

THE LATEST SOCIAL TASK OF THE NORWEGIAN RED CROSS

Prison Visitors

by J. Meinich

It was with a feeling of excitement that, one day in February 1959, I complied with the request of the Leader of Education at the National Prison—Botsfengselet—in Oslo to make a speech on the Red Cross, accompanied by a film and followed by a question-hour, in connection with a course in social science for the prisoners.

I started by telling the audience that the Founder of the Red Cross, Henry Dunant, as a young man visited the prison in Geneva, where he read aloud to the prisoners and brought them human contact.

In the lecture room at the prison I had 24 very alert listeners who, after the lecture and the film, bombarded me with questions regarding the Red Cross and expressed several wishes.

— Can we prisoners be accepted as blood donors? If the Red Cross would allow this, we might be considered sufficiently worthy to donate our blood.

— Can we give some tombola-things to the Red Cross? There are so many dexterous and neat-handed people amongst us, and it would mean so much to every one of them to be allowed to help.

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— When I get out of here, can I then go to the person concerned and put all my cards on the table and yet become a member of the Red Cross?

— Is it not possible to organize first-aid courses for us prisoners?

— Do they have Red Cross in the Soviet Union?

— Can the Red Cross do anything to release the tension which exists in the world to-day?

The prisoners' proposals and wishes were duly noted and a few days later the Secretary General of the Norwegian Red Cross and I had a meeting with the Prison Chaplain at the office of the Norwegian Red Cross. We told him that the Red Cross would be glad to try to meet the wishes of the prisoners as far as possible.

What is the Prison Authorities' attitude to this?

The Prison Chaplain was very positive and grateful for the Red Cross' offer and with the permission of the Prison Governor a first-aid course was started under the guidance of an instructor from Oslo Red Cross First Aid Unit. The course was fully booked up and aroused great interest. These Red Cross first-aid courses are now a permanent part of the prison's educational system.

The next step was to lend books from the Red Cross Book Collection Service to the Prison's Library. This is a welcome supplement to the library. There is a lot of reading going on in the prison and the book-supplies from the Red Cross, which are regularly being changed, are very popular.

The question of blood-donation amongst the prisoners was discussed with the prison's physician and with medical experts from the Norwegian Red Cross. However, on account of technical and practical obstacles this has so far been impossible to bring into effect, but the matter is still under consideration.

As the Prison Chaplain stated that there were prisoners who seldom or never received visits from relatives or friends, I volunteered as "Prison-Visitor", and I was allotted a prisoner who was serving a term for a serious offence and who would like to receive visits. After being briefed by the Prison Governor, I was given an identity card and I commenced my service together with other approved prison visitors. On Sunday afternoons, every fortnight, I used to sit for about an hour in the prisoner's cell with him alone, and talk with my new friend.

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This prison visitor service is nothing new at the National Prison. It has been in operation for quite some time. The interest shown has been varying and during the spring 1960 there were only 5 visitors in action. There are more than 200 prisoners at the National Prison.

This was the Red Cross' first contact with the prison and a cautious start of the work for the prisoners—"les misérables"—in accordance with the example set by Henry Dunant.

During the Summer 1960 this work was speeded up, thanks to the new Prison Chaplain who previously was the Chaplain of the Norwegian Seamen's Church in Copenhagen,—a sportsman, idealist and a true Red Cross friend! On his initiative a committee was formed, consisting of representatives of the National Prison and the Norwegian Red Cross. This committee drew up conditions and regulations, based on those applying to Red Cross "Friends of the Patients" (Gray Ladies) for a Red Cross Prison Visitor service, which was started on probation for prisoners at the National Prison. At a meeting on November 10th 1960, attended by representatives of the National Prison, the Ministry of Justice and visitors, a plan was submitted to the effect that the Norwegian Red Cross should organize a visitor-service for the National Prison along the lines of the service which the Norwegian Red Cross had established with regard to the "Friends of the Patients" at the hospitals. The plan was supported by the representatives of the Ministry of Justice.

The guiding lines include *inter alia* the following passage:

At our prisons—and more especially at the Central institutions—there is a large percentage of prisoners who seldom or never receive a visit from relatives or friends.

Such painful loneliness may result in some prisoners' being afraid to regain their freedom, creates bitterness against their fellowmen and the community, and thus makes them disposed again to breaking the law. The Visitor Service regards it as its task to bring positive impulses to the individual prisoners during their term of detention and, as far as possible give them inspiring support on their discharge.

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Paragraph 1 of the Regulations reads as follows:

A visitor must meet the prisoner as a fellow being whom he can accept. He must avoid a critical, moralizing attitude or passing moral judgement on the prisoner. The visitor's visit is intended first and foremost to be a pleasant interlude, to brighten the monotony and be an event to which the prisoner looks forward. By exchanging views on topics of mutual interest, and by bringing the prisoner up-to-date news from the outside world, the visitor should endeavour to encourage the prisoner to follow what is going on in the world and also to increase his power of evaluation.

The number of Red Cross Prison Visitors increased. From the modest beginning in 1960, the number of Prison Visitors at the National Prison has today reached 100, all of whom are men of different age and occupation.

A new and valuable group of active Red Cross workers has been recruited through personal contacts with the Red Cross members, Rotary and Lions Clubs.

Any person admitted as visitor must be at least 25 years of age and a member of the Norwegian Red Cross. He must give at least two references. He must carefully acquaint himself with the Regulations applicable to the visitor-service, and—most important of all—he must sign *a pledge of secrecy*.

He receives an identification card, stamped and signed by the Norwegian Red Cross and the National Prison.

Considerable effort has been made beforehand with a view to finding a prisoner whom a visitor would be especially suited to help. This work is done at the meetings of the Visitor Committee, which consists of representatives of the Prison Authorities and the Red Cross Prison Visitors. At these meetings the new Visitor Candidates are introduced and briefed.

When a person is accepted as a prison visitor the prison chaplain introduces him to the prisoner whom he is to visit. Such visits must not take place more frequently than once every third week or every fortnight.

The visitors' reports tell both of delights and disappointments. The most difficult task for a visitor is often to follow his friend after

release and to assist him in obtaining work, i.e. being an intermediary between employer and the released prisoner.

As a pleasant example I may mention that I have given a prisoner lessons in English. He borrowed a tape-recorder, and I got Englishmen who are living in Oslo to record some of the lessons. I recorded the Norwegian translation. The young man, who uses his prison time to read for his matriculation exam, passed the test in English with honours! I have now, by appealing to professors at High Schools in Oslo, obtained for my pupil private tutors in mathematics and physics. The payment we can offer is the gratitude of a human being! Every autumn the Norwegian Red Cross calls a Visitor-Meeting. At these meetings lectures are given on topics of importance; mutual experiences are discussed and plans for the future work are made. Representatives of other institutions, the Ministry of Justice, the Federation of Norwegian Rehabilitation Authorities and the Red Cross organisations in our neighbouring countries are invited to attend the meetings.

The members of the Prison Visitors' Committee have given lectures in various parts of the country and aroused interest for this new social task of the Red Cross. This work has been, or is being, taken up by Red Cross Committees in the more important towns of Norway. I may mention that it was a Junior Red Cross branch near Stavanger (Bryne) which started a prison visitor service in a prison, viz. Opstad Workhouse.

In the summer of 1964, Oslo Red Cross opened a home for long term prisoners, where they can spend the first often difficult months after their release. In this *home* they should have a feeling of trust and security. Here they should, as far as possible, be helped to get a place where to live and work and become worthy members of the community.

Oslo Red Cross has also put into being other relief undertakings for the benefit of prisoners and their families. On account of the growth of the visitor-work the Norwegian Red Cross has now organized the work into: 1) a *national committee* consisting of five active Red Cross Prison Visitors and 2) a *special Prison Visitor-Committee* at each prison, consisting of three—five members, with representatives of the prison authorities and the Prison Visitors, so that the Prison Visitors have a majority. When there are several

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prisons with Prison Visitors within the area of a Red Cross Local Committee, then the Board of the Red Cross elects a Visitor committee to coordinate the service. Such local visitor committees should consist of Red Cross members only. This Prison Visitor service has caused the Norwegian Red Cross to take the initiative to start a *responsibility campaign against juvenile delinquency and repetition of offence*, in co-operation with all good forces like national, municipal and private institutions and organisations. This work is going ahead!

The Finnish and Swedish Red Cross Societies have followed the example of the Norwegian Red Cross as regards Prison Visitor Service.

Is this not a task, which every Red Cross organisation ought to adopt? Henry Dunant showed us the way!

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