

Experiences of a Nurse : an Unusal Woman Talks to the N.S.H.

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EXPERIENCES OF A NURSE

by *Helen Nussbaum*

An Unusual Woman Talks to the N.S.H.

The invitation to the Open Meeting of the London Group of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique on 17th March said "Miss Helen Nussbaum, General Secretary of the International Council of Nurses, will speak on her experiences with UNRRA and WHO and ICRC and the international work of her Organisation". This proved to be a fascinating talk by a distinguished compatriot of ours. We feel many of our readers would be interested in what Miss Nussbaum had to relate, and we have pleasure in printing the following résumé of her talk.

Before being appointed to her present position with the International Council of Nurses, she had the perhaps unusual opportunity of working with three international organisations during the years following World War II. During those first post-war years a very large number of relief organisations were established throughout the world. Many of them had a definite and successful programme of assistance and aid, while others sent special missions to countries which had been destroyed or had suffered tragic hardships and famine, without planning a specific relief programme.

The three organisations with whom Miss Nussbaum worked were of world importance, and she was fortunate enough to take part in work which was being carried out perhaps for the first time on such a large scale, offering a unique opportunity of experience in international relief activities. During those years these three organisations operated a special mission in Greece, and by remaining there so many years she had the opportunity of witnessing the slow but remarkable progress which the country achieved after the devastating years of war and occupation.

During the years Miss Nussbaum spent in Greece, first with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) in 1946 and then with the World Health Organisation (WHO), her activities brought her in contact with many international organisations; in fact, it seemed as if the country was "invaded" by organisations from all over the world, each trying to bring relief or assistance in some specific way to some specific group of people.

It was then that she became poignantly aware of the term "internationally minded", which now seems to have become an almost common expression. But she also became aware of the fact that in order to contribute efficiently in international activities, one had to make a special effort to understand the people who were receiving assistance, their language, and to try to picture oneself in their desperate situations, in their poverty and emotional sufferings, and this was particularly necessary in work related to health, welfare and nursing.

Having lived in the South of Italy for many years, Miss Nussbaum soon found some points of similarity in the character of the Greek peasants; that is, the love of natural beauty, a delight in music and songs, the warm-hearted gift of hospitality, the philosophy of enjoying what life could offer in its simplest way and in the poorest conditions. The material needs of the Greek people were great. The rural population had lost nearly all its worldly belongings, but their greater need at that time was to be understood.

During the ten-month assignment with UNRRA Miss Nussbaum worked mainly in the north-western region of the country bordering with Albania, reorganising the

nursing and re-equipping the various hospitals, a challenging task which became gradually very rewarding as conditions improved and was at all times most interesting and enlightening.

The whole national set-up was chaotic in 1946; all roads, both in the rural and urban areas, were in a dreadful state, covered by huge holes which were called "bath tubs", making travelling by jeep a tiring and painful experience. Water was very scarce; the railway network throughout the country had been destroyed; no bridges existed over rivers. Transport of food, equipment, drugs, etc., was slow and uncertain and often not adequate.

The main concern of UNRRA during that emergency period in Europe was to bring immediate assistance and relief to the people, thus, as an official once explained, trying to fill the enormous gaps caused by the War, allowing people to stand on firmer ground without stumbling.

Miss Nussbaum's second assignment from January 1947 to the end of 1950, was with WHO which had taken over from UNRRA as an Interim Commission before being definitely established in 1948 as one of the most important branches of the United Nations. Amongst the numerous activities carried out by WHO to Greece, one of the most invaluable was the campaign against tuberculosis. As a result of the areas of famine, malnutrition and lack of drugs, a marked increase in the morbidity and mortality of this disease was registered throughout the country.

As Nursing Consultant to the Ministry of Health in this special field, she had to travel all over the country, including the large islands such as Crete and the Dodecanese, organising health centres, sanatoria and hospitals. These travels brought her in close contact with the people, the peasants, the shepherds in remote villages. This gave her a clearer understanding of their way of living, their mentality, their conditions, their poverty and their endurance.

From 1949 — 1951, the country was again badly destroyed by the armed conflicts against neighbouring states, which caused even greater damage than the previous years of enemy occupation, not to mention the abduction of approximately twenty thousand children. This period of danger, sadness and mourning brought the helpers very near to the Greek people, and they increased their efforts in order to extend and intensify their help.

Miss Nussbaum's third assignment in 1951 with the International Committee of the Red Cross was a special mission closely connected with the political events of the previous years. Since 1947 the ICRC, with the help and understanding of the Greek Government, had been able to assist all those who, because of their political feelings, had been interned or exiled. The prisons were overcrowded with political detainees, and the Government had made a special appeal to the International Red Cross to investigate the health conditions of the prisons and detect any cases of tuberculosis.

This was her assignment, assisted by the Swiss delegate of the ICRC in Athens. It took them two years of hard work, constant travelling by jeep, by ship and even by fishing motor-boats, to accomplish this task, which, besides the physical strain, required infinite patience, understanding, discussions and meetings, and the effort of never swaying from the objective human and non-political purpose. Nevertheless the result was more successful and

of greater importance than had been foreseen at the beginning. Two thousand detainees were X-rayed and five hundred treatments were successfully carried out.

A few days after Miss Nussbaum's return to the International Red Cross Headquarters in Geneva, the disastrous eruption of the Ionian Islands took place, and she was flown back again to the scene of destruction, once again to bring assistance and relief to people stricken by fear and panic, this time by organising an emergency village of 139 large tents for 2,500 homeless people. It was not only a question of giving these families a roof, even if it were a canvas one, but of organising a health service, daily dispensary and a children's centre.

Her last assignment, which ended in 1958, was to help organise and supervise a modern centre for illegitimate and orphan babies, and open the first school for nursery nurses, with a two-year training programme.

These years of international nursing activities were not only the most interesting and rewarding, but perhaps also the most difficult years of her professional work. The situations and problems with which she was often faced were a constant challenge, but they definitely helped her and prepared her for her present work and responsibilities as General Secretary of the International Council of Nurses. The lasting result of her past activities is the knowledge that unity in work and purpose is the most important and essential factor towards achieving the ultimate aim. In nursing this prerogative is indispensable. Unity in a working team extends to unity on the national level, and develops further into international unity, relationship and solidarity.

To be able to meet the increasing, complicated and difficult demands put to the nursing profession, the nurse of the future will still need to be skilful and highly trained in order to help her patients. But she must be something more. She must have a training with a wider outlook, an understanding of the larger problems that confront her profession, as well as individuality and initiative, enabling her to meet and solve these difficulties. In this great and challenging task the nurse cannot stand alone. Nor can the national professional body to which she belongs operate and develop without international relations, international exchange of experience, training and knowledge with other nurses of other countries.

The founders of the International Council of Nurses foresaw in 1899 this increasing need of unity in the nursing profession, and expressed it in the Preamble of the Constitution, defining, at the same time, one of its objectives which, even now, after sixty-two years of activity, is to maintain and promote by all means possible a spirit of international relations and friendship within the nursing profession.

Today's technical improvements and developments in the nursing training have broken the national boundaries of the past and nursing, more than any other profession, has become an international exchange, not only of individual nurses but of methods, of training, of skilful techniques, of professional research and of better understanding of the needs of the peoples.

The International Congresses which the ICN organises every four years, and which are one of its numerous activities, stress the reality of these objectives, uniting the nurses of the fifty-nine National Associations which are in active membership with the ICN and which together represent a total of half a million nurses in the five continents. By bringing the nurses together, these Congresses offer the

opportunity of exchanging information, of broadening the personal and professional out-look of the nurses, of making them participate in technical discussions and in business meetings, teaching them to understand the various problems which face the different countries, and helping them to ensure increased efficiency in their own work.

The activities of the ICN are numerous and are constantly expanding. The ICN maintains at Headquarters an International Information Centre on all aspects of nursing which, through the specific Divisions of Nursing Education, Nursing Service, and Economic Welfare, is made available to all nurses, training schools, institutions and other allied international and national organisations. The ICN further maintains a special register of nurses whose qualifications have been re-established following emigration to other countries.

It maintains and develops good relationships with other international organisations which are concerned with health and social welfare, such as the United Nations Committees and their Specialised Agencies, and the World Health Organisation. It is listed on a special register for mutual consultative purposes maintained by the International Labour Office, co-operates with the International Hospital Federation and the World Federation for Mental Health, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the League of Red Cross Societies, the World Medical Association, the World Confederation of Midwives, the International Union for Child Welfare, etc. Maintaining good international relationships is an extremely important aspect of the work which the ICN undertakes on behalf of its members.

A number of important publications on nursing education and nursing service are produced by the ICN Headquarters Staff and are available on request, including the International Nursing Review which is sent to over one hundred countries.

The ICN exists to serve the profession and can only continue to exist and to serve if the National Associations in each country are prepared actively to support it. Every country contributes through its knowledge and discoveries to the progress of other nations, and nurses form a valuable and indispensable link in promoting this world progress by working towards the ultimate aim of securing health and well-being for all peoples.

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