

CENTENARY OF THE AUSTRIAN RED CROSS

HISTORY

The Austrian Red Cross, which is the largest private relief organization in the country with its 25,000 unpaid workers, about 300,000 adult members and 1.2 million members of the Junior Red Cross, officially celebrated its hundredth anniversary on 14 March 1980.

The first organized and benevolent relief activities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire began, however, at a much earlier date. In April 1859, when an armed conflict for supremacy in Lombardy already seemed inevitable, a number of influential Austrians set up with the Emperor's consent, a "Patriotic Relief Association", which two months later became an official relief service assisting the victims of the battle of Solferino and their families.

After the war the association was dissolved but it resumed its activities five years later during the campaign against Denmark and again two years after that in the war against Prussia. Similar organizations were also set up in the various provinces of the realm. But this time the association was not dissolved at the end of the war. On the contrary the parent body in Vienna became established as a permanent institution under the title "Austrian Patriotic Relief Association for Wounded Combatants, Widows and Orphans of War Victims" and it adopted the Red Cross emblem. A year previously, on 21 July 1866, Austria had signed the Geneva Convention.

In the course of the next few years, private relief organizations were created in all parts of the country. They were brought together in 1880 and the "Austrian Red Cross Society" was founded on 14 March. Its first President was Baron Karl von Tinti, who had already been active with the Patriotic Relief Association 21 years before, in 1859. The new Austrian Red Cross Society was placed under the patronage of Emperor Francis Joseph and Empress Elisabeth.

Under Baron von Tinti's presidency, the Austrian Red Cross undertook its first major activity in peace-time, in accordance with Henry

Dunant's proposal that humanitarian activities should not be limited to assistance during hostilities, but should also include relief in case of natural disasters: the first opportunity to do so was provided by the serious floods that affected Carinthia and the Tyrol in 1882.

In another field and still under President Tinti's term of office the Austrian Red Cross acted as a pioneer in equipping an ambulance ship in Trieste, although the Geneva Convention was only later extended (by the Hague Convention of 1899) to cover naval warfare, and in case of serious danger it would not at that time have protected the hospital ship in any way.

The first issue of the Society's publication entitled "Das Rothe Kreuz" (The Red Cross) appeared on 1 September 1884. President Tinti died that same year and was succeeded by his deputy, Count Franz Falkenhayn. Under Count Falkenhayn's mandate, in 1897, Vienna for the first time hosted an International Red Cross Conference, which was attended by delegates of 32 States. President Falkenhayn died one year later and his successor, Prince Alois Schönburg-Hartenstein, remained in office until shortly before the outbreak of the First World War. During this period training courses for nursing auxiliaries were introduced and the Red Cross Society's storage facilities were reorganized and extended.

From 1914, under the mandate of the new President, Count Abensperg-Traun, the men and women volunteers worked unstintingly for the four long years of the First World War: a total of 1,316,421 soldiers were cared for in 876 medical units; Red Cross convoys transported 8,480,434 wounded and sick and the main depot in the Prater sent out medicaments and dressings to the value of 13 million Austrian crowns.

After the end of the war the Austrian Red Cross' first task was to tend the seriously wounded and to assist civilians and soldiers returning to their homes. President Dr. Max Vladimír Beck (1918-1938) and his collaborators devoted themselves, in spite of a constant lack of funds, to helping the poor and caring for the elderly and the sick. A large number of hospitals and rest homes were set up and run by the Red Cross in its struggle against tuberculosis which was prevalent in the post-war years.

Two major events marked Dr. Beck's term of office: in 1921 the Austrian Red Cross joined the League of Red Cross Societies, created two years before, and the following year the Austrian Junior Red Cross was founded. In 1938 the Austrian Red Cross Society did not escape the whole country's fate, it was "annexed" and incorporated into the German Red Cross.

Immediately after the Second World War, assistance activities were resumed. Under Presidents Karl Seitz (1946-1950) and Burghard Breitner (1950-1956) those activities mainly concentrated on providing assistance to civilians and soldiers released from captivity or simply returning home and on helping refugees and the population in need.

The revised and amplified Geneva Conventions of 1949 were ratified by Austria in 1953. In 1956 the Austrian Red Cross was put to one of its greatest trials. With international support it assisted and cared for up to 180,000 Hungarian refugees. That same year Dr. Hans von Lauda became President of the Society.

In the course of the next few years the Austrian Red Cross contributed to the relief activities undertaken for practically every natural disaster or political crisis that occurred in the world.

In 1965 the Austrian Red Cross hosted the 20th International Red Cross Conference. The fundamental Red Cross principles (humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality) still guiding Red Cross action today were adopted in Vienna by that Conference.

In 1970 a fundamental revision of the Society's statutes was made so as to adapt its structures to the requirements of the modern world. The Society's name was also slightly changed. Since Dr. von Lauda's death in 1974 Dr. Heinrich Treichl has been performing the office of President.

On the occasion of the celebration of the centenary of the Austrian Red Cross the President of the Federal Republic, Dr. Rudolf Kirchschläger, revived an ancient tradition on 20 September 1980 in becoming Honorary President of the Society.

ORGANIZATION

Like the Republic of Austria, the Austrian Red Cross Society is set up on a federalistic basis. With its nine regional associations it assumes the following duties:

- voluntary assistance in all aspects of public welfare and health care,
- training of appropriate personnel and information of the public at large,
- first aid in emergency situations and disasters,
- running of the voluntary blood donation service,
- tracing of missing soldiers and civilians, and
- taking part in the establishment of civil defence measures.

The Austrian Red Cross is the only recognized authority vis-à-vis the ICRC, the League, foreign Red Cross Societies and other foreign associations, and vis-à-vis the federal authorities and supra-regional Austrian organizations.

It co-ordinates disaster relief when disasters exceed the competence of a regional association or when they occur outside the country. The Society is also responsible for organizing the Junior Red Cross, the Red Cross nurses, the various voluntary services and for the nomination of the governing body of the blood bank.

To be able to discharge its duties the Austrian Red Cross must have an appropriate structure. This structure is determined partly by historical factors: the nine regional associations are legally and financially independent, because most of them already existed before the creation of the Society in 1880 and worked independently as voluntary relief associations under their common protective emblem.

The Austrian Red Cross is directed by the General Assembly, the Executive Council and the President, who is elected for a period of five years by the General Assembly and may be re-elected. He represents the Austrian Red Cross abroad, sees to the implementation of decisions taken and has discretionary powers in urgent cases. He also chairs the Executive Council. The Presidents of the nine regional associations are *ex officio* members of the Executive Council and have the right to vote. The Federal President of the Junior Red Cross, the Secretary General, the Chief Medical Officer, the Federal Director of the voluntary women's relief service and the President of the governing body of the blood bank attend Executive Council meetings in an advisory capacity. The Executive Council is the authoritative body of the Austrian Red Cross.

The General Assembly is composed of the representatives of the regional associations and the members of the Executive Council and is held once a year. Each regional association has four to six voting delegates, depending on the number of inhabitants. The General Assembly elects the President and the three Vice-Presidents, approves the budget, fixes the amount of contributions and decides on modifications to the statutes. The President and Executive Council have a Secretariat, headed by the Secretary General, who is appointed by the Executive Council on the President's recommendation.

The regional associations and the district and cantonal offices, which are their local offshoots, are all organized on the same pattern. Each regional association has its general assembly, its branch committee or executive council and its president.

ACTIVITIES

The Red Cross service with which Austrians are most familiar is the transport of the sick and of persons injured or affected by some natural disaster. With the aid of its 25,000 voluntary auxiliaries, the Red Cross helps nine of ten first aid cases. About 1,100 Red Cross ambulances are kept in readiness in 340 different places. Last year these ambulances covered 36 million km, or 100,000 km a day! In other words, the Austrian Red Cross ambulances travel more than twice round the world every day.

The efficient organization of the blood donation service is a further achievement of the Austrian Red Cross. A blood bank was set up on the basis of voluntary blood donations 30 years ago in Salzburg. The idea gradually developed and there are now seven blood donation centres in Austria which last year provided 330,000 units of stored blood, i.e. 95 per cent of all units used in Austrian hospitals. The remaining 5 per cent are provided by other blood banks still in existence in various hospitals.

The Austrian Red Cross also has its own health and social service, a disaster relief service and a tracing service for missing persons. About 1.2 million children and adolescents work in the Junior Red Cross and will be expected to take over one day from the voluntary auxiliaries of the Austrian Red Cross.

The Austrian Red Cross also organizes information courses for the public. It holds first aid courses (which are also intended for driving-license candidates), courses on assistance to the sick and the elderly, maternal and child care and assistance among neighbours. The health and social service of the Austrian Red Cross is currently being reviewed, because its primary concern is no longer the struggle against material distress. It should now concentrate on combating solitude, helping invalids and handicapped persons and providing care for sick persons living alone. The Austrian Red Cross therefore lays increasing emphasis on care for the sick, home care and assistance among neighbours.

The Junior Red Cross considers itself as a "benevolent educational community". Its aim is to counter indifference and aggressiveness in young people by giving them a sense of solidarity, which must not only be accepted in theory, but also applied in practice. Children are willing to give up their free time and often quite a large share of their pocket money to help others. A striking example of such solidarity: after the terrible earthquake in Frioul, the Austrian Junior Red Cross gathered 14 million shillings, which were used to build a social centre in Tramonti,

consisting of a kindergarten, a school, an advisory service for mothers and a kitchen.

The card index held by the Austrian Red Cross' military tracing service contains the names of approximately 100,000 Austrian soldiers. Thirty-five years after the Second World War, 30,000 cases have still not been solved and tracing is becoming more and more difficult. Over the years the service's activities have focused increasingly on tracing activities for civilian persons. On their arrival in Austria, refugees and immigrants wish to establish contact with relatives who left their home country earlier than they. Many requests are also made from abroad, for example by families concerned about a son or a nephew who went to Austria some years before and from whom no news had ever been heard since. The civilian tracing service has a card index with about 300,000 names. ¹

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When ICRC President Alexandre Hay was in Vienna for the commemoration of the centenary of the Austrian Red Cross, he conveyed the best wishes of the ICRC to the Austrian National Society, to whom the International Review of the Red Cross also tenders its warmest congratulations.

¹ Article sent by the Austrian Red Cross.