop's Palace. Since 1946 this ancient building has been transformed into a special school. We are welcomed by the warden, who is appropriately Miss Welfare, and led straight into one of the class rooms. Jennifer is leaning out of her spinal carriage to cope with the typewriter perched on a stand. Beside her, Diana's machine is fitted with a holed plate over the keys, which are speedily depressed by means of a short stick in a partially paralysed hand. The speed? 80 words a minute and the letter faultless. Lydia is 15, and sitting in her wheelchair, she is studying shorthand. She is proud when I stenograph a few lines on her pad, and she transcribes them without hesitation. A local insurance company has promised her a job as soon as she has passed her final tests. In the next room Penelope is shaking in almost every limb from cerebral palsy, but she slips her arm under her leg. This acts as a lever and steadies her hand sufficiently to enable her to work on a picture of a king being crowned. From the boxes of crayons around her she has selected the colours for the magnificent robes and stained-glass windows of the cathedral.

Most of the pupils have already joined the Red Cross, and in the geography class all the pupils could show me Geneva on the map. Happy laughter echoes round the walls of the speech-therapy class, as those vocally handicapped attempt to pronounce my name.

The five year olds are brick-building and in the kitchen I watch several of the older girls propelling their chairs to the ovens to take out some delicious pies for our dinner.

The afternoon is for promenades—with processions of “ Invacars ” being helped along by the Red Cross.

Local shopkeepers make room for the pupils to reach the counters, or wares are brought out on to the pavements so that the week's pocket money can be wisely spent.

One of the girls has written a play for the puppets (a gift of Prince Richard of Gloucester) and all gather round to applaud a fascinating show.

Then there are Scottish reels to be practised and the invalid chairs are wheeled into formation as the gramophone is started up. With one hand to steer and the other to clasp her partner's, everyone whirls round to the rollicking music.

The disabilities are so varied that helping each other at bed-time has become a smooth routine. Sheila, who cannot move her arms, is undressed by Mary with the paralysed legs, while Susan cleverly pushes a bedside chair into position with her feet.

Once in a magazine an article appeared on the sad plight of the handicapped. Unbeknown to her teacher, a pupil of the Palace School wrote to the editor: "Dear Sir, we are glad of your help but we don't want your pity."

When my foreign Red Cross colleague arrived at this erstwhile home of bishops, she expected to find stillness and apathy. Instead she left to the sound of joyous laughter coming from the throats of noisy, energetic girls, gaily rushing about on wheels and crutches.

The work we had seen today was far removed from that of the International Committee, but we both agreed that in peace as in war, the Red Cross can bring comfort to many.

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Geneva, 1945. — In August 1945 I went to Geneva to see the International Committee of the Red Cross—the neutral Red Cross body made up of Swiss citizens which goes into action in time of war and armed conflict. The Committee had kept the standard prisoner-of-war parcels moving by all possible means. They had come from the four corners of the earth and, in order to prevent delays through the sinking of convoys or bombing of trains and ware-houses, large stocks had been piled at every conceivable point, and particularly in Geneva itself. I walked fascinated through the warehouse, known as “ Little New York ” with its lines of parcels stacked into miniature skyscrapers, all named after the numerous Red Cross Societies which had sent them—Canada Avenue, New Zealand Avenue, etc.

Having arranged for further supplies of parcels for our relief teams working in the hungry corners of Europe, I turned with an armful of inquiries to the International Committee's records. Here forty-six million cards classified “ lost ” or “ missing ” people of all nationalities into two giant indices—the first was a total register from A to Z, and the second consisted of duplicate information broken down into countries. Details of British were on blue cards, housed in a room with blue carpets and rugs, blue wallpaper, etc. In the Japanese room there was a rising sun tinge—orange cards, girl filing clerks in orange overalls working under matching lampshades, and so on. In another room were the huge Watson machines with their hole-punching devices, where girls merely pushing or twisting a handle a couple of times turned out amazing categories of information.

. . . It was, however, scrupulous care and not magic which had resulted in not one mother being told that her son was alive when in fact he was dead, or a wife that her husband was in an Allied hospital when he had been taken prisoner. Sometimes this had been extremely difficult, as in the case of Giuseppe Mario, son of a man of the same name. Giuseppe was taken prisoner in 1943 and brought to England. Captured with him and taken to a nearby camp was his friend, born on the same day, in the same village, with the same surname and baptized with the same Christian name. The only difference was that the mother of one was Maria Theresa, while the other was Maria Aplina, and one boy was transported to Camp 8 and the other to Camp 12, both, however, in the same district.

Ethiopia, 1950.—At that time I was at work with the Ethiopian Red Cross who, after the years of war and the long exile of the Imperial family with their ministers, were facing many difficulties. Their President, the Crown Prince, told me about some of the projects started. Their latest acquisition was a tough-looking ambulance to undertake the transport of the sick over the roughest roads, and I was glad to be able to hand over to five new first-aid stations some British Red Cross surplus supplies which had been stored in the British Consulate since the departure of our ambulance unit from Addis Ababa at the end of the Abyssinian war.

Some of these I sent to a clinic run by a woman doctor, another amazing Red Cross worker known to her many friends as "Aunty". This "Aunty" was born a White Russian and is the widow of a former British Consul. She spoke fluent Amharic as well as ten other languages, all of which she was inclined to mix up, so that at times in her excitement to explain things she would become rather incoherent. She was seeing an average of 120,000 patients a year, and in recognition of her splendid work the Emperor frequently made grants to her clinic from his private purse. For a whole day I worked with her. There were queues of diseased humanity—tuberculosis, malaria and cases of pneumonia for the hospital.

Jordan, 1951.—Nearby in Beit Jala I visited a home for blind girls. Nobody knew I was coming, and when I arrived the only sighted person—the housekeeper-cum-cook-cum-cleaner—was busy scrubbing the floors. Small children running round her were cleverly dodging the pail of water by the kindly warnings she called to them. There were thirty inmates ranging from the ages of sixteen months to twenty-two years. The headmistress, a woman of seventy, who had been blind since girlhood had a look of complete serenity. She spoke perfect English, as did many of the pupils, because most of the Braille books available are in our language. Some of the older pupils had started making Braille books in Arabic. Quite small children were knitting beautiful cardigans and jumpers in intricate patterns, while others were busy with beadwork baskets in which to put plants and flowers. All the designs were flawless and the colours were sorted by feeling the texture of each bead. I took up a blind baby of eighteen months and she put her arms round my neck and hugged me.

Five tiny children sat playing on a bench against the wall. Their blind teacher brought them forward to shake hands. Two of them pressed my hand to their lips and then began to jump and sing in Arabic " I kissed the lady's hand ". The other three then wanted to do the same. I left them to go and see the dormitories, where the beds were very close together. On my return I noticed the five children standing desolately in the centre of the room holding on to each other. I did not realize immediately that they could not find their way back to their seat against the wall. I went over to lead them but they would not even then let go of each other. Once back there among their toys they laughed joyously.

In fact there was a spirit of happiness in that place, where they asked for nothing but could obviously do with everything. I was glad later to be able to send from our London Headquarters supplies of Braille books, paper, typewriters, sewing machines, and various occupational material.

Throughout my visit my admiration for the Jordan Red Crescent women grew daily. Their working parties were magnificent, and they gave up hours of spare time to sewing, knitting, making bandages or feeding needy families and helpless patients in the hospitals. Funds were raised to build their own hospital, for which the British Red Cross helped to provide some of the equipment.

Greece, 1952.—I paid several visits to the Aesculapian open-air hospital at Attica Voula, where 400 of the 600 beds were occupied by children being treated for tubercular bone diseases. The children were sweet and enjoying the tuition being given them by Greek Red Cross welfare officers—embroidery, basket and leather work were particularly popular.

... The hospitals in Athens have a rota for accidents, and police and first-aid stations automatically direct ambulances by the calendar. On Wednesdays all casualties come to the Greek Red Cross Hospital, where there are normally 300 beds. When I arrived at ten o'clock one Wednesday morning extra beds already filled all the corridors, and everyone was working overtime ...

Austria, 1952.—Most of my work was connected with the millions who had dim prospects of ever finding a home again. Scarcely had sufficient funds been raised to help cover the emer-

gency needs of one batch of refugees, before more were uprooted, and the coffers of the Red Cross societies into whose countries these waves of wretchedness overflowed were usually strained to the uttermost. The refugee situation in Austria and Germany was again in the forefront of the public mind and further appeals were reaching the Red Cross . . .

. . . I made a dismal pilgrimage of the refugee camps—grim barracks, or row after row of wooden huts, with the old familiar smells of overcrowding and communal cooking, and the old familiar sights of beshawled women and bored looking men. The only sign of animation came from the noisy children. For many, day as well as night was spent lying on the iron bedsteads draped in drab army blankets. Above them, all that remained of personal belongings was piled on a rough shelf ; this was sometimes covered in newspaper pathetically cut out into lace-like patterns. Two bedridden sisters begged me for books in English or French, which they spoke fluently, to while away their dejection, and one old lady knitted up an ounce of grubby wool and unravelled it as soon as she came to the end, in order to begin all over again . . .

. . . For the next week I toured ugly pauper dwellings set in a background of glorious landscape. The lakes were silent and frozen and the forests glistened with heavy snows. Nearly all the refugees could speak German and I talked with family after family. For many their coming had been a grim adventure, but now they were quietly stoical and seemed resigned to adversity. Some had obtained work and a few of these had made efforts to transform one of the square single rooms in the long wooden huts into an individual home. The few possessions they had brought with them were carefully set out—a small icon on the wall or a pillow-case bordered with hand-made lace peeping from beneath an old army blanket.

Yugoslavia, 1952.—Next morning we kept on our overcoats as we walked round the offices of the Red Cross Headquarters. We found everything extremely well run, and were filled with admiration for the courage and tenacity with which the Yugoslavs overcame difficulties quite unknown to our Society. Teams of three, trained in public health, were touring the country to teach hygiene, and in some of the primitive areas instructed the people how to

construct their own latrines. Workers in factories throughout the country were given half an hour off each day to attend Red Cross lectures until the first examination had been passed.

Hungary, 1956.—The night before Christmas I spent helping the Austrian Red Cross with new refugees, who were still arriving over the frontier. They had come through dark woodland patches, across half-frozen marshland or over the canal. Some had even floated themselves across on a rubber tyre, and were accordingly soaked to the skin. It was a bitterly cold night and we were often knee-deep in snow. In improvised centres the Red Cross took care of the weary travellers, who donned new clothes and dried out their old ones, and drank their favourite beverage—sweet tea with lemon, after mugs of hot soup with a sandwich. They then went to bed for a few hours before buses and farm carts conveyed them to more permanent lodgings.

. . . Week after week the International Committee's columns of white lorries painted with the Red Cross emblem could be seen crossing the Austro-Hungarian frontier. The British Red Cross provided one convoy of fifteen vehicles and paid for its running over a period of several weeks. By consent of both the Russians and Hungarians these convoys were still being admitted through the barrier at Nickelsdorf in the spring of 1957, although the rest of the frontier had been sealed by mines and double rows of barbed wire. When the lilac, apricot and peach trees were beginning to blossom, I, too, crossed from Austria into Hungary again.

Budapest was in the throes of repairs, and that the damage had been extensive was plain to see. Under the aegis of the International Committee the Hungarian Red Cross was distributing food, clothing and medicaments in every district of the capital. Priorities were given to those who had lost the breadwinner and their homes in the fighting. At the Committee's large warehouses at Czepel their Swiss teams were handling medical and other relief supplies from the National Red Cross Societies of Rumania, Poland, Bulgaria, etc., as well as from the West—all sent for distribution where the need was greatest without discrimination of any sort . . .