

## TWENTY YEARS AGO

*The "Landesverband Baden-Württemberg und Südbaden" of the German Red Cross in the German Federal Republic has published in its Mitteilungsblatt (1965, 3/4) an article on events which took place at the end of the Second World War in which the ICRC was involved. This article, entitled "Twenty years ago, Ravensburg was saved by the Red Cross", in fact recalls the large-scale relief action then carried out by the International Committee and which was based on Ravensburg. We now give some of the more important portions of this account.*

In March 1945, negotiations took place in connection with the fate of Ravensburg and the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave instructions for a suitable building to be found in that town for the installation of a relief depot of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

In view of the increasing destruction of railway communications, it was becoming more and more difficult to ensure, as hitherto, the supplying of allied prisoners of war. Their return had to be rendered possible from an assembly centre located in South Germany and which had to be in proximity to Switzerland. Amongst the towns which came under consideration and which insistently asked for this central depot to be installed was Ravensburg, which was selected, where already by March 14 a first meeting with the appropriate authorities was held.

The town, which interested itself to the maximum extent in the practical realization of this international protection, immediately made available the Württemberg central warehouse and removed all the contents from this important depot as well as from the gymnastic hall and other neighbouring buildings. Arrangements were also made to place vehicles transporting relief under cover.

A further meeting took place in the Town Hall on March 22, presided over by the Mayor, in which took part several leading officials and a representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross, who had come from Geneva. It was soon realized that Ravensburg was the most convenient location from both a technical and geographical point of view as well as regards communications

and installations. Other meetings were held, amongst others at Kreuzlingen.<sup>1</sup> The respective Swiss authorities also approved of the project.

It was a question, at the outset, of supplying 250,000 prisoners of war who were on German territory. The depot had an approximate storage capacity of 4,000 tons. By April 14, the first Red Cross convoy, consisting of 60 railway trucks, arrived at Ravensburg. White-painted vehicles assured subsequent distributions. This relief action lasted from April 14 to June 21. During this period, 232 trucks arrived in the town, loaded with foodstuffs which were then distributed in the form of 435,000 parcels each of 5 kgs. to prisoners and foreign workers who were in fact now free. It has been estimated that the 520 white vehicles of the Red Cross covered more than 19,000 kilometres.

Personnel appointed at the final meeting immediately set to work. The Mayor took special measures to ensure that the protective emblem of the Red Cross could be seen from a distance, marked with luminous paint on the roofs of buildings placed at the disposal of the International Committee. It was indeed through the latter that the Allied air forces were informed that Ravensburg should henceforth be spared. The importance of the ICRC's participation in the "Ravensburg Plan" was shown in a letter sent by Mr. Carl J. Burckhardt, President of the International Committee, to Dr. Kurndt, Counsellor of Legation and to the Mayor, Walzer. He expressed pleasure in seeing this large-scale enterprise put so rapidly into execution . . .

. . . When French forces entered Ravensburg on April 28, the relief action was already in full swing. It was pursued without meeting with any opposition. The "Ravensburg Plan" thus adequately stood the test during the most difficult days. The ICRC continued its relief work. Consequently the town remained intact, with the result that this action of the Red Cross stands out as a landmark in that sombre period of the war's end and of general confusion: "Inter arma caritas".

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<sup>1</sup> See article in the *International Review*, April 1965, on the book "Trotz Stacheldraht" (O. Raggenbass) in which Kreuzlingen's rôle during the ICRC's relief action in 1945 is described.