

# Re-uniting of families

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### III. RE-UNITING OF FAMILIES

Of all the humanitarian problems which the ICRC has to deal with, that of re-uniting families who were dispersed by the war is one of the most poignant.

It happens all too frequently that, after peace is re-established, people can no longer find their families.

The International Committee does its utmost to re-unite these families who have often lived through years of separation.

#### (a) *Hungarian children*

Following the events in Hungary in the autumn of 1956, a large number of Hungarian families were dispersed; the ICRC has given a great deal of consideration to this problem, and in particular to the question of children separated from their parents. In response to requests by the Hungarian authorities and the authorities in a number of "countries of asylum", and in view of the humanitarian aspect of the problem, the International Committee agreed to use its good offices in order to try to find a solution. After collecting all available information, it appointed a special delegate<sup>1</sup> to study in Hungary what action might be taken.

In April 1957, following this first mission, the ICRC submitted a draft general agreement to the Hungarian Government.

The agreement contained a plan whereby families would be re-united either in Hungary or abroad, according to the freely expressed wish of the head of the family. Re-uniting should be on

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. A. Guillermet.

an individual and voluntary basis, and the competent authorities should grant exit visas without delay, under a simplified procedure distinct from that generally applied for emigration, to persons wishing to rejoin their close relatives. Lastly, the whole operation would be under the supervision and control of the ICRC.

The Hungarian Government did not accept these proposals. While admitting that the problem of emigration should also be settled, it considered it to be a matter of secondary importance and emphasised that priority should be given to the repatriation to Hungary of child refugees abroad. Furthermore, it could not agree that the ICRC should exercise any supervision or control ; in its view, the International Committee should limit itself to transmitting to National Red Cross Societies in the " countries of asylum " the lists of children claimed, and to requesting these National Societies to arrange for repatriation.

In these circumstances, the International Committee was obliged to desist from its efforts to find a general solution to the problem.

The Hungarian Government then put forward the proposal that the question should be settled by direct agreement between the Hungarian Red Cross and the National Societies of the countries concerned.

For its part, the International Committee expressed its willingness to co-operate in the work of re-uniting dispersed families, in the event that there was no direct agreement between Hungary and any individual " country of asylum ", on condition that the ICRC was requested to do so by both parties and in so far as both parties agreed to give it freedom of action and supervision corresponding to the responsibilities it would undertake.

In the summer, the Hungarian Red Cross expressed its concern to the ICRC delegates at the ever increasing number of requests which it had received from parents in Hungary for the return of their children from other countries, and proposed a procedure which, in its opinion, would expedite the return of these children.

The ICRC examined both the Hungarian requests and the applications received from refugees in most of the " countries of asylum ", for their children who had remained in Hungary to be

allowed to join them. In order to facilitate direct agreement between the parties concerned, it proposed that they should present their respective points of view at a meeting during which the various aspects of the problem would be studied.

Pending a final reply from the Hungarian Red Cross, which had indicated that in principle the suggestion was acceptable, the International Committee transmitted its proposal to the National Red Cross Societies of the "countries of asylum". Most of them supported the proposal and indicated their readiness to take part in the meeting on condition that the problem be considered in the light of the Resolution which had in the meantime been adopted by the XIXth International Red Cross Conference and which reads as follows :

" The XIXth International Conference of the Red Cross,

considering that as a result of war, internal conflicts and other events a large number of persons, both adults and children, are still separated from their homes and from their families which have been dispersed, and

whereas much human suffering has been caused as a result of such separation, and,

whereas the XVIIIth International Conference of the Red Cross meeting in Toronto in 1952 by Resolution No. 20 has already recognized the National Societies of the Red Cross, " as the natural intermediaries with their respective Governments to facilitate to the greatest extent the liberation of these persons, to seek information concerning the fate of such persons and to facilitate the despatch to them of material relief ",

reaffirms the principles enunciated in this Resolution,

urges all National Societies and Governments to intensify their efforts in these matters and, in particular, to facilitate by every means the reunion of persons, both adults and children, with their families in accordance with the wishes of such persons, and in the case of minor children in accordance with the wishes of the recognised head of the family no matter where domiciled."

The reply of the Hungarian Red Cross, which reached Geneva in December, stated that that Society would take part in a conference of representatives of the countries of asylum only on condition that the sole question on the agenda was that of the return of children to Hungary. In these circumstances, the meeting could not take place. Despite this setback, which the ICRC deplores,

it appears that 600 children (out of 1500) have been repatriated to Hungary. As on December 31, 1957, the International Committee had no knowledge of any Hungarian children having been allowed to join their parents abroad.

The ICRC continues to follow this question and is ready to co-operate in any solution which is consistent with the principles declared at New Delhi.

(b) *Greek refugees*

Previous Annual Reports<sup>1</sup> have referred to action by the International Committee in order to enable Greek nationals who had been delayed in Eastern European countries at the end of the war to rejoin their families.

In 1957, the efforts of the ICRC, the League of Red Cross Societies and the National Red Cross Societies concerned made it possible for twenty-two Greeks to leave Rumania and travel to Australia where part of their families had settled.

In this way, since 1948, the ICRC has assisted more than 5,000 Greeks, including 3,000 children, to rejoin their families.

(c) *Persons of German origin*

As soon as the war was over, the ICRC took up the problem of "Volksdeutsche" who were then living in Poland, Czechoslovakia and the Balkan countries.

This problem is linked up with that of the nationals of the former Reich who were resident in territories east of the Oder and the Neisse. Under the 1945 Potsdam Treaty, several million people were to be expelled from these territories, and added to that number were all those persons who had been driven from their homes by military operations and were unable to return to them. Despairing of being able to stay in their native land, large groups of people soon took the road to exile.

At first, the efforts of the ICRC were limited to doing as much as possible to improve the lot of those evacuees who were to be transferred in accordance with arrangements made by the appropriate government authorities. Its activity was somewhat modified after it began to receive an ever-growing number of appeals from

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<sup>1</sup> See Annual Report 1955, pp. 32 and 33.



Germans and "Volksdeutsche" who had remained in the areas to which the Treaty referred and who asked the ICRC to intervene on their behalf so that they might be allowed to move according to their own wishes to Germany, Austria or other regions where their close relatives had settled. In accordance with its humanitarian tradition, the ICRC then took the initiative of reuniting these families and it has continued this work since that time.

At the outset, the ICRC took the necessary steps in order to obtain emigration permits and entry visas and also played an important part in organising travel. Later on, this work was largely handed over, whenever possible, to the National Red Cross Societies with whom the ICRC had continued to co-operate closely. Nevertheless, the International Committee has always played a central part in the re-uniting of families and it follows the matter closely.

In the course of the year, the ICRC continued to play a key rôle in a number of countries to which it sent delegates. By the end of 1957, more than 230,000 persons of German origin had been re-united with their families.

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