

The Work of the Red Cross in Poland

by I. Domńska

*For love of humanity, give us lint and
bandages for the army . . .
May this offering from your fair hands
bring solace to suffering and be an
inspiration to heroism.*

Appeal addressed in 1794 to the women of Poland by Tadeusz Kosciuszko, leader of the first Insurrection for Poland's independence and justice.

The year 1969 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Polish Red Cross.

In our country the assistance brought by the population and voluntary associations to wounded soldiers originated from a very ancient and fine tradition. It goes back to the time of Kosciuszko's Insurrection and was continued during the national insurrections of 1830 and 1863. Throughout the 120 years and more of Poland's servitude and dismemberment it was extended to those who had been imprisoned for fighting for liberty and justice. One of the organizations of voluntary assistance and first-aid was called the Red Cross Society (1862-1886).

During the First World War several organizations brought relief to wounded or sick Polish soldiers in the various units in which they were serving.

After Poland had regained its independence after the end of the 1914-1918 war, some of these relief organizations, such as the Central Committee of Assistance to Soldiers, the Relief Service, the Polish Male Nurse and the Polish Committee of Medical Aid,

formed in 1919 a temporary Committee of the Polish Red Cross Society.

A general assembly, meeting on April 27, 1919, adopted the institution's statutes and elected a directing committee consisting of thirty. This then is the official date of our Society's founding.

On July 15, 1919, the Polish Red Cross was recognized by the International Committee of the Red Cross as the sole Red Cross Society whose activities extended over the whole territory and which became the organization called upon by the Government of the Polish Republic to co-operate with the Army Medical Service to bring assistance to sick and wounded soldiers, in accordance with the Geneva Convention previously signed by the Polish Government.

At the end of that same month, the Polish Red Cross was admitted to the League of Red Cross Societies which had just been created.

The National Society was to develop rapidly throughout the country. It had the good fortune to receive property, installations and equipment belonging to the founding organizations which also handed over to it military hospitals, convalescent homes, medical trains, river transport, disinfestation trains, medical and food aid posts, etc...

Created in 1919, the Information Bureau received lists of casualties and made searches for military and civilians missing during the war. Thanks to the co-operation established, amongst other things, from that time between the Polish and the Soviet Red Cross Societies, many of these were able to return home.

When, as a result of a decision of the Allied High Commission, half Silesia was allocated to Germany and the Polish population of Silesia took up arms on three occasions by insurrections in 1919, 1920 and 1921 to reclaim the return of the whole of Silesia to Poland, the Polish Red Cross brought aid in medical care and food to the insurgents and took part in the exchange of prisoners.

After carrying out tasks brought about by the aftermath of war, the Polish Red Cross took on activities belonging to a time of peace which were essentially those of giving assistance in cases of natural disasters and epidemics and also of co-operating with governmental and communal authorities for the purpose of improving the health of the population. To that end it took over responsi-

bility for about 200 medical and welfare institutions (hospitals, sanatoria, anti-tubercular dispensaries, mobile columns in the fight against trachoma, etc...) and the training of nurses in two schools in Warsaw and Poznan. At the same time, it concerned itself with medical education in schools in particular where from 1921 onwards groups were set up and in the country with training the first rural hygienists as well as with teaching ambulance work to the population. It also trained "first-aid sisters" of the Red Cross, called upon to serve as voluntary auxiliary nurses in case of war or natural disaster.

During 1937 and 1938, the National Society started to recruit blood donors in Poland. In 1937 it organized the first Blood Transfusion Institute at the Polish Red Cross hospital in Warsaw, with centres at Lodz and Krakow.

By 1938 the number of Red Cross members amounted to 700,000 of whom 300,000 were adults and 400,000 juniors.

During the September campaign of 1939.—From the first day of the Nazi invasion, September 1, 1939 which marked the beginning of the Second World War, the Polish Red Cross undertook the bringing of relief to sick and wounded soldiers as well as to the civilian population which suffered the most from bombing on a massive scale. At this tragic moment the Society was successful in organizing nearly 180 hospitals for military wounded and providing treatment in existing hospitals. In Warsaw alone, 3000 ambulance workers and first-aid sisters of the Red Cross brought their assistance to wounded military and civilians.

For the civilian population fleeing the invader the Polish Red Cross set up mobile kitchens, canteens, reception centres, etc. on the roads. During this month of September 1939 its Information and Tracing Bureau registered over 80,000 names of war victims.

Then followed the Nazi occupation with its attendant brutal violation of human and the population's rights, persecution and wide-scale extermination, forced uprooting, executions, famine, misery, finally the concentration camps and, for the Jewish population, specially established and isolated ghettos, all outside aid being forbidden on pain of death, in order to facilitate the process of exterminating the population.

The National Society had to intervene in extremely difficult conditions. However, thanks to the outstanding devotion of its volunteers, it pursued its humanitarian activities, in particular in the following spheres:

- assistance to the unemployed and homeless, persons deported, displaced and those enclosed in the ghettos,
- assistance to prisoners of war and detainees in concentration camps and prisons,
- medical and hygiene aid to the civilian population,
- transmission of news to families of the fate of prisoners of war and detainees, the despatching of parcels and messages.

It also succeeded in organizing more than 500 courses for ambulance workers throughout the country. It was thus possible to train a large number of ambulance workers, both men and women who were to devote themselves to partisan detachments and to medical aid during the Warsaw Insurrection.

The Warsaw Insurrection. — Red Cross ambulance workers were the first to bring aid to fighters in the Resistance, to the wounded and sick civilians during the Warsaw Insurrection which broke out on August 1, 1944.

For the inhabitants of the capital subjected to bombing and artillery fire for 65 days and nights, the Polish Red Cross put into service some twenty temporary hospitals and first-aid detachments and hundreds of medical posts. The heroic conduct of the medical service and the devotion to duty which it displayed during the two months of the Insurrection earned it the very highest praise. Many of its members were killed in the performance of their duty.

After the capitulation, the Red Cross was entrusted with the task of assisting the wounded and evacuating the hospitals which, like the entire population, had to leave Warsaw on October 6, 1944. After that date the capital was subjected to total destruction. The Society's Central Committee, too, had to take refuge in the provinces.

After the Liberation. — In the summer of 1944 Polish territory was partly liberated by the Soviet army and Polish forces fighting on

its side. The Manifesto of July 22, 1944 was the first act of the new People's Government of Poland which brought release to our people.

On January 17, 1945 Warsaw was itself liberated and the Red Cross Central Committee then immediately returned to the capital, as did its inhabitants who had decided to bring life back to their city which had been razed to the ground by the enemy.

In a country in ruins the Red Cross had considerable tasks to face.

Once again, as after the First World War, but on a far vaster scale, it had to deal with problems raised by the immense human distress resulting from the occupation and war. From East and from the West millions of Poles returned to their own country, prisoners of war, internees of concentration camps and labour camps, those repatriated from the USSR and the western countries.

In co-operation with the authorities, the Polish Red Cross organized reception centres, shelters, mobile cookers, canteens, first-aid medical and food posts. Thanks to the population's enthusiasm and to help given by the neighbouring Red Cross Societies, the League and the International Committee, it was able, apart from distributions of food, clothing, boots and shoes, underclothes, to set up 30 hospitals, 5 sanatoria, more than 300 dispensaries, 24 assistances centres for mothers and children, emergency relief centres which by 1950 already amounted to 177, as well as 15 blood transfusion centres and 6 nursing schools. At that time, the Polish Red Cross possessed 3 medical trains, some fifteen medical wagons and mobile dispensaries.

Once re-installed in Warsaw, the Information and Tracing Bureau resumed its activity, so that it was soon in position to face the flood of requests for inquiries. At present it has a card-index containing over 10 million cards of missing, lists of killed; a horrifying testimony to the martyrdom endured by the Polish people during the Second World War.

Even in 1968, it was still possible to obtain details of the fate of some six thousand persons.

At the end of 1947, the Polish Red Cross began to expand on a large scale the teaching of ambulance work and medical education with a view to raising the standard of hygiene and the medical

condition of the country. This was a question of particularly valuable work on account of the lack of doctors and nurses decimated by the occupation forces.

With this end in view Red Cross committees were set up in all sorts of undertakings. The National Society was able to count on the help of the authorities and the trade unions, which, conscious of the range of Red Cross work for the workers' health, gave it all the necessary facilities.

Similar activities were embarked upon, in relation to the needs of different sectors, by local committees in towns and sectors, in the country, as well as in schools. This orientation of work, based on voluntary service, led to a dynamic expansion by the Society.

In the framework of its action of medical education, the Polish Red Cross published large numbers of pamphlets and folders. It changed the organ of its Central Committee *Jestem* into a monthly journal *Zdrowie* (Health) essentially devoted to problems of health, aimed at wide circulation.

The administration of therapeutic institutions and establishments on such a gigantic scale demanded a considerable administrative apparatus and financial resources. By allowing this situation to continue, justified just after the end of the war when the lack of Public Health Services had to be remedied, the development of other work undertaken by the Polish Red Cross might in the long run have been slowed down. It then decided in 1948 to place establishments it administered gradually at the disposal of the Public Health Service, by then already well organized.

In view of the considerable need of nurses by the Health Service, which was itself in full expansion, the National Society undertook, on the other hand, to train auxiliary nursing personnel. In three years, from 1949 to 1952, it thus trained about 20,000 auxiliary nurses.

The first national Congress convened since the war met at the beginning of 1951. It elected the Society's directing bodies, passed statutes, confirmed the general lines of work accomplished since then and drew up a programme of future tasks.

The following Congress in 1955 brought out the necessity of extending Red Cross activities to country areas. For this purpose it was decided to carry out large-scale training of voluntary rural

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Voluntary rural health workers look after children at harvest time.



The filing system of the Red Cross Information and Tracing Bureau, Warsaw.

hygienists by organizing courses of one month's duration as boarders. Similarly, medical education in the country was intensified.

In 1953, six months' courses for the training of auxiliary nurses were extended to a period of one year and in 1957 the length of training in all auxiliary nursing schools of the Polish Red Cross was fixed for two years. Nurses known as "assistants" were thus given preparatory instruction.

This study programme continued until 1966, when it was interrupted because of the general re-organization of the system of training nurses in Poland. During that period the Red Cross trained 14,620 assistant nurses. In all, in 21 years it trained some 40,000 qualified and assistant nurses for the Health Service. These whilst being professional take an active part, as volunteers, in realizing the Society's humanitarian activity.

In 1957, the Polish Red Cross again concerned itself with the training of voluntary auxiliary nurses, called Red Cross first-aid sisters, with a view to preparing a sufficient number of nurses and special voluntary cadres and to form, to a certain extent, a reserve for home-care of the sick.

The same year a large-scale campaign was undertaken for voluntary blood donations, an activity considered to be one of the fundamental Red Cross tasks. The number of voluntary blood donors increased each year, as did that of donors giving their blood on a regular basis.

The efforts made to implement the decisions of the national Congresses of 1960 and 1965 to extend activities to the country achieved success. The number of Red Cross members in the country is rapidly increasing. There are more and more voluntary rural hygienists, co-operating with the rural health services to improve preventive measures amongst the peasants. In this way, the Red Cross committees and their consultative committees increasingly benefit at all levels from the voluntary work of Red Cross members, which enables a reduction to be made in the number of paid officials.

As the number of voluntary auxiliary nurses increases, so the Society organizes home-care centres for the aged and lonely. This activity is most useful and much appreciated by the population but, although it is constantly expanding, still remains insufficient for needs in this direction.

Special attention is given to the improvement of hygienic education and to publicity for the voluntary donating of blood. Awards are given to voluntary donors and to those of particular merit.

Since 1960, Red Cross activities have been making continual progress with the young, amongst others thanks to the support of the school authorities and enthusiastic instructors of school groups. These groups are also increasing in numbers in primary and professional schools, secondary and high schools where first-aid posts and teams can therefore be organized.

Every year the school team leaders meet at some twenty Red Cross holiday camps. Leaders who have had training in these study camps, show special interest in the humanitarian work of the Red Cross and have the necessary aptitude, can become voluntary junior instructors. In 1967, there were about three thousand of these organized in 160 groups with the committees throughout the country. The Polish Red Cross entrusts these young volunteers with the responsibility of youth activities. It was they who took the initiative in running an important hygiene and school aesthetic campaign to mark the XXth anniversary of the Polish People's Republic and the millenary of the Polish State.

To them also goes the credit of having successfully organized the first international Red Cross camp in which 13 Red Cross Societies took part.

For primary schools the Polish Red Cross publishes a periodical *Czyn Młodzieży* (Youth Action) and for secondary schools the journal *Czyn PCK* (The Action of the PRC) which since 1967 has as its title *Jestem gotow do pomocy* (Present at the Roll-call).

During these last few years, the Society has added civil defence to its tasks. Its first-aid teams act as the medical service in self-defence groups.

In 1964, as testimony to the role of the Red Cross and the importance attached in Poland to humanitarian activities, the Parliament of the People's Polish Republic adopted a law on the Polish Red Cross which laid down the obligations and rights of the National Society. It stipulated that, in carrying out its tasks, it should cooperate with the public powers and welfare organizations, respecting at the same time the fundamental Red Cross principles. Public

bodies, welfare organizations, institutions and undertakings are bound to give it all the necessary help to enable it to accomplish its humanitarian work.

At the end of 1968, the Polish Red Cross counted about 5,150,000 members, of whom more than 2,750,000 young, 54,500 local committees and school groups, 54,000 first-aid posts and teams. The number of active volunteers exceeded 630,000 of whom 350,000 were ambulance workers, 10,000 first-aid sisters and about 10,000 voluntary rural hygienists. Over 650,000 voluntary donators have offered their blood for Public Health Service requirements.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the National Society possesses 100 home-care centres and 12 voluntary cadre training centres ¹.

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The Polish Red Cross has, for many years, been taking an active part in the international Red Cross programme supporting the humanitarian initiatives of sister Societies and the League whose purposes are to protect life and health, develop welfare work and to participate in humanitarian actions on behalf of Polish victims of the war and the effects of Nazism.

It has always expressed the desire to see the international Red Cross play an increasing role in disarmament, in the prohibition of the employment of weapons of mass destruction, in favour also of peace and friendly co-operation between nations.

It has always spoken for the right of peoples to be independent and for self-determination and against acts of violence and aggression, source of conflict and suffering. It has established friendly co-operation with the other National Societies by exchanges of visits and experiences.

Having itself benefitted from the assistance of sister Societies, the League and the International Committee at the end of the war, it has, on its side, taken part whenever possible in international actions of relief to countries subjected to disasters and war.

¹ *Plate.* — Voluntary rural health workers look after children at harvest time.
The filing system of the Red Cross Information and Tracing Bureau, Warsaw.

On the occasion of the Red Cross Centenary in 1963, the National Society was awarded the highest distinction of the Polish State the order of the "Labour Banner" first class, in recognition of the services it has rendered to medical education and its dissemination, the training of auxiliary cadres for the Health Service and care of the sick, assistance to the victims of war and disasters and to its work of international peaceful co-operation.

This high award is testimony of the esteem which the authorities have for the humanitarian work of the Polish Red Cross, for the devotion to duty of tens of thousands of members of first-aid teams and posts, for the rural hygienists and first-aid sisters who often at the risk of their own lives have brought their aid to victims of war, of natural disasters or work accidents. It is also an expression of gratitude towards members of committees and their commissions, instructors of school groups, as well as towards all who work for the Red Cross and thanks to whom the National Society is the most important welfare organization in Poland, efficient and always ready for action.

This distinction makes it a duty for the Polish Red Cross to work ever better with increased vigour in the service of the country and the cause of peace.

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