

125th ANNIVERSARY OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

The Review is pleased to publish the thoughts of Dr. Olga Milosevic on the significance and lasting nature of the Red Cross, 125 years after its inception.

Dr. Milosevic was an assistant at the University of Belgrade Faculty of Medicine before the Second World War, and a fighter in the Yugoslav War of Liberation. From 1947-1963 she was Secretary General of the Red Cross of Yugoslavia and a member of its Central Committee. She is still an active member of the Red Cross of Yugoslavia. With her extensive social welfare activities and her position at the Yugoslav Red Cross, Dr. Milosevic has helped foster Red Cross acceptance of the principle of service to the community.

As a League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies expert, she helped draw up the League Development Programme and assess seminars organized for developing National Societies.

The depth of her personal commitment to humanitarian work and her outstanding devotion in the field of care for the wounded, the sick and the victims of war, make her a model of modesty and humanity.

It was for these merits that the Standing Commission of the International Red Cross unanimously decided, during the Council of Delegates on 25 October 1985, to award her the Henry Dunant Medal.

*
* *

The lasting nature of the Red Cross

The idea of the Red Cross was born of suffering, suffering in war. It was followed by humanitarian action for the benefit of all humanity, and has been enhanced with the knowledge and experience gained throughout the many years of its long history.

We have seen how one man, a good man, struck with compassion for those who were suffering, was able to arouse that same compassion and will to help in many hitherto indifferent people, how he was able to convince them to give what was best in them to a noble humanitarian cause. In doing their humanitarian work, these people did not ask who was friend and who was foe. Only one thing mattered: to alleviate suffering and save human lives.

The experience of Solferino, the effect the suffering of others had on him, the need he felt to organize assistance, were all factors which inspired Henry Dunant and incited him, with a group of men sharing the same ideas and goals, to found an institution which was subsequently to become the Red Cross. From that moment on the institution has never stopped growing. It is now universal, for in every country in the world, more and more men and women have joined the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to fulfil its humanitarian goals.

In the course of its history, the Red Cross has become an important part of life. It is one of the oldest institutions working for humanity—we can even wonder by what miracle, in spite of all the disruptive events to which our world is prey, it has stood fast for so long and why? The answer is obvious. The Red Cross has deep historical roots, a long tradition of service in the name of justice and good. Unique in kind, it has resisted the test of time, fortified by the confidence of the members it has never let down.

Born in war, the Red Cross is making a substantial contribution to the defence of peace and exerting a peaceable influence on the very causes of war, for peace is not just the absence of war.

From the outset, the Red Cross has also been committed to the well-being of humanity, attentive to community needs and constantly adapting its mission and its tasks to them.

The Red Cross has managed to make men and women aware of their own strength and accept the principle that every individual has the right to live in dignity. The cause of a better life is undoubtedly greatly furthered by helping those who suffer, but it is also important to help prevent suffering, often the result of ignorance and poverty. This means everyone, in particular the Red Cross, must take on new, increasingly weighty tasks.

For all these reasons, the Red Cross has brought together more and more people anxious to work for justice and truth, it has been able to win their loyalty and to attract new members. It is with the Red Cross and Red Crescent that generations of young people ready to do what is right have been raised, so that in adulthood, nurtured on humanistic

principles, they would carry on the humanitarian work of their elders for a better world.

Throughout its history the Red Cross has worked for greater equity, for more universal social and cultural development, for truth and humanism, the fulfilment of man's loftiest ideals. By sharing in the plight of peoples throughout the world, by adapting to modern needs, the Red Cross has weathered all the storms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It has advanced the struggle for man's dignity, for mutual respect and consideration, for a world of love and peace.

For my part, I cannot say when I really became a member of the Red Cross. I think it happened when I got to know the organization's humanitarian objectives. As a doctor, these objectives were not only familiar to me, they were also a part of my professional life, and they could easily be accomplished in conditions of peace.

When a mighty power overran my country, spreading poverty, destruction and death, the people rose up in defence of their dignity and freedom, against enslavement. I joined them, and by doing so acquired new experience which showed me, in particularly cruel circumstances, everything that was good in man, how utterly selfless individual people can be, the effort they can make to lead, to teach, to defend life.

I thus unfortunately lived through the same thing—if I may be permitted to say so—as Henry Dunant did in Solferino. But with one difference: the Red Cross already existed and we had to apply its principles in action. In the midst of the bloodshed, of destruction and fire, humanitarian virtues are seen in their true dimension, but also how impossible it is to humanize savagery.

At the end of the Second World War, I dedicated myself to the Red Cross of Yugoslavia with the desire to serve my people and others and to let them benefit from my knowledge. I have never looked back.

In a country which was once again free, which had learned the lessons of the past and the war, we worked to improve day-to-day community life. We used our strength to help people, to teach them how to take care of themselves and those around them, so as to improve their everyday life and foster social equality. We became teachers to show the dangers of everyday life, which threaten individual and community health and social welfare. We launched and organized operations calling on all volunteers to participate in the work of the Red Cross.

We wanted to share this experience with other Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and in turn benefit from the experience of others.

Our people gave itself wholeheartedly to Red Cross activities, willing to help in Yugoslavia and elsewhere and to try to solve the problems facing mankind.

The Red Cross of Yugoslavia has always championed the cause of “lasting fellowship”, for misfortune strikes every day, and sickness, poverty, famine and ignorance are no lesser blights than natural disasters. It is in such circumstances that the Red Cross can mobilize considerable forces to alleviate suffering and that the feeling of fellowship is strongest.

As a contribution to co-operation in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, I felt it my duty to share our experiences and the results obtained, the means and methods we have used. During all these years, I have had the great privilege of receiving sincere and friendly co-operation in my work with international organizations and the individuals they are made up of.

We have always supported Red Cross co-operation with other international organizations with similar mandates. In this respect, we are aware of the important part to be played by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in achieving the goal set at the Alma-Ata Conference: “Health for all by the year 2000”. This goal will not be met unless everyone helps. By adopting it, the Red Cross remains true to its basic mission: to prevent and alleviate human suffering in all circumstances, to protect life and health and respect for the human being. By counting on the broadest possible support of the general population it is able to fulfil its humanitarian duty for the well-being of man.

After many years of work with the Red Cross, my National Society paid me the great honour of bestowing on me the highest distinctions of the Red Cross of Yugoslavia and nominating me for the most noble award of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement—the Henry Dunant Medal, which I received in 1985. Allow me to repeat what I said on that occasion:

“The Henry Dunant medal is for me not only a great honour, it is much more than that. It symbolizes the conviction that, in spite of the difficulties and obstacles, humanity aspires to a better future, that peoples should know each other better, respect each other and help each other at all times. That they should lend each other a helping hand and live in peace, freedom and dignity.

With what strength I have left, I will continue my life’s work, and to all those at work for the Red Cross throughout the world I wish

much courage, so that the Red Cross and Red Crescent banner—which, as Henry Dunant said, stands for no country but for all humanity—may continue to fly”.

Dr. Olga Milosevic
