**History of International Welfare Organizations**

**The First International Conference of Social Work and its Antecedents**

There is no firm date to mark the beginning of social work. Better documented are the beginnings of social work education and here it is known that by the very late 19th century, social work courses had been offered in England, the United States and the Netherlands, with Germany following in the early years of the 20th century. Social workers were active in important international movements of the early 20th century, especially movements for peace, women’s rights, and improved labor conditions. As leaders in social welfare from various countries met each other, the benefits of exchanges of ideas became evident. This led to a proposal for an international conference on social work and social welfare, an idea that originated when European and Japanese social workers participated in the U.S. National Conference of Social Work in 1919. The official proposal for a conference was made in a letter from Dr. Rene Sand of Belgium to Julia Lathrop of the U.S. in 1923. Endorsement by national associations and by the League of Red Cross Societies followed. In 1926, an organizing committee met in Paris; the Committee was comprised of representatives from 17 countries in Europe, Asia and North America and from a number of important international organizations. Among these were the League of Nations, the International Labor Organization, the League of Red Cross Societies, the International Migration Service, and the Save the Children Fund. Leading the way were Dr. Alice Masarykova of Prague as President and Dr. Rene Sand as Secretary General of the conference. Plans grew until the final event spanned two weeks and included international meetings of a number of organizations. The first International Conference of Social Work was held from July 8-13 1928 in Paris and was attended by 2,481 delegates from 42 countries. The Conference was only the first of what became the international social work and social welfare conferences. Two more were held before World War II interrupted international collaboration: 1932 in Frankfurt and 1936 in London. A planned conference for 1940 was never held; a planning meeting in Paris in 1946 and much less grandiose conference in 1948 in Atlantic City, New Jersey in the U.S. began the effort to rebuild the international social work/social welfare movement. Particularly significant is that the 1928 conference “gave birth” to the three international organizations, the **IASSW**, the **ICSW** and the **IFSW**.

**International Red Cross**

The original large scale organization of many nations related to social welfare is the International Red Cross. Its foundation was inspired by the vision of Henri Dunant, a young banker of Geneva. By accident, he came to the battlefield of Solferino in 1859 and was so shocked by the suffering of the wounded and dying soldiers on both sides that he wrote a book describing these horrors entitled “Un Souvenir de Solferino”. This book stirred opinion in many countries and led to the Geneva Convention of 1864, at which the international Red Cross was founded. Its article provided that under the guidance of an International Committee, principles of humane treatment and medical care of wounded soldiers were to be established, and that hospitals, ambulances, doctors and nurses caring for these patients should be respected as neutral institutions.

**League of Nations**

A new stimulus to international cooperation came from the foundation of the League of Nations. The League has standing committee on social welfare, and its secretariat established a section on “Social Questions and Opium Traffic”. The Committee on Social Questions was particularly concerned with protection of women and children against prostitution. This committee dealt also with methods of protecting children in the field of child labor, with measures to protect young people in periods of unemployment, and with the suppression of obscene publications. In the field of health protection the Health Organization of the League published information on epidemics in cooperation with the international Office of Public Health in Paris and set up special bureaus in Singapore and Rio de Janeiro for protective measures against communicable diseases and epidemics.

**The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration**

The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) became the most dynamic force in the development of international social welfare. Founded on November 9, 1943, two years before the creation of the United Nations, in Washington, D.C by forty four nations, it was an international organization that was called upon to solve relief problems of tremendous magnitude. The aggression of Axis Powers had, in three years, overrun thirty five countries in Europe and Asia, destroying their economic and political systems. It left them in semi-starvation, ravaged by hunger, disease, epidemics and despair, without sufficient food, cloths, and shelter and lacking care for the sick and homeless.

The creation of UNRRA became a promise to the people in the invaded countries and to their underground fighters, giving them assurance that the nations of the free world would share their resources in food, clothing, medicines and emergencies supplies as soon as help possibly could be brought.

**Social Welfare under the United Nations**

Under the provisions of the United Nations Charter, approved in 1945, the Economic and Social Council was authorized to develop comprehensive system of international social welfare, dealing with humanitarian and social problems. It was to become the international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples.

The UN services include research studies and reports on social problems, assistance in social welfare programs and social administration, consultant service to government s, information on social welfare practice, collection and provision of literature and films, scholarships for studies in foreign countries and fellowships for observation of social services in other countries, help in social welfare training and increasing knowledge and skill in services for families, children, handicapped person, correctional services and housing.

International seminars on social security, rural welfare, child welfare services and teaching of social casework have been arranged under the auspices of the United Nations with the aid of the participating countries on various continents. At the request of government, experts are sent to those countries which desire advice on such matters as child welfare, rehabilitation of handicapped persons, public assistance, case work or group work techniques, social insurance legislation and administration, prevention and treatment of delinquency, and community organization for health and social welfare.