

The Polish Red Cross: 75 years of activity

LANDMARKS IN THE SOCIETY'S HISTORY FROM 1919 TO THE PRESENT

As soon as Poland recovered its independence after more than 120 years of occupation, representatives of the humanitarian associations working in the three areas previously occupied by Russia, Germany and Austria respectively decided to found a Red Cross society in the newly liberated and unified State.

Between the two world wars

The first General Assembly, held on 27 April 1919, adopted statutes and appointed the Central Committee of the Polish Association of the Red Cross. In July of that year the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) registered the new Association as the only Red Cross organization in Poland acting by virtue of the Geneva Conventions, and in August the Association was admitted to the League of Red Cross Societies, set up a few months before in May 1919.

Some of the very first tasks undertaken by the Association were to assist Polish soldiers and their families, to combat epidemics in the eastern territories and to set up a chain of disinfection points, public baths and dispensaries, with considerable support from the League of Red Cross Societies.

During the 1919-1921 uprisings in Silesia, the Association opened delegations in all the districts of Upper Silesia to provide whatever assistance was needed. An Information and Tracing Bureau was set up soon after the Association was born, in order to promote contacts with the ICRC and National Red Cross Societies on matters relating to prisoners of war and civilians separated from their families as a result of the hostilities.

In September 1920 the Association and the Soviet Red Cross concluded an agreement and appointed representatives in charge of exchanging information on civilian and military casualties.

The Polish Association of the Red Cross became the Polish Red Cross under a presidential decree dated 1 September 1927. It was recognized as a public service organization under the patronage of the Polish Head of State. The new statutes provided for the Society to be placed under the authority of the Minister for Military Affairs in the event of conflict.

Undaunted by a shortage of resources that made its task all the more difficult, the Polish Red Cross immediately became involved in social and medical activities, in particular a campaign to combat the typhus epidemic that had spread throughout the country. It also launched training programmes for nurses and first-aid workers and set up a network of health posts. A Polish Red Cross emergency centre with a blood transfusion unit was opened in Lodz in 1935. Poland's first blood transfusion and storage facility, supplied by a large number of donors, was set up the following year as part of the Red Cross hospital (see below).

On 29 January 1937 the Council of Ministers issued an order establishing compulsory training for first-aid teams. The recruitment, training and equipping of these teams was entrusted to the Polish Red Cross. Before the outbreak of the Second World War the Society had constituted large stocks of medical supplies and equipment. The supervisors of the officially recognized first-aid teams were assisted by nursing aides called the "Sisters of the Polish Red Cross" and by some 50,000 female health workers in rural areas. The Society also placed at the army's disposal a hospital staffed by highly skilled doctors and nurses, 200 health posts, an ambulance aircraft and a detachment of field nurses.

At that time the Society had 736,866 members and comprised 14 regional committees, over 350 district committees, 9,024 Red Cross circles and more than 1,300 medical establishments and social welfare institutions.

The occupation (1939-1945)

When the Second World War broke out on 1 September 1939, the Polish Red Cross was assigned a whole series of new tasks, the most important being to assist wounded and sick soldiers and civilian victims of air raids. The unexpected course taken by the hostilities and the rapid advance of German troops further aggravated the general state of confusion in the country. The Information and Tracing Bureau began compiling data on persons killed during the fighting. In the territories that had not yet been invaded the Polish Red Cross set up hundreds of health posts, dispensaries, supply points, canteens and night shelters for soldiers and civilians retreating towards the centre of the country.

On 7 September 1939 the Polish High Command ordered the evacuation of some of the central authorities of the Polish Red Cross in Warsaw. The former Treasurer-General, Waclaw Lachert, became the acting chairman of the new

Central Committee, which remained in Warsaw until Poland capitulated at the end of September.

On 12 September the Minister of Military Affairs of the Polish Government in exile in Paris issued a decree establishing a Central Committee of the Red Cross attached to this new government. From that point on the ICRC maintained working relations with the Central Committee in Paris and subsequently in London.

In Poland, the Red Cross adjusted its structure to the circumstances imposed by the occupation of western Poland by the Reich and of the eastern part of the country by the USSR. In German-occupied territory, the Society conducted its activities in four districts instead of the former 14, i.e. in Kielce, Cracow, Lublin and Warsaw. The Central Committee's headquarters had been destroyed in a bombing raid along with archives containing the vital documents compiled by the Information and Tracing Bureau.

In October 1939 the ICRC appealed to all National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to come to the aid of Polish prisoners of war and civilians in occupied Poland. The response was generous, and large consignments of medicines and medical equipment arrived in December. The occupying German authorities ordered part of the supplies to be given to the hospitals, and the remainder was placed at the disposal of the Polish Red Cross.

In July 1940 the German authorities ordered the dissolution of all Polish associations except the Red Cross, whose activity was reduced strictly to tasks provided for under the Geneva Conventions. A statement by Governor-General Frank clearly shows the attitude of the German authorities towards this exclusively Polish organization: "For the Poles the National Red Cross represents a remnant of sovereignty, a symbol of their State. That is something we cannot tolerate".

Despite numerous forms of harassment, such as the blocking of bank accounts, the diverting of some Red Cross supplies, the dismantlement of collegiate authorities at district level, the control exercised by the German administration over correspondence with the ICRC and the League, and the appointment of a German representative to the Central Committee of the Polish Red Cross, the Society managed to continue running its hospitals, dispensaries, health posts, homes for the disabled and orphanages for children who had lost their parents in the war.

Millions of people who had lost contact with their families as a result of the hostilities turned to the Polish Red Cross for help. Tracing activities were entrusted to the Information and Tracing Bureau, whose staff rose from 3 to 100 — almost all of them volunteers. The Bureau's main tasks were to draw up lists of prisoners of war and people who had died or been killed, arrested, imprisoned, interned in concentration camps or assigned to forced labour.

In accordance with the 1929 Geneva Convention, the Polish Red Cross came to the aid of prisoners of war held in Germany by forwarding messages and sending relief parcels. However, thousands of prisoners of war held in the Soviet Union were unable to maintain contacts with their families.

With the ICRC's help, the Society was able to keep mailing services operating both inside Poland and with other countries. Insofar as its resources permitted it also assisted prisoners in concentration camps, though without any legal basis as there was no convention providing for the protection of civilians at the time. It did not succeed, however, in its repeated attempts to alleviate the plight of Poles deported to the USSR, despite the contacts it had established with the Soviet Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

In April 1943, German troops discovered the graves of several thousand Polish officers who had been interned at Kozielsk camp and murdered in Katyn. From that moment on there was a radical change in the occupying authorities' attitude towards the Polish Red Cross. They tried to persuade the Society to join in their propaganda campaign against the USSR, the purpose being to establish who had perpetrated the massacre and the date on which it had been committed. Although threats were levelled against the President of the Polish Red Cross and the Society as a whole, the National Society did no more than send a team of experts to exhume and identify the bodies, considering this task as an obligation. The team worked in Katyn from April to early June 1943 and found a total of 4,143 bodies. Of these 2,805 were identified and the families duly informed.

On 1 August 1944 an uprising broke out in Warsaw. The following day the Germans set fire to the Polish Red Cross headquarters, destroying the Society's archives which contained the information compiled by the Tracing and Information Bureau on the Katyn massacre, lists of persons killed, arrested or deported, and a million identification cards — all irreplaceable documents of vital historical importance.

During the uprising the Polish Red Cross came to the aid of the insurgents and the civilian population. It set up several hospitals and hundreds of first-aid posts and food distribution points. Red Cross first-aid workers, many of whom unfortunately paid with their lives, constituted stocks of relief supplies, searched for missing persons, identified people killed during the fighting and drew up lists of casualties.

The Warsaw uprising lasted two months. A representative of the Polish Red Cross attended the negotiations that led to the surrender of the insurgents. This enabled the latter, whom the Germans considered as bandits, to acquire prisoner-of-war status before being deported to internment camps. The Polish Red Cross was also entrusted with the task of evacuating 5,000 patients from hospitals in the insurrection zone to medical facilities that had been set up for the purpose outside Warsaw.

The Red Cross authorities were forced to leave the Polish capital at the same time as the residents who had survived the fighting. This marked the end of one of the most tragic periods in the Society's history.

The post-war period

Warsaw was liberated in January 1945, and shortly afterwards the Central Committee returned to the city.

In July of that year a network of Red Cross posts was set up in the eastern territories liberated by the Soviet army and the Polish forces.

The Polish Red Cross, and its Tracing and Information Bureau in particular, was then faced with a range of extremely difficult tasks. It succeeded, however, in restoring contacts among members of tens of thousands of families separated during the war.

The posts set up by the Red Cross provided former prisoners of war and returnees with their very first shelter and meals on Polish territory. People who had lost everything in the war were given clothes and food parcels. By late 1945 the indexes of the Tracing and Information Bureau contained over one million registration and identification cards.

The facilities run by the Polish Red Cross included 30 hospitals, five sanatoriums, 24 maternal and child-care posts and 16 public baths and disinfection rooms. A vaccination campaign covering over one million people was carried out and Red Cross dispensaries and aid posts were set up in train stations.

The Polish Red Cross was able to conduct all these activities thanks to a vast operation of solidarity set up by the ICRC and the League. Several dozen National Societies, shocked by the appalling tragedy that had befallen the Polish people, came to their aid with medicines, food, kitchen utensils and other basic necessities.

The Polish Red Cross gave assistance not only to Polish citizens but also to foreigners who had fought with the Allied forces and had been interned in German camps in Poland or deported to forced labour camps on Polish soil.

All over Poland soldiers killed on the battlefield and civilians murdered in the course of the war had been buried wherever they fell. It was therefore decided to exhume the bodies and set up cemeteries to give them a decent burial. At the end of 1945 more than 17,000 bodies were exhumed in Warsaw and its surroundings alone.

A vast first-aid training campaign for the general public was then launched. As there was a shortage of qualified medical staff, the Polish Red Cross organized professional training for nurses and established emergency services and blood

transfusion posts. Health posts were set up in workplaces, schools and residential areas; medical and public health teams were formed to provide first aid, combat epidemics and deal with other disasters.

In late 1949 and early 1950, the Polish Red Cross handed over to the National Health Service 177 fully equipped emergency centres and 15 blood transfusion and storage posts.

The first National Congress of the Polish Red Cross was held at the beginning of 1951. New statutes were adopted and a plan of action was drawn up for the years to come. This meeting marked the beginning of coordinated Red Cross action in a country that had returned to relative stability.

The Congress defined assistance to the elderly, the sick and people living alone as the Society's primary responsibility. In 1962 the Polish Red Cross began constituting a network of health posts staffed by the qualified nursing aides called the "Sisters of the Red Cross" to provide care for sick people unable to leave their homes. In barely a few years, 1,660 posts run by over 23,000 aides provided home nursing for some 100,000 people who had suffered most from the atrocities committed during the war or who no longer had any family to look after them.

Among the many activities carried out in the 1950s and 1960s were a blood donation campaign launched in 1958 and a vast health education and training programme for first-aid workers and voluntary youth instructors. The Society also took an active part in efforts to reunite Poles of German origin with their families in the Federal Republic of Germany. In 1956 it joined in the campaign to repatriate Poles from the USSR by registering them on their return and trying to trace their families. That same year saw the outbreak of the Hungarian revolution. The Polish Red Cross sent medicines, blood and food supplies for the Hungarian people and gave shelter to about a hundred Hungarian children.

Over the next ten years, former prisoners who had been subjected to pseudo-medical experiments in Nazi concentration camps received financial compensation from the Federal Republic of Germany. This operation was launched at the initiative of the Polish Red Cross, with strong backing from the ICRC, and was almost entirely carried out by the National Society except for the final stage when the State took over. The operation covered 1,357 people, and the amount paid in reparation totalled 30,435,000 DM.

In 1964 the Polish Diet passed a new law setting out the duties of the National Society in time of both peace and war and the extent of its cooperation with the public authorities and other organizations, in compliance with the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent.

In March 1977, the Polish Red Cross and the ICRC jointly conducted the first seminar on the dissemination of international humanitarian law for senior

officials of European and North American National Societies. Over the next three years, similar seminars were run for Red Cross Youth leaders, university professors and doctors.

From 1980, the Polish Red Cross and the ICRC jointly organized annual summer courses on international humanitarian law, given in Warsaw by well-known experts from all over the world and bringing together about 40 students from Europe and North America.

The proclamation of martial law on 13 December 1981 took the Polish Red Cross by surprise, but it nevertheless gave priority to assisting internees and their families. Having secured the authorities' permission, its representatives began visiting internment centres in the days that followed and were soon joined by ICRC delegates, who arrived in Poland on 15 December.

In January 1982, a delegation of the ICRC and the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies opened an office at the headquarters of the Society's Central Committee, and a task force was set up in Geneva to coordinate the dispatch of relief supplies to Poland under the League's leadership. Between December 1981 and July 1983, National Societies responded to the League's appeal for support by sending some 19,000 tonnes of relief goods, which were distributed to 1.5 million people in need.

During the same period ICRC and Polish Red Cross delegates visited internees in 79 detention centres all over the country, and representatives of the regional committees, or *voivodie*, made 170 visits to places of internment in their respective areas. More than 6,000 private interviews were held with the internees, and representations were made to the authorities to ensure that the internees received adequate medical care and enjoyed decent conditions of detention and treatment. They were given help with their personal affairs, their families received assistance and efforts were made to secure the internees' release. At the end of the mission both the ICRC and the League praised the work done by the Polish Red Cross in this sphere and presented it as a model Society on the international scene.

The year 1984 saw an influx of refugees transiting through Poland on their way to the West. The first to arrive were Palestinians, Libyans, Ethiopians and Somalis, followed by Romanians, Turks, Kurds, Iranians, Iraqis, Senegalese, Angolans and refugees from the Soviet Union. This was a new challenge for the Polish Red Cross, which between 1984 and 1988 provided assistance to some 320 people. The number of refugees rose sharply in 1989 with the arrival of people fleeing the German Democratic Republic. Working in close cooperation with the Embassy of the German Federal Republic and the German Red Cross, the Polish Red Cross gave the refugees shelter and food, and arranged for the transport of 2,800 people to West Germany. In March 1990 there was a sharp rise in arrivals when about 300 refugees were expelled from Sweden, including

many families with children. More than 800 refugees made their way to Poland in the course of that year.

Having itself enjoyed support from a number of sister Societies, the Polish Red Cross could not turn a blind eye to the suffering caused by natural disasters and political strife beyond its borders. It therefore conducted large-scale assistance operations for the people of Armenia, Lithuania, Romania and the Middle East, among others.

The Society's success in meeting so many challenges in so short a time was mainly due to its outstanding reputation among the Polish population, the dedication of its staff and volunteers, the assistance provided by the International Red Cross and substantial financial backing from the State.

Recent years

The year 1989 brought radical political, social and economic changes to Poland and then to other Central and Eastern European countries. The transition to a market economy led to the closing of numerous enterprises, a sharp rise in unemployment, the impoverishment of certain categories of the population and a lack of social security.

These developments had a major impact on the Polish Red Cross. The number of its members and committees, mainly in government enterprises, declined, as did the number of voluntary blood donors and consequently the volume of blood donated. Numerous health posts had to be closed down as a result of changes in the financing of social welfare, and the beneficiaries of Red Cross health services decreased as a result. Health promotion and training activities for adults were also considerably reduced.

In 1989 the Society's National Congress adjusted to the changing situation by defining a new strategy, granting autonomy to local sections, abandoning centralized financing and management and modifying programmes and structures. The state of the national economy was such that government subsidies for associations such as the Red Cross were cut to a minimum. The Society therefore had to seek new sources of funds.

An extraordinary session of the Congress, the Society's supreme governing body, was convened in 1991 to adopt new statutes and adapt Polish Red Cross structures to these new circumstances.

Meanwhile the affair of the Katyn massacre had resurfaced. Following developments in the USSR, more graves of Polish officers and policemen were discovered near Kharkov and Miednoie. When the bodies were exhumed in the presence of a representative of the Polish Red Cross, it was confirmed that the victims had been held in the Ostachkovo and Starobielsk camps.

At an extraordinary session held on 26 and 27 September 1992 the Polish Red Cross Congress took stock of the Society's past activities and adopted new statutes which were largely based on those in force during the period between the two world wars. It also elected new leaders and passed a resolution on programmes for the 1990s.

The Polish Red Cross currently comprises 49 Regional Committees or *voivodie*, 404 district committees, 16,192 Red Cross circles with over 978,400 members, and 17,613 clubs in kindergartens and primary schools attended by almost 600,000 children.

The Society's 185 health centres provide care for a population of nearly 40,000. Its first-aid posts, nursing homes and shelters assisted some 2,500 people in 1993. There are also 2,358 blood donation clubs with a membership of over 200,000 volunteers. Out of a total of 414,510 litres of blood donated free of charge in 1993, more than half was provided by these volunteer donors.

In 1993 almost 231,000 people received first-aid training in 9,164 courses organized by the Polish Red Cross, while five emergency teams, composed of 132 first-aid workers, stood ready to provide assistance to disaster victims. Health promotion activities were organized for 24,205 groups of participants, and 134 centres provided information and guidance on AIDS.

In its 55 warehouses the Polish Red Cross has sufficient stocks to meet the needs of some 10,000 disaster victims.

As part of its programme for the dissemination of international humanitarian law, the Society organized 5,081 lectures and courses, 130 seminars, 683 competitions, 889 exhibitions, 103 radio broadcasts and 236 television programmes throughout the country, in addition to the Warsaw summer courses on international humanitarian law mentioned above.

The archives of the Information and Tracing Bureau contain more than seven million registration cards and invaluable data on people who died during the Second World War. In 1993 alone the Bureau received over 60,000 tracing inquiries from people searching for lost relatives and requests for confirmation of detention, often in concentration, internment or forced labour camps. The Bureau processed more than 56,000 cases, issued 18,500 certificates and successfully resolved 500 cases concerning individuals whose families had lost all trace of them since the early days of the war. The Bureau is also continuing its efforts to trace the missing and to locate the gravesites of soldiers of all nationalities. In cooperation with the German Red Cross it is currently establishing cemeteries for German servicemen killed during the war.

The Polish Red Cross has three monthly publications, with a total circulation of 900,000: "*Zdrowie*" (Health), the Society's official bulletin, "*Jestem*" (I am) for adolescents, and "*Zygzak*" (Zigzag), a magazine for young children.

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