

*“Every one of us is responsible
for all men and for everything on earth”*

INAUGURATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE RED CROSS

(Geneva, 29 October 1988)

The International Museum of the Red Cross was inaugurated on 29 October 1988 in the presence of Swiss federal and cantonal government representatives, members of the permanent missions to the United Nations Office in Geneva and representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the League and many National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

The Museum, initially conceived to provide the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement with a means of becoming better known, attracting funds and inspiring young people, is the outcome of twelve years of tireless effort. Its purpose is not only to document the creation and expansion of the Movement, but also and above all to pay tribute to man's humanity throughout the centuries. As underscored by Mr. Otto Stich, President of the Swiss Confederation, who cut the inaugural ribbon, the International Museum of the Red Cross is “a testimony to the deed, the word or the look that, in the midst of war, violence and disaster, assists and saves”.

This is an accurate portrayal of the Museum, which emphasizes humanitarian endeavours rather than war and violence.

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In 1979 an architectural competition was organized for the future Museum. The plans ultimately selected, most similar in form and spirit to the programme envisaged by the Museum Foundation, were those submitted by the Swiss architects Pierre Zoelly, Georges Haefeli and Michel Girardet.

The foundation stone was laid in November 1985 at an official ceremony attended by Nancy Reagan and Raissa Gorbachev. The collections, selected from sources throughout Europe and the United States, include various historical documents, photographs and films from the ICRC's archives.

The Museum was totally financed outside of the Movement. The Museum Foundation, headed by Mr. Philippe de Weck, sought no contributions from the Red Cross and Red Crescent institutions nor from the general public. The 24 million Swiss francs needed to implement the project were raised among private concerns and governments. The Swiss Confederation and the Canton and City of Geneva contributed about 7.5 million Swiss francs.

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Set in the hillside below the ICRC's headquarters, the Museum is approached through an atrium where concrete, glass and light blend harmoniously. The exhibition is divided into eleven large areas where state-of-the-art museum technology is used to trace the history of man's humanity and to show how the Movement has channelled this universal quality.

On entering the exhibition, the visitor is greeted by images of merciful acts and customs whereby all civilizations have shown a spontaneous desire to preserve life and assist others without discrimination. Further on, a panoramic audiovisual show conveys the horror of Solferino and points to Henry Dunant's initiative, which led to the foundation of the Red Cross. Archive films, scale models and photographic and iconographic montages then depict the development of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, its work during the First and Second World Wars and its activities in situations of conflict and natural disasters up to the present time.

The Museum also displays the complete collection of seven million index cards filed during the First World War by the International Prisoners of War Agency, a telegram 72 metres (236 feet) long sent in 1943 to the ICRC by the American Government and listing the names of 2,341 German prisoners of war transferred to the United States, and an exact replica of a cell with a floor space of four square metres (43 sq. ft), in which an ICRC delegate found 17 political detainees who had been held there for several months. All of these Red Cross activities took place during events that have shaped the history of humanity since 1863 and are engraved on the Museum's Wall of Time.

In the words of the Museum's Director, Laurent Marti: "Wars, disasters, epidemics, massacres, genocides and collective and individual tragedies, such are the milestones of man's fate that cover the Wall of Time. Against this

backdrop of absurd violence and misfortune, the outstretched hand, the supportive arm, the surgeon's scalpel, the compassionate look, the respectful word, the attentive ear and the encouraging smile all help to preserve life".

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The Museum suggests rather than tells. Instead of overwhelming the visitor with relics and documents, it successfully uses highly sophisticated audiovisual technology (suspended luminous panels, superimposed panels of photographs processed by scanner and ink jet on tulle) and a subtle play of shadow and light to show what motivates human beings to help one another. Each exhibition area is designed to involve the visitor in the world of humanitarian activities by stimulating his senses, appealing to his emotions and giving him cause for thought. To quote Laurent Marti again: "The Museum is an experience that should leave the visitor sobered and concerned but not despairing. The message it is meant to convey is twofold: one of hope despite considerable obstacles and one of peace in the spirit of Dostoevsky's words, engraved in capital letters over the Museum's entrance: "Every one of us is responsible for all men and for everything on earth".*

* See also the interview with Laurent Marti in *IRRC* No. 266, Sept.-Oct. 1988, pp. 452-456.

The Museum, run by Laurent Marti with the assistance of Jean-Pierre Gaume, its curator, and about sixty volunteers, is located at 17, avenue de la Paix, Geneva. It is open to the public daily (except Tuesdays) from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The admission fee for adults is 10 Swiss francs, with the usual reductions available. Summaries of the exhibition are available in ten languages. The commentaries and captions are in English, French and German. Temporary exhibitions will be held in a specially reserved area.