

HENRY DUNANT MEDALIST WRITES ABOUT

Red Cross and Youth Education

by Sachiko Hashimoto

To have won the Henry Dunant Medal comes as more than a surprise. It is a great honour, an honour beyond my wildest expectations. I knew, of course, of the nature and origin of the Medal but only as an interesting fact that had nothing to do with me. Therefore, to be personally part of this great Red Cross event makes me feel very grateful and very happy indeed.¹

When I think of the first recipients of the Medal since it was established in 1965, I feel too humble for words. Of those four courageous men—all of them victims of their duty—three have passed away and the other is seriously injured. Compared to them, what dramatic incident, what life and death struggles have made me a fit candidate for this honour? My twenty-four years of Red Cross career have no dramatic effects . . . rather it has been a slow, uphill climb . . . difficulties, disappointments have barred the way . . . slow progress over a quarter of a century.

From the ashes of the war, I witnessed our Junior Red Cross reborn out of nothing. Those birth pains were followed by my country's growing pains: revolutionary changes in values, great and sweeping changes in educational policy, new approaches to social and family life. Through it all, our Junior Red Cross membership finally soared to 950,000 in 1965; only to come down at this

¹ In this same issue we are publishing an account of the presentation of the Henry Dunant Medal to Mrs. Hashimoto, whom we thank for her article. (*Ed.*)

time to 840,000 members. Why have we lost some of our young people? This question haunts me and keeps me looking for a reason and a solution. Could it perhaps be the price we must pay for our affluent society?

These are my concerns: the fate of young people—certainly they are not dramatic enough to warrant a Medal. I think of myself as a simple teacher. We teachers are plodders really: we have no moment of enlightenment, no nirvana. We plod along hoping to plant a seed here, raise an idea there, guide a young mind to something better. A plodder, trudging the slow path to some eternal truth. Confucious understood us. He said: “If I could find the eternal truth in the morning, I would be glad to die by nightfall”. We plod on hoping to find that truth.

The unromantic may ask what good is a star. It’s pretty enough but we can’t touch it or feel it or hold it in our hands. Oh, but stars are as necessary as bread for a teacher. They are our ideals, our guiding lights. Unlike a great many things we experience every day, they never change. They lead us higher and higher. Our guiding star must be lofty enough to pursue for ever and important enough to require as much or as little of all of us: a lifetime’s dedication, one yen flung in a box, one hour of time, or one act of thoughtfulness or kindness. I have found my star in the Red Cross. Its never-changing values have never led me astray.

But these beliefs are shared by thousands of Red Cross workers the world over. Surely they do not rate a Medal. This was my first embarrassed thought when I heard the news. Mr. Tanabé, Executive Vice-President of the Japanese Red Cross, helped ease some of my timidity by a chance remark: “I wonder”, he said, “what the Henry Dunant Medal looks like? I’ve never seen it before.” How fortunate, I thought, to be able to bring the medal to Japan for the first time.

Again, the Medal will serve yet another purpose in my country. In Japan, the name of Henry Dunant as founder of the Red Cross is virtually unknown. Rather, many people believe that Florence Nightingale founded our organization. I sincerely hope that the Medal will bring light on the name of Henry Dunant, who selflessly sacrificed possessions, worldly pleasures . . . all for the sake of his work. A man who in the lonely latter years of his life was discovered

in the Heiden Hospital. When he was awarded the first Nobel Prize, he insisted on contributing it to the cause preferring, instead, to be buried like a dog. That man is unknown in Japan. I sincerely hope I can shed some light on that noble name in my country. I should like to share the Henry Dunant Medal with all the Junior Red Cross teachers who have worked and sacrificed by my side over these years, and with the members and staff of the Junior Red Cross who will draw such strength from it.

I should especially like to share the medal with Mr Tadamasu Fukiura, an ex-Junior Red Cross member who has just reached the age of 31, the same age as Henry Dunant at the battle of Solferino, 1859. For me he exemplifies the spirit of selfless devotion embodied in the life of Henry Dunant. Mr. Kukiura answered the call from the International Red Cross for disaster service in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, in 1971, during the Indo-Pakistani war. Mr. Fukiura is still in Bangladesh helping wherever and in whatever way he can.

Mr. Fukiura wrote me a series of letters from Bangladesh. They speak more eloquently than I could ever do of Red Cross spirit through action, of my teaching aims with young people, of the guiding purpose of my life . . . of my star.

The first letter, dated 13 October 1971 comes from Chittagong.

“ Everything has gone well for the past 17 days since my safe arrival here on 26 September in spite of my being desperately busy. I have volunteered to go to the Noakhali District, worst stricken by the cyclone and worst also from a safety viewpoint. For 10 days we have been reviewing the damage and distributing goods by ship. I was shocked at the countless number of dead and homeless. I have no words to say.

It was such an adventure to sail over the river in Paktuakhali at night, after persuading the captain who was reluctant to go because of the terrorists. The more danger we anticipated, the more challenged our relief team felt about the Red Cross, and the more strengthened became our trust in the Geneva Conventions.

To be practical, we decided to sail down the river with the spotlight on the Red Cross flag and with our flash light on all night, challenging the terrorists to be humane enough to respect the Red Cross emblem.

We first fixed the night watch. I was on duty between 2 and 4 a.m. While I was alone on duty, I continued singing the Japanese Junior Red

Cross song: *Hata wa juji no Ai: ne. Hata . . .* (The flag is of the Red Cross, the symbol of love.) I remembered that Mrs. Hashimoto once said she sang this when she was requested to sing a Japanese song in foreign countries. The memory made me feel a trifle sad and lonely. Close to the end of my watch, all was in complete darkness. To be honest, I felt helpless . . . utterly alone, when a young local interpreter prepared hot tea for me, bless his heart. Soon Hanna appeared, an American, and Hagstrom, a Swede. Their shifts were night. It was so dark that we sat close together on the top of the ship watching the Red Cross flag and the light shining on it.

When the sun rose over the fields that stretched as far as the horizon, we gasped together at the sight. I don't remember who started first, but we all joined in singing *We Shall Overcome*. The Red Cross emblem was flying proudly above, unharmed and our trust in its prestige was justified.

Then memories brought me back to my school days in Akita Prefecture, a rural area in the northern part of Japan, where I first learned about the Geneva Conventions with my Junior Red Cross teacher, Mr. Koji Yamaya. His field was not law, he had no special knowledge of the Geneva Conventions either, but he encouraged me so eagerly to study them and Pictet's basic principles of the Red Cross with the textbook prepared by Mrs. Hashimoto and Mr. Inouye, that I groped toward enlightenment with the help of this rural teacher."

On reading this part of his letter, I was impressed by how important it is to teach young people the Geneva Conventions.

The need for Red Cross education in youth and childhood is greatly emphasized in Mr. Fukiura's letter of 23 January 1972, written just after the Indo-Pakistani war:

" . . . I have returned to Dacca on December 20th, as one of the five remaining delegates and have been able to store up the most precious experiences. We five are Alanko from Finland, 27; Janz from Austria, 28; Jean-Pierre from France, and me from Japan, both 30; and Koch from the Federal Republic of Germany, 35. All of us Young Power are Junior Red Cross graduates. Mr. Beer, Secretary General of the League, recently sent us a special letter of appreciation which is most encouraging.

Such difficult post-war problems as prisoners, repatriation, minority problems, refugees, medical services, care of the sick and the wounded, etc, are pressing in around us. But we feel strong and healthy. We can

trust to our experience in the Red Cross, our knowledge of Red Cross principles especially the Geneva Conventions. This makes our job easier, gives us confidence. I feel that there is nothing useless in my 15 years of Red Cross experience but it is not enough. Despite this experience, I feel helpless in this situation and need strength and ability.”

I, too, feel very much like Mr. Fukiura: helpless and in need of strength and ability, a plodding teacher searching always, for the road of truth.

Some of the strength that both Mr. Fukiura and I seek can be found in the words of Henry Dunant. Some of the unpublished writings of Henry Dunant have appeared in a book and in the *International Review of the Red Cross*; one of them, entitled: “The Yoke of Preconceived Ideas”, yields these truths:

“Our real enemy is not our neighbouring country. It is hunger, cold, poverty, ignorance, routine, superstition, prejudice. What can be said of the spirit of violence and destruction in war which makes ‘every soldier a professional killer’? Instead of striving together against misery and ignorance, men encourage each other and struggle to outdo each other in blind national fury, in senseless bloodshed, in really bestial slaughter, and not only do they kill each other during these crises of fratricide but even in time of peace they devote themselves with special care to advancing the applied science of destruction.”

These ideas are no longer preconceived in our time—they constitute reality. But there is another reality: the reality of five selfless young men from five different countries who in Bangladesh are even now co-operating for the benefit of strangers in a strange country.

In another letter from Pakistan before the war, Mr. Fukiura wrote:

“My work has been carried out successfully with joy and satisfaction. This is because of my success in organizing the Junior Red Cross in Hatia. For example, when we distributed saris, we could do so without confusion, using the principle of Due Proportion, that “The help available shall be apportioned according to the relative importance of individual needs and in their order of urgency.”¹ In order to practise this

¹ See Jean Pictet, *Red Cross Principles*, ICRC, Geneva, 1955.

principle of Due Proportion so that saris could be given first to widows who had lost family support because of the cyclone, we needed a list of destitute widows. I asked high school girls to help compile this list. I first got the support of the superintendent of schools on the island. Then, at the request of the principal of the high school, I made a speech about the Junior Red Cross. Two days later there was 100% enrolment in the Junior Red Cross. The women of this country hardly dare to appear or speak in the presence of men after 20 years of age, but those under 15 or 16 are quite active and willing to do volunteer service. Nearly one hundred girls came to help us daily from 7 o'clock in the morning. A young 26-year old school teacher directs them along with me. He has taught me a great deal and his dedication amazes me.

On the island, there are 78 schools, 60 of which are elementary schools. Only three are Junior Red Cross schools but the number is sure to increase. I constantly tell my teacher friend of the importance of life-long education through the Red Cross and training of youth by the Junior Red Cross. Even with educational materials swept away they have appetite for study—so much that they can still learn very well. Their growth is amazingly quick and they are creative enough to contribute their suggestions. It is most impressive to witness the obligatory demands that the Red Cross makes on youth.”

Thus, he continues citing many concrete examples of how valuable it is to grasp on to some meaning to life during the period of peak growth in body, mind and soul. The most unforgettable part of his letter to this old teacher was the following sentence: “Running into decision-making difficulties, I couldn't help wondering: What would Mrs Hashimoto have done in this instance?” This statement makes me feel so humble and yet full of genuine joy and satisfaction.

For after all, what is life but a series of personal encounters, personal influences? How many times have we wondered: “What would my life be like if I had not met her or him?” In life we can only think in terms of individuals. If I have influenced one life, enriched one life by introducing it to the Red Cross, then I should think all is worth while. This is why I think the dissemination of Red Cross principles and, more practically, of the Geneva Conventions and Mr. Pictet's basic Red Cross principles, is so important for young people to learn.

These ideas have a meaning for each individual, can influence the life of any young person. I don't mean we should make lawyers and philosophers out of all our young people. The Conventions themselves are merely words. They must be practised, first by the teacher and then by the student. It is only through this personal, direct practice of Red Cross principles that a young mind can be influenced. I believe Mr Pictet's principles are the best for young minds to study because in Japan they speak most eloquently and effectively to our teachers who are looking for some fundamental, solid truths on which to base their instruction.

There is a long way to go, such a long way that we had better set out in the right direction immediately. The Red Cross cannot solve the ills of the world, but at least it can certainly set it in the right direction, provide a compass with which to direct humanity. If we keep the Red Cross fire burning within us all along the way, there will always be light in any darkness, light to see the person before you and the person who comes after. One is never alone when one is part of the Red Cross family. It is a big family stretching across continents and seas. I am proud to be a part of it as long as I live.

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