

# Constance Teichmann

## A Great Lady of the Red Cross

by Carl Vandekerckhove

*The author of the article printed below, last year published, as part of a collection in Dutch commemorating major figures of the Red Cross, a lavishly illustrated booklet on Constance Teichmann, whose life was a model of service to suffering humanity.<sup>1</sup> He has been kind enough to provide a summary of the booklet's contents for our readers. We would like to thank him for this, and to point out that he is at present preparing a work on Henry Dunant which will be the first on the subject to be published in the Dutch language. (Ed.)*

One hundred and fifty years ago, on June 16, 1824, Constance Teichmann was born in Antwerp. Her father was governor of the Province of Antwerp. Her mother was very active in social work: she founded a society to provide for needy widows, and an association of Christian mothers; she helped to establish nursery schools, Sunday schools and schools of lacemaking, and she set up an orphanage for girls.

The governor's residence, besides being the focus of fashionable society, was the centre of artistic and philanthropic activities. Balls were succeeded by meetings of charitable organizations, concerts alternated with exhibitions. While her sisters were happy to follow the dictates of the social round, Constance was more interested in art and in cultural and charitable activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Vandekerckhove, *Leven en werken van Constance Teichmann*, Red Cross, Belgium, Brussels.

Her diary reveals that her selflessness and ardour sprang from deep humane and religious convictions. From childhood, she longed to enter a religious order. Her parents did not actually refuse their consent, but instead astutely guided her aspirations in another direction, by helping her to satisfy her need to be of service. With their encouragement, Constance joined the "Society of Ladies of Charity", in order to devote herself to the poor. One year later, she rented a house so that she could nurse poor children who were sick. This became the Children's Hospital, where the number of beds rapidly increased until it was more than three hundred.

Constance also had a great affection for the Flemish people, and in particular encouraged Flemish artists: Peter Benoit, Hendrik Conscience, Van Duyse, August Snieders and Edgard Tinel all had the joy of being understood and sponsored by her.

But her principal task, the one nearest her heart, was nursing her young patients. On July 25, 1877, she acquired more spacious premises and set up two special clinics, one for eye diseases, the other for conditions of the ear, nose and throat.

On July 22, 1886, she was made a Chevalier of the Order of Leopold I, on the fortieth anniversary of the foundation of the Children's Hospital. In 1896, on the fiftieth anniversary, she received a supreme tribute: through the city passed a procession of tableaux formed by various groups from Antwerp and the surrounding area, portraying (to quote the programme) "her self-sacrifice, her tenderness, her talent, her dedication, her tenacity, her heroism, her kindness, her perseverance, her courage, her modesty".

### **The vessel placed in quarantine**

But to go back thirty years. On May 13, 1866, the German ship "Agnes" was placed in quarantine in the harbour of Antwerp: an epidemic of cholera had broken out on board. Before long, the whole country was swept by this scourge.

At that time, the city on the Scheldt had no more than 123,000 inhabitants; 4,892 of them fell victim to the "black death". This time of trial was remembered by the people of Antwerp above all for the exemplary conduct and sublime self-sacrifice of Constance Teichmann.

As soon as she heard the terrible news, she went, with two priests, to the death ship and remained there to nurse the cholera cases. Later, most of the stricken crew and passengers were transferred to a fort, where she was unsparing of her efforts to help the sick and comfort the dying. Hardly had her work there come to an end than she went to nurse more than three hundred children who were suffering from the disease. It was two months before the epidemic was stamped out.

The people of the city which had known such distress bestowed on its nurse the title of "the Angel of Antwerp" for her heroic conduct.

### **In the service of the Red Cross**

A section of the Red Cross was founded in Antwerp in 1867. Constance Teichmann immediately got in touch with the institution, whose ideals she shared.

In July 1870, when the Franco-Prussian War had broken out, the Central Committee of the Red Cross made a moving appeal to the population to help the victims of the conflict. Constance at once responded to this appeal. On August 24, a Belgian ambulance left for Saarbrücken. On arrival there, Constance noted in her diary for August 28: "Today I put on my Red Cross armband for the first time".

Throughout her stay in Saarbrücken, she devoted herself unreservedly to the sick and wounded, making no distinction between nationalities in nursing them. Wherever the medical team went, the ambulance moving on as the fighting front changed position, she was brought face to face with the same horrors: amputations carried out without or with only rudimentary anaesthetics, suppurating wounds, infections, parasites, stench and foul air, patients crying out in pain or delirious with fever, at times no medicines or dressings, shortage of beds and even of food. More and more, Constance became aware that she was not merely a member of the Red Cross, she was herself "the Red Cross in action".

In letters to her family she stated, in moving terms, her aversion to war as the scourge of humanity; but she found pleasure in giving families the news that "her patients" were recovering. The severely injured she helped to readapt, admittedly to the life of a handicapped person—but to life!

She noted with emotion each time either of the belligerents showed respect for the Geneva Convention. She took this, rightly, as a proof that the Red Cross, then only in its seventh year, was recognized by governments as an absolute moral authority. She triumphantly quoted examples.

Not mentioned in Constance's letters home was the fact that the sick bay had many patients with typhus or dysentery. Many were the soldiers who died in her arms. Some of them, in the delirium of death, thought that she was their mother, and died murmuring "Maman" or "Mütterlein", comforted at the last.

At Saarbrücken, and later, at Metz and at Cambrai, she gave of her best. The Baroness de Crombrughe, in her book, "Diary of a nurse during the war of 1870-71", wrote: "The unfortunate patients blessed those devoted women to their last breath. Mademoiselle Teichmann, whom the most charitable and the most intelligent of hospital sisters might perhaps equal, but could certainly never surpass, either in devotion or in selfless acts of every kind, gives the finest physical and spiritual care to the patients in need. Always at the disposal of those among our nurses who seek her help or advice, she is constantly at hand for any task and any person. Her experience is most valuable to us".

After the end of hostilities, on February 27, 1871, Constance Teichmann and her fellow nurses left France and returned to Belgium. Constance's sister described the return in the following words: "Long before she was near to us, she held out her arms to us. At Namur, another group of the family welcomed us, and at midnight we reached Antwerp, where the staff had decorated the house with little Red Cross flags".

### **Death of Constance Teichmann**

After the jubilee celebrations in 1896, her state of health deteriorated, and on December 14 she died. News of her death spread like wildfire through the city. Rich and poor flocked to her house from all sides: the grateful population wished to pay its last respects to her. On December 17, the day of her funeral, countless men, women and children from all levels of society demonstrated their deep gratitude to the "Angel of Antwerp".

In the church of Saint Eloi, in Antwerp, a great monument was erected to her memory. Two reliefs illustrate the culminating moments of her life of charity: her aid to the wretched outcasts suffering from cholera on the Scheldt, and her Red Cross mission during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71.

The Belgian Red Cross can be proud of this great lady of the newly founded Red Cross. But Constance Teichmann reminds us also of the dedication and sacrifices of the pioneers of our institution. At a time when the whole world looked with scepticism on the "humanitarian dream" of Henry Dunant, and many people were convinced that this dream would vanish like a bubble at the first thrust of a bayonet, these pioneers helped to ensure that brotherhood was not entirely banished from the field of battle.

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