

125th ANNIVERSARY OF THE SWISS RED CROSS (1866-1991)

Thoughts on past and future

by Philippe Bender

Rather than serving as a pretext for noisy celebration and self-congratulation, the 125th anniversary of the founding of the Swiss Red Cross should be an occasion for reflection on our institution's development, its role within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and its special situation as the National Society of Switzerland. This is a worthy undertaking, an attempt, as the historian Marc Ferro put it, "to capture time and make it intelligible to others".¹ But anyone who embarks on such a venture must be careful to avoid rewriting the past according to his own preferences and giving an idealized picture of this humanitarian organization, which has had its share of tensions, setbacks and contradictions, some of them still unresolved.

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Of what interest is a study on the National Society's past to those who are shaping its history today?

Looking back to the origins of the Swiss Red Cross involves an endeavour to understand the circumstances that have prompted thousands of people to join the ranks of volunteers who perform its humanitarian work. It is a way of defining the basic identity of the institution and determining what makes it different from other charitable associations. It also enables us to discover the general principles governing its internal workings, the driving forces deep within it and the lines along which it has developed.

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¹ Marc Ferro, *L'Histoire sous surveillance*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 1985, p. 177.

The Swiss Red Cross has its own history, which is distinct in many respects from that of its sister Societies in France, Germany, Italy and Spain. Its history is intimately linked with that of Switzerland itself; the former cannot really be understood without understanding the latter. The Red Cross ideal, though universal in terms of the principles on which it is based, manifests itself differently in each Society. Thus in Switzerland, "how could the personality of the Swiss Red Cross fail to be shaped by the structure and history of our country and by the characteristics of our people?"² Before demonstrating just how true this is, it is worth taking a somewhat iconoclastic look at the relationship between the Society and Switzerland. Is that relationship so close that the destiny of one can legitimately be viewed as inextricably linked with that of the other? The fact that the International Red Cross has adopted as its emblem our national flag with the colours reversed may reinforce the tendency to consider Switzerland not only as the cradle of the Red Cross but also as its natural home. However, the idea that Switzerland is the perfect incarnation of the Red Cross ideal is not one that can be embraced unreservedly. Moreover, one cannot ignore the effect that the immense prestige enjoyed by the International Committee of the Red Cross, that "exclusively Swiss" organization, has on a people that tends to make no distinction between the ICRC and its own National Society. This confusion complicates public relations and fund-raising campaigns by the two organizations but illustrates both the profound unity of the Movement and the fact that the public sees the Red Cross in terms of its activities rather than its administrative structure.

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In the early years, expansion of the Swiss Red Cross was hampered by a number of obstacles, not least the indifference shown by the population and the authorities.

Indeed, when Switzerland set up a *Society for relief to the wounded* in 1866, ten other European States had already taken such an initiative. Why this apathy about the enterprise launched by Dunant, Moynier, Dufour, Appia and Maunoir, our compatriots on the

² Hans Haug, "Lignes directrices du développement de la Croix-Rouge suisse", in *1866-1966, Centenaire de la Croix-Rouge suisse*, offprint from *La Croix-Rouge suisse*, 75th year, No. 5, p. 14, Bern, 1966.

Committee of Five? Was the main reason, as Alexis François has suggested, the “phlegmatic national temperament” of the Swiss?³

The best explanation for this surprising phenomenon is the permanent neutrality that has kept Switzerland out of international conflicts, and which was a *sine qua non* for the success of the International Committee. As the Reverend Wernly, one of our Society’s early promoters, pointed out in his *Mémorial des vingt-cinq premières années de la Croix-Rouge*, published in 1888:

“With its neutrality assured and its strict policy of non-aggression, the country seemed to be in no danger of being obliged to take part in a war and of having to take exceptional measures to assist the military medical services”.⁴

Setting up a National Red Cross Society in Switzerland was thus such an arduous task that it had to be undertaken twice – in 1866 and again in 1882!

The *Association for Relief to Swiss Soldiers and their Families*, which was founded on 17 July 1866, existed for only a brief period. Although it did remarkable work in 1870-71 during the Franco-Prussian War, by the 1880s it had fallen into abeyance.

The rebirth of the Red Cross in Switzerland was brought about by two men: Walther Kempin, a pastor from Zurich who was deeply involved in social issues and public health problems, and Ernest Moeckli from Bern, a non-commissioned officer in the army medical services who was alarmed at the services’ shortcomings, notably as regards training.

Together, on 25 April 1882, they laid the foundations of the *Swiss Central Red Cross Society*, whose stated purpose was to “do everything possible to improve care for the sick and disabled in both wartime and times of peace”.

The new Society’s beginnings were difficult and it was beset by a number of crises due to rivalry between its leaders, weaknesses in its internal organization and the absence of sustained cooperation with the authorities, particularly the army. In 1895, the Society had only 8,700 members in 19 regional branches and only 70,000 francs in the bank. Sizeable portions of the country – especially the French and Italian-speaking regions – were unreceptive to its message. Thanks to support from the federal government and the adoption of a methodical

³ Alexis François, *Le Berceau de la Croix-Rouge*, A. Jullien, Geneva, 1918, p. 196.

⁴ “Mémorial des vingt-cinq premières années de la Croix-Rouge”, in *Bulletin international des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, XIX, p. 149, Geneva, 1888.

programme combining both civilian and military tasks, it managed to achieve a respectable size by the time the First World War broke out. The number of local branches grew from 20 in 1898 to 50 in 1914, and membership from 11,000 to 36,000 over the same period. Expenditure by the central treasury rose markedly, from 6,500 francs in 1896 to 136,000 in 1914, while that of the local branches rose from 39,000 in 1903 to 188,000 in 1914. Thus it took half a century for the Swiss Red Cross to take firm root and we have the paradox of a country that was the cradle of a universal movement but had little inclination to give substance to the ideals of its own philanthropists.

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Since then, however, the relationship between the National Society and the authorities has grown much closer at all levels. A series of government and parliamentary decrees has gradually given the Swiss Red Cross a special legal status. A federal decree of 1903 concerning voluntary assistance to the wounded and sick in wartime guaranteed the Society regular financial support and recognized it as the only organization responsible for voluntary medical assistance, a mission that was to become the basis for the Society's leading role in the training of nursing staff. Another milestone was the federal law of 1910 protecting the red cross name and emblem. More recently, in 1951, a federal decree declared the Swiss Red Cross to be the only Red Cross Society in the country and gave it a mandate to promote voluntary medical assistance, provide a blood transfusion service to meet both civilian and military needs and train nursing and paramedical personnel. The latter task is governed by a special agreement, signed in 1976, which delegates to the Swiss Red Cross certain functions that are normally the responsibility of the cantonal authorities. The devolution of such duties on a National Society – a private association – is doubtless unique in the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Federal refugee legislation has also recognized the Swiss Red Cross as a charitable organization authorized to become involved in various stages of the processing of asylum requests.

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Another point that the Swiss Confederation and the Swiss Red Cross have in common (although it is best to approach this subject with caution to avoid any hint of undue or ideologically motivated criticism) is that they are both governed by the same elite. There is a

kind of osmosis, a similarity of views between their respective leaders that have established a privileged relationship – going beyond their formal links under the law – between the National Society and the economic, political and military powers that be. But this status has sometimes given rise to a degree of confusion between the humanitarian purpose of the Society and the interests of the State: can it be assumed that what was good for Switzerland was always good for the Red Cross? It has also brought with it the risk of the Red Cross being identified with a select social group and being criticized for elitism and hypocrisy (“the Red Cross is nothing but a sop to the conscience of the Swiss bourgeoisie!”).

The democratic, federalist tradition of the Swiss State has served as a model for the organization of the Swiss Red Cross which, after several fruitless attempts at centralization, finally fell in a pattern of cantonal, regional and local branches, which sometimes enjoy considerable autonomy. This system has not been without its drawbacks, sometimes serious, such as the excessive disparity in the circumstances of the various branches, some being rich, powerful, well equipped, well staffed and active over a large area, while others have very modest resources, enjoy little support, are confined to a small locality and lack coordination in their activities. This inequality persists in the Swiss Red Cross, along with the very wide freedom of action and organization enjoyed by its associated bodies, now called corporate members. The best known of the latter is the Swiss Samaritan Alliance, which was set up in 1888 and has never given up its independence. Attempts to amalgamate the two have always failed, although the rivalry of former times has given way in recent decades to a staunch spirit of constructive cooperation.

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As is the case with the Swiss Confederation, the National Society’s *central bodies* have gained in influence at the expense of peripheral structures, particularly the branches. This is largely due to the fact that each time a new task has been entrusted to the Swiss Red Cross, the central services at have had to be strengthened and have thus expanded from year to year. For example, the Nursing Secretariat, which had a handful of staff members at the end of the Second World War, has now grown into the Vocational Training Service and employs over 70 people. Then there is the Central Blood Transfusion Laboratory, which was set up in Bern in since the early 1950s and now employs several hundred people, and the Society’s headquarters itself, which has

assumed proportions that its founders at the turn of the century could scarcely have imagined, going from a staff of four in 1906 to almost 140 today.

The *growing professionalization of the Society's activities* and the necessity for nationwide coordination and planning have also favoured the gravitation of responsibilities towards the centre. A similar pattern can be observed in individual cantons that comprised several branches or sub-branches (as many as 20 in the canton of Vaud in 1936), where the branches in the biggest towns have gradually become predominant. This comparison of the structure of the Swiss Red Cross with that of the Swiss Confederation could be extended to many other areas. What it would show, basically, is that a balance has been struck between the extremes of federalism and centralism and that the golden mean of unity amid diversity has proved narrow but beneficial and, above all, in harmony with the Swiss mentality and the requirements of humanitarian work.

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The policy of *armed neutrality* which our country has followed since 1815 has been a constant – and sometimes decisive – influence on the Swiss Red Cross.

The Society's activities, more perhaps than those of the ICRC, have developed and been perceived as the corollary of that policy: having itself avoided the horrors of war, Switzerland had a moral duty to take action in behalf of countries in conflict and show a generous response to the suffering of war victims, both civilian and military.

Four examples may be cited to illustrate this perceived duty to demonstrate solidarity towards the outside world: the internment of the "Bourbakis" (French soldiers) in 1871, the dispatch of medical teams to the front during the Balkan Wars in 1912-13, the repatriation of seriously wounded soldiers during the First World War and the *Save the Children* programme during the Second World War. These were all costly, large-scale operations and it is perhaps worth describing them as they left their mark on the collective memory and helped establish the reputation of both our Society and our country.

Conflict broke out in July 1870 between France under Napoleon III and Bismarck's Prussia. The latter quickly gained the upper hand and French forces were obliged to capitulate, one unit after the other. The eastern armies under General Bourbaki had been ordered to push eastwards across Burgundy and Franche-Comté, just north of the Swiss border, towards Alsace. At Héricourt they ran up against invincible

German positions and had to retreat to Besançon, then Pontarlier, “through an exceptionally harsh winter on roads covered with more than a metre of snow”. Finally, exhausted, they had no choice but to seek refuge in Switzerland.

The Swiss border along the Jura mountains was guarded by the Swiss army under the command of General Hans Herzog from Aarau. On 1 February 1871 an internment agreement was signed at Les Verrières and General Bourbaki’s 85,000 men were allowed to enter Switzerland, after laying down their arms, at the main crossing points of Les Verrières, Vallorbe and Jougne.

At news of this, a wave of enthusiasm swept through the population, “which showed by its actions that it fully shared Henry Dunant’s principles”.⁵ Under the auspices of the Red Cross and government authorities, “rich and poor vied to show hospitality and charity and provide care for the sick”.⁶ This resounding demonstration of solidarity inspired a number of artists such as Edouard Castres, who painted the famous “Panorama of Lucerne”, Albert Anker and Auguste Bachelin.

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During the 1912-13 *Balkan Wars*, the Swiss Red Cross was asked to help. In February 1913 it sent five medical teams to war zones in Serbia, Albania, Montenegro, Bulgaria and Greece (the famous Vaud-Geneva ambulance). The teams were well equipped and well trained and performed excellent work treating thousands of wounded people. This made an enormous difference: the Montenegrin army, for example, was 25,000 men strong but had only seven doctors! Nor was Turkey forgotten. Donations of money and shipments of clothing and food helped to relieve the suffering endured by the Ottoman army. The Swiss Hospital in Constantinople, run by a former student of the well-known Lausanne surgeon César Roux, treated hundreds of patients.

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⁵ *Nouvelle Histoire de la Suisse et des Suisses*, Vol. III, Payot, Lausanne, 1983, p. 57.

⁶ Edgar Bonjour, *La Neutralité suisse, synthèse de son histoire*, A la Baconnière, Neuchâtel, 1979, p. 71.

During the *First World War*, the Swiss Red Cross again engaged in large-scale international activities. For example, it repatriated wounded and sick soldiers on special trains, traced prisoners and missing servicemen in conjunction with the ICRC's Tracing Agency, sent relief supplies to the inhabitants of Vienna (early 1919) and to Swiss citizens in countries affected by the war. Arranging for the exchange of sick, wounded and disabled prisoners of war between the belligerent States consumed a considerable portion of the Society's resources. Over a period of five years, from 1915 to 1920, it repatriated over 80,000 prisoners of war including 17,000 Germans, 30,000 French and Belgians, 13,000 Austrians and Hungarians, 3,200 Serbs and 17,500 Italians. For this purpose, hospital trains were fitted out to transport 300 to 350 people at a time. Each one was accompanied by Red Cross staff, trained nurses, volunteer first-aid workers and doctors. On 1 March 1915, the first two such trains left Bern, one on its way to Lyon in France and the other to Constance in Germany. In all, the Swiss Red Cross organized over 300 such trains to various destinations such as Constance, Lyon, Como, Monza, La Spezia, Munich, Stuttgart, Feldkirch and Héricourt.

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During the *Second World War*, the *Save the Children* programme for children in belligerent countries – “the innocent victims and Europe's hope for the future” – was without doubt one of our finest endeavours. Some 100,000 Swiss families took in over 180,000 children for three-month periods and thus gave true meaning to the country's role as a neutral State. These “Red Cross children” came mostly from France (67,000), the Benelux countries (16,000), Germany (23,000), Austria (27,700), Italy (5,500) and Hungary (5,300). In addition to receiving children in Switzerland itself, *Save the Children* organized large-scale assistance programmes in most European countries affected by the conflict: orphanages and school canteens were organized, food, clothing and medicines distributed, medical dispensaries opened, a sponsorship project set up whereby people could send individual children regular relief parcels, etc.

This generosity shown to children from neighbouring countries cannot, however, obscure the fact that on a number of occasions cold reasons of State silenced the call to humanitarian duty, especially when political opportunism prevented French Jewish children from being taken in. In that case, selfishness combined with fear to bring

about unconditional acquiescence with Vichy French legislation that ran counter to individual dignity.

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Since 1945, Switzerland has given a new interpretation to its policy of neutrality. As Edgar Bonjour put it, “this principle... which was formerly applied in a restrictive and even negative way to limit contacts and as a pretext for inaction, has now become associated with notions of solidarity, universality and willingness to help”.⁷ This has brought with it a more active foreign policy, especially in relations with the *Third World*, through the advent of *Swiss development aid*. The Swiss Red Cross has contributed to this effort since the 1950s with a number of programmes aimed mainly at promoting health, consolidating local community services and strengthening National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in the Third World.

Nor has *emergency assistance* been neglected. On the contrary, thanks to coordination between the various organizations and public support for fund-raising campaigns launched on radio and television by the Swiss Red Cross, large sums have been collected each time a natural disaster has struck (Greece in 1953, Yugoslavia in 1972, Italy in 1980, Mexico in 1985, Armenia in 1989, etc.). Almost sixty countries have received Swiss Red Cross assistance in recent decades.

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Finally, mention must be made of the role played by the National Society in setting up *public health services* in Switzerland. The modern idea of the Red Cross as a “force for the promotion of hygiene and the dissemination of sound ideas and practices in the field of health”⁸ really took hold in the 1920s, thanks partly to encouragement from the League. Among the initiatives that demonstrate the leading role played by the Swiss Red Cross in health matters at the time were its courses for the public, social welfare and health centres staffed by nurses specially trained to treat poor people in their homes, advanced training for nurses, programmes to control epidemic diseases (in particular tuberculosis) and promotion of ambulatory medical care.

⁷ Edgar Bonjour, *op.cit.*, p. 228.

⁸ Alice Favre, in *La Croix-Rouge suisse*, 1 May 1910.

Following a series of plebiscites, the federal parliament adopted legislation to set up health and accident insurance in 1911, an old-age pension fund in 1947, disability insurance in 1960 and, more recently, occupational provident schemes. This development of a social security system in Switzerland has been closely followed by the National Society. The expansion, beginning in the 1960s, of its volunteer services in the areas of medical care and social services (transport for disabled people, mobile libraries, social and educational programmes in orphanages and other institutions, training for Red Cross health auxiliaries, etc.) has provided an appropriate response to the demands of a population that is ageing and thus increasingly under medical supervision.

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In spite of the difficulties – largely attributable, as we have seen, to the country’s neutral status – of establishing a Red Cross Society in Switzerland, the ideals of Henry Dunant have become a vital part of Swiss culture, in both its national and its international aspects. The assertion that “the Red Cross is Switzerland’s finest gift to the community of nations”⁹ should not be give rise to self-satisfaction. On the contrary, the close relationship between the Red Cross and Switzerland creates special obligations for the Swiss people and the country’s government. Shall we be capable of taking other fertile initiatives, following the example of the Geneva Committee in 1863? Or shall we be increasingly concerned with preserving our material well-being, forgetting that tiny Switzerland can achieve a universal dimension only through humanity and greatness of spirit?

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⁹ F.T. Wahlen, Federal Councillor, in “*La Croix-Rouge et la Confédération suisse*”, offprint from *La Croix-Rouge suisse*, 72nd year, No. 5. p. 3, Bern, 1963.

THE SWISS RED CROSS (SRC) FROM 1866 TO 1991

1866: The Association for Relief to Swiss Soldiers and their Families founded as a result of the appeal made by Henry Dunant in his book "A Memory of Solferino", published in 1862, and Switzerland's signing of the 1864 Geneva Convention.

1870/1871: During the Franco-Prussian War, 85,000 soldiers from General Bourbaki's army interned in Switzerland. In almost all the cantons, committees working under the Red Cross banner.

1882: The Swiss Central Red Cross Society set up to replace the inactive Association formed in 1866.

1898: The Central Secretariat for Voluntary Medical Assistance established to coordinate the work of the Central Red Cross Society, the Swiss Samaritan Alliance (founded in 1888) and the Swiss Society of Military Medical Personnel (founded in 1882).

1899: The Lindenhof School of Nursing set up by the SRC to train both professional and auxiliary nursing staff to care for the sick and injured in time of peace and in wartime.

1903: A federal decree on voluntary work to help the wounded and sick in wartime confirmed the

leading role of the Swiss Red Cross in this area and thus in the development of nursing care.

1908: Messina earthquake (100,000 dead): emergency assistance and reconstruction programme.

1910: Adoption of the federal law protecting the red cross name and emblem.

1912/1913: Medical teams sent to the countries involved in the Balkan wars.

1914-1918: The SRC mobilized to reinforce the army medical services during the First World War. It was also assigned other tasks: social welfare assistance for destitute Swiss soldiers and repatriation of sick and wounded prisoners of war on hospital trains. Campaign to control Spanish influenza.

1922: Food aid and a team of volunteers sent to assist victims of the famine in Russia.

1925: First directives issued on professional nursing training.

1925: Several social welfare and health centres set up by various SRC branches. Services to civilians accounted for an increasing part of the Society's work.

1936-1939: Evacuation of 2,500 children, women and elderly people from Madrid during the Spanish Civil War.

1939-1945: Second World War. In Switzerland, action taken by the SRC to help servicemen and the civilian population by making its personnel and equipment available, organizing a blood transfusion service and promoting nursing care. At the international level, the "Save the Children" programme launched (180,000 children from belligerent countries taken in by families in Switzerland), aid programmes set up in almost all European countries, assistance provided to civilians and servicemen interned in Switzerland and help given in evacuating 20,000 concentration camp inmates.

1949: The SRC assigned the task of meeting civilian and military blood needs and the Central Blood Transfusion Laboratory set up in Bern.

1950: Opening of the Zurich College of Nursing (followed by the Lausanne College in 1956). Health-care courses set up for the general public and a growing number of medical care and social welfare activities organized (work therapy, voluntary services and training of health auxiliaries). Involvement of the SRC in civil defence.

1956: Reception facilities set up for 10,000 Hungarian refugees ar-

iving in Switzerland following the crushing of the revolt in Budapest.

1959: Similar arrangements made for 1,350 Tibetan refugees fleeing the Chinese invasion of their country.

1960-1990: In conjunction with the Swiss Confederation and a number of charitable organizations, SRC participation in emergency relief, reconstruction and development operations in some 60 regions throughout the world including the Congo, the Sahel, Indo-China, Yugoslavia, Ethiopia, Algeria, Italy, Mexico, Colombia, Bangladesh and Armenia.

1976: An agreement signed between the Swiss cantons and the SRC assigning the latter the task of formulating rules and standards for the training of nurses and nursing aides, medical technicians and other health-care staff.

1981: Recognition of the SRC by the Swiss federal authorities as a charitable organization within the meaning of the legislation governing the granting of asylum. Services set up by the SRC to help recognized asylum-seekers and refugees.

1991: The 125th anniversary of the SRC falls in the same year as the 700th anniversary of the Swiss Confederation, a coincidence which highlights the close relationship between Switzerland and the Red Cross.

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