

# The work of the International Committee of "The Red Cross" during the Second World War : "a friend is anxious to reassure..."

Objektyp: **Group**

Zeitschrift: **Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand**

Band (Jahr): **13 (1948)**

Heft 4

PDF erstellt am: **12.07.2024**

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offering and granting those displaced persons the right which they are entitled to. There is also a tendency of considering these masses of displaced persons as some sort of labour reservoir, into which one can only reach and fish out the best qualified. Most of the displaced persons who have been picked so far, have been picked according to economic considerations and have been sent to factories, coal-mines, forests, but usually alone without their families. The destruction of the family, started by National-Socialism, is being continued. One then feels surprised if those men, torn from their wives, their children and their old parents, find it impossible to adapt themselves to the new life and circumstances. From this point to the statement that they cannot be assimilated by any Society, is only one step. Finally, they will be considered as a bothersome burden, and not as what they really are, as what all human beings are without distinction, the most important element of this world, the element without which no human progress is thinkable.

THE WORK OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF  
 "THE RED CROSS"  
 DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR.

"A FRIEND IS ANXIOUS TO REASSURE....."

The Agency was a small workshop under the direction of members of the Committee and its secretariat - a handful of voluntary workers at their tables, card-indexes and filing-cabinets.

What was the work in hand? "This agency," says Article 79 of the Convention, "shall be charged with the duty of collecting all information regarding prisoners which they may be able to obtain through official or private channels, and the agency shall transmit the information as rapidly as possible to the prisoners' own country or the Power in whose service they have been."

Remarkable office work, and useful at that. But the Red Cross is not an office. It cannot content itself with waiting for information in order to file and transmit it to another office. For the Red Cross, a list of prisoners of war is not a document; it is a herd of human beings in a barbed-wire enclosure. A regimental number is not a piece of information, but a man, and a man in trouble. It stands, too, for a family in which something has snapped because the man has stopped writing home. Those who had worked with the 1914 Agency well knew that these families would not always have patience to wait until the military bureaux of their country had found them and put an end to their anxiety with the words "Killed in action" or "Taken prisoner;" or else intensified it with the word "Missing." When they received one or other of these brief notices, they would ask a thousand questions. Killed! How did he die? Did he suffer? Where is he buried? A prisoner! Is he wounded? Is he ill? Is he not hungry or cold? Missing! Where is he? Heavens! Where is he?

In the confusion of war, with a hermetically sealed battlefront, to whom other than the Red Cross could they address these questions? So, either to the National Societies, who would send their letters on, or direct to Geneva, all these people would write, write, write.....

They would have to be answered. Even if the card-index had nothing to say, those who asked must know that they were being attended to, and that everything humanly possible would be done to send them information. For this purpose, the Agency must keep track of all that happened, and not just vaguely, but with full particulars. Each man in whatever camp must have his "duplicate" at Geneva, where he could always be found and followed up. Moreover, when further information was required, the Agency would not be content to wait for it; it would go to seek it, if necessary. It would seek it through every possible medium, through the official bureaux or the National Red Cross of the opposite side; through the military authorities and the commandants of camps; through the Committee's delegates and even from other men in the same unit as

the missing man.

That was the leading idea in the light of which the Agency organized itself and began to function, the principle which was to cause it to expand enormously and go beyond the sphere allotted to it by the Convention - the care of the prisoners of war alone - and extend its activity to civilians.

The history of the Agency cannot be written here; it would need a whole volume to itself. All we can do is to try to give a general idea of its work. Even this will only be intelligible if the reader makes a twofold effort. First, an effort of memory, to recall the main stages of the conflict; the going to war of nearly all the countries of the world, one after another, lightning invasions, great battles and armistices which "created" prisoners of war in millions; the flight of refugees, deportations, mass transfers of populations, and then the final capitulations which left more millions of combatants in the power of their enemy, and of civilians seeking each other. Secondly, an effort of the imagination, to realise the effect of these events on the Agency's work. Then perhaps he will understand the meaning of these few figures; on September 1st, 1939, the staff of the International Committee of the Red Cross consisted of 50 workers, at the end of April, 1945, of 3,921, of whom 2,585 were at the Agency alone; by the end of October 1946, the Agency had made out and filed 39 million index-cards, forwarded 13 million letters and post-cards for prisoners of war, censored, transmitted - and often transcribed - 24 million civilian messages.

These are but a few figures.

Straight away, in September 1939, four "national" departments were established, the German, British, French and Polish Departments, each attending to one of the four States and group of States at war. These national departments were the essential element of the Agency. It was they who kept the card-index, where was recorded and whence was subsequently sent out all information relating to individual men. There were also the general departments, technical for the most part, and the special departments set up according to the steps taken by the International Committee. All these together constituted the Central Agency, and at the beginning they occupied - and even then they shared it with other departments of the permanent Secretariat - one small part only of the immense building put at the Committee's disposal.

During the months of the "phoney war," the Agency had leisure to perfect its organization and its method of work, to open up sections, to adapt itself to the volume of questions to be dealt with and to their fairly regular frequency. But in the Spring of 1940, everything changed. From France alone, seven hundred thousand letters arrived in a few weeks, as many as 60,000 in a single day. Fresh national sections had to be established, existing sections enlarged or split, new workers hastily recruited and trained, and the work divided. The "Palais électoral", so recently much too large, was occupied to the last of its 50,592 square feet. Soon, indeed, it became too small for the Agency alone, which overflowed, while the Secretariat and the other sections which had shared the same building, themselves enlarged, split and transformed into departments of no mean size, occupied bank premises, hotels and flats. And so it was until the end of hostilities. The "workshop" of September 1930 had become a huge factory, with its benches, crowd of workers, machines - yes, its business machines - and twenty-seven branches or secondary workshops scattered throughout Switzerland.

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SUNDRY NEWS.  
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TRAVEL.

In 1947 over 1,400,000 tourists visited Switzerland; of these 700,000 were from Great Britain. In the coming Season only some 150,000 to 200,000 British tourists will have the opportunity of visiting Switzerland.