

**Zeitschrift:** Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Society of New Zealand  
**Band:** 13 (1948)  
**Heft:** 12

**Rubrik:** The work of the International Committee of "The Red Cross" during the Second World War

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 18.08.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

winter months. A new dam, recently inaugurated at Rossens has taken three years to build, and is an important factor in this drive; it signifies an annual increase of 180 million Kwh, not a negligible addition to the nation's power output. Two other new artificial lakes, built to ensure the supply of the Lucendro power plant, have recently been filled. Work is going forward on several other large-scale enterprises; reconstruction of power-houses, extension of artificial lakes. The "Grande Dixence" scheme is particularly interesting, for its realization entails the building of a reservoir having a capacity of 400 million cub. meters of water.

In another domain, the Swiss Federal Council's message to the nation concerning the 1949 budget has just been published. This budget anticipates an excess of expenditure in the amount of 5 million francs and shows a marked retrogression of both revenue and expenditure. The deficit is compensated by a presumed overplus of revenue from a special capital account in the amount of 102 million francs. The Swiss Federal Government is doing its utmost to reduce the budget to a normal level, for it had assumed exaggerated proportions during the war years.

---

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

---

TO HELP.....

The principle having been accepted, the actual relief work still had to be done; in other words, yet more difficulties had to be surmounted. This was no small matter, as the reader will see. It was a question of conveying through blockade and counter-blockade, supplies which the Red Cross Societies of the Allied countries provided for their nationals; of transporting these supplies to Switzerland and storing them before despatch to Germany and Italy; and lastly, of issuing them in the camps, according to the wishes of the donors, and at regular intervals. For some nationalities, this involved moving as much as eleven pounds of foodstuffs and comforts per man weekly, besides clothing and medical supplies. Leaving the French and Russians out of consideration, Allied prisoners of war in Germany and Italy totalled some two million. After deducting the men who were liberated or turned into civilian workers, there were still a million Frenchmen. It was found theoretically possible, until the Spring of 1944, to feed these prisoners direct from France, but supplies were scanty and transport often irregular. A large part of the relief had to come from overseas, and consequently pass like the rest through Geneva.

The only ports by which goods coming from overseas could reach Switzerland were Genoa and Marseilles, which were closed to the Allies. Even neutral vessels could not approach them without danger. It was therefore decided to concentrate supplies in Lisbon, a neutral port, and to forward them from there to Marseilles or Genoa. For this purpose it was necessary to find shipping, and to persuade the owners to let the vessels sail into the Mediterranean, then controlled by the Axis Powers.

Further negotiations by the Committee led belligerents to agree that the protection strictly confined by the Geneva Conventions to hospital-ships, should be extended to cargo-vessels carrying relief supplies. As a preliminary condition, it was laid down that the ships must be the property of neutrals, and sail under the strict supervision of the Committee's conveying agents on board; further, notification of sailing and route were to be given six days beforehand. The Committee's delegation in Lisbon soon became a vast shipping agency. The Committee chartered vessels and signed on crews in steadily increasing numbers. Thanks to an organisation formed in Switzerland, it even became itself the owner of three cargo-vessels. (x.) The Foundation for Red Cross Transports, at Basle.)

All these ships not only made the shuttle service between Lisbon and Marseilles or Genoa, but on many occasions sailed as far as the United States and Canada, to load supplies at their source. At a time when transport by sea was only effected in strongly protected convoys, when monthly communiques spoke of hundreds of thousands of tons torpedoed and sent to the bottom, small steamers crossed the ocean singly and alone, with the emblem of the Red Cross as their only safeguard.....Prisoners and friends, here are parcels from home.....

At Marseilles or Genoa, the goods had to be unloaded and forwarded overland. Fresh difficulties arose; freight cars were needed, and priority must be secured for the trains; and that in time of war or occupation, when rolling stock was scarce, and what remained was overworked or bombed. Few people realise that on the Marseilles-Geneva line alone, the goods moved by the International Committee equalled in bulk, for several years, all Switzerland's food imports from overseas.

Having safely reached Switzerland, supplies were not immediately despatched to the camps. Consignments arrived at irregular intervals; they had to be checked, sometimes packed afresh, and then sorted, ready for forwarding. Conditions of transport made it necessary to build up stocks in Switzerland on which to draw as need arose, so that the delivery programme could be followed. Warehouses were established in various parts of Switzerland and filled with huge and ever-changing dumps of parcels. Receiving, examining, reconditioning, sorting, despatching - all these activities of a big international shipping agency called for an increasing number of employees. As from a workshop the Central Agency had grown into a factory, so the small department which, in the Autumn of 1939, handled the despatch of the first individual parcels, now took on the appearance of a large business concern, employing nearly eight hundred people.

One figure should suffice - thirty-six million parcels! On thirty-six million occasions, prisoners of war received from home the longed-for parcels which kept them alive. Many problems had however, to be solved before these parcels reached the camps. The transport of thirty-six .x. million parcels called for the services of forty-five thousand freight cars. Until the end of 1944, the International Committee had no means of transport. Switzerland did all it could to help, but it is a very small country; its resources in rolling stock are not extensive. As for Germany and Italy, it can be imagined that the demands of war on several fronts, added to excessive wear and tear, and destruction, left but little for the service of enemy prisoners. In short, a daily struggle had to be waged all along the route to secure for the relief trains the priority to which they were entitled.

In the end, the trains managed to get through; but the question arose - how long would they do so? The increasingly systematic bombing of Germany and Italy made it clear that one day all traffic would be paralysed. As early as 1943, the Committee informed the Allies of its anxiety in this respect. It asked for freight cars to keep in reserve, for motor trucks and petrol for road transport, when the railways could no longer be used. For many months the Allies refused, fearing no doubt that they would be indirectly helping the enemy's transport.

This refusal might have cost the prisoners dear. As it was, Geneva had to wait until the German railway system was completely disorganized before obtaining at the end of 1944, less than three hundred freight cars and four hundred motor trucks. It was high time. Already several camps had exhausted their food stocks. Before the advance of the Allies, hundreds of thousands of prisoners of war had been evacuated towards the interior of the country. These pitiful columns had to march on foot through the snow;

- 
- .x. These ten-ton cars, as used in Europe, conveyed 450,000 tons of relief supplies. Most of the consignments were collective, and the total was the equivalent of ninety million single parcels weighing eleven pounds each.



without food, or prospect of obtaining any; a prey to hunger, cold and disease; sometimes a target for the bombs of their own air forces.

.x.

The Committee hastily made up so-called "block-trains" in Switzerland, and directed them towards the few regions of Germany which were still accessible by rail. There the Geneva motor trucks took over the supplies to convey them to the camps, or else to the columns of prisoners marching along the roads - when they could be located. More fleets of motor trucks set out direct from Switzerland and travelled by road right across Germany, and even to Czechoslovakia and Poland. Still others set out from Lübeck. As it grew steadily more difficult to convey supplies from Switzerland to the North German camps, part of the shipments from overseas had been landed, for some months past, at Gothenburg, in Sweden. Here a delegation of the International Committee, following the example of the Lisbon delegation, shipped the parcels to Lübeck, where they were taken over and issued to the camps by yet more delegates.

The story of the adventurous journeys made by the Committee's white motor trucks is worth telling. Their red crosses, scarcely visible from planes flying at two hundred and fifty miles an hour, did not always protect them against air attack. When we remember how many prisoners of war died of starvation and cold during these marches, we shudder at the idea of what would have happened on the high roads of Germany, and even in the camps, if the International Committee had not, by its unwearying insistence, finally obtained this small number of vehicles.

Much is achieved when a prisoners' hunger is more or less satisfied, when his meagre jail food - everything about it, from its appearance to its issue suggesting that the man is a mere number in a herd - is eked out by the contents of a parcel, bursting with vitamins and calories, but also coming "from home." But there was more - health, too, had to be considered, both physical and mental.

The Convention provides for the health of the body. Each camp must have its sick ward, each man the medical attention he may require. The Detaining Power bears the costs of treatment, including those of temporary artificial limbs. In this respect the Convention was fairly generally observed, at the outset, although many reports spoke of deficiencies, which were to increase later.

This side of the question was attended to by the Medical Department at Geneva. Since its formation in September 1939, this Department had, to begin with, a limited task only within the framework of the Agency. According to the Geneva Convention proper (Wounded and Sick), personnel exclusively engaged in removing, transporting and nursing the wounded and sick including the auxiliaries and staff of Aid Societies, must be respected and protected in all circumstances. If they fall into enemy hands, they may not be treated as prisoners of war, but must be repatriated as soon as circumstances allow (Art. 9 and 12).

The Medical Department turned its attention to the members of this so-called "protected personnel." It picked them out among the masses of prisoners.<sup>(i)</sup> It tried to ensure their repatriation; when the shortage of doctors and orderlies involved their detention in camps to nurse their compatriots, the Committee tried to have them treated as far as possible in agreement with the spirit of the Convention. This task was heavier than had been anticipated, owing to the many enquiries and other steps which it entailed. From 1941 onwards, some Detaining Powers experienced such difficulty in supplying the camp infirmaries that the Medical Department had also to undertake the unexpected work of despatching medical relief supplies. There was a frequent shortage of medicaments, particularly of special

---

.x. Whole trains which were not broken up en route.

(i) 161,000 members of this personnel were traced.

patents. Enquiries were made locally, in Switzerland and in other neutral countries. Supplies were finally obtained from the home countries, like the food parcels. But in a world in which essential goods were becoming scarce, it was most difficult always to find exactly what was required, and in sufficient quantities, too. Prostheses were asked for everywhere. The Committee purchased artificial legs and arms, or had them manufactured for the account of the home countries. The greatest demand was for artificial teeth. Owing to the camp food, caries and other dental trouble spread rapidly, with their usual bad effects on health. There were not enough dentists in the camps, nor sufficient equipment. With the help of sets of instruments and appliances furnished by National Red Cross Societies, sixty-four dental surgeries were completely fitted out in the camps of Germany. The Joint Relief Commission assisted in a collection of artificial teeth. Spectacles, too, were collected, both lenses and frames, to allow the men who had lost theirs to read and see clearly, nevertheless.

All these goods, from the simplest artificial tooth to the bottle of patent medicine, were invaluable. There were millions of prisoners, so wastage could not be permitted. It was not therefore, a matter of wholesale consignment. The goods had to be sorted, classified, and stocked, with all the care of the skilled expert, so that the right articles could be sent, and sent quickly, from Geneva to each camp, according to specific requirements.

Intellectual and spiritual needs are also covered by the Convention, but only in a general way. Men whose minds are occupied by their job, can at a pinch do without reading matter. But there are many others. No Detaining Power can be expected to find enough books to instruct, amuse and cheer so many men in so many languages. Several agencies turned their attention to this problem, and it was in close co-operation with various societies, particularly with the World Alliance of Y.M.C.A. - it is quite impossible to say how much the prisoners owed to this organization - that the Committee's Intellectual Relief Section endeavoured to meet, as far as might be, such applications. Thus, one and a half million books, up to the end of the War, had been sorted, classified, selected, frequently repaired or rebound in Geneva, and forwarded to the camps.

.....

The war was indeed total. A well-constructed and hermetically sealed "fighting zone" which engines of death alone were able to cross. Yet, day after day, by repeated and untiring efforts, the Red Cross succeeded in its 'tour de force' and managed to convey through, to the other side, thirty-six million parcels, quantities of medicaments, vast libraries - in short, life and hope.

And it all went through a tiny rent in the armoured curtain - Geneva.

---

|||||  
! "OF ZURICH AND THE LAKE." !  
! |||

When the very first people, of whom we have evidence, settled on the shores of Lake Zurich, they must have liked the place, for the residual remnants of the lake dwellers, living in wooden huts built on piles dug in on the shore, are plentiful and widespread. Later on came the hunters, nomadic tribes, the Teutonic Helvetians and Romans, who first established the citadel of Turicum (Zurich) on the top of the Lindenhof hill. More people came and stayed in the settlement on the beautiful lake. Of course, some who tried to come in and take over were enemies and these often had to move on when in the centuries of the Middle Age -

"With clarion loud and banner proud, - From Zurich on the lake,  
In martial pomp and fair array, - Their onward march they make."