

Switzerland Doing Fine Job in Keeping Contact With War Prisoners

The only link between prisoners of war and their families is the POW Central Information Bureau maintained by the International Red Cross at Geneva, Switzerland. Starting with a staff of 17 when war broke out, the bureau has grown to a force of 5,200 Swiss citizens who handle staggering amount of letters and packages.

From September, 1939, to June 30, 1943, more than 24,602,000 pieces of mail had been received by the Central Information Bureau. During the four years, the monthly average had grown from 25,000 to 905,000. Only a little more than half of the mail is from free countries, directed to the prisoners and 1,093,000 sent out by them.

The mail for and from American prisoners is handled by 16 persons under the direction of Miss M. Straehler. From the origin of this department to mid-August, 1943, it had cabled names of 38,086 American prisoners of war from Geneva to Washington. On the basis of news received from the Axis, it also cabled the names of 6,721 interned civilians.

Letters and cards forwarded from and to American internees and civilians amounted to 152,215; 6,423 telegrams were received and sent; 8,362 inquiries about individuals were made and 1,758 replies received. There were 76,223 cards in the American information files at the end of July, 1943, compared with a total of 15,500,000 name cards in the entire Geneva file.

Of the Swiss citizens who staff the Central Bureau and its 27 auxiliary bureaus functioning in various parts of Switzerland, 1,100 receive modest salaries, while 4,100 are volunteers. While the Musee Rath of Geneva provided enough space for the operation of the first Central Information Bureau for Prisoners of War during World War I, the offices have now expanded to the Palais du Conseil General, the large Hotel Metropole,

a free port for packages, and 27 auxiliary sections. The International Labor Office recently agreed to lend without cost part of its 500-room building at Geneva to the International Red Cross Committee.

The aid to prisoners, or relief department, of the International Red Cross also does a gigantic work. Its duty is to accept, store and forward goods to prisoners and is now housed in the Hotel Metropole. Recently the canton of Geneva presented the committee with a new clothing storehouse with a 5,000-ton capacity.

Guardettes Will Take on Two New Activities

Two new Red Cross activities for Fort Worth Guardettes will begin this week. A surgical dressings room will be opened at the Guardette armory, 2200 Montgomery, at 7 p. m. Thursday, and a standard first-aid course for Guardettes will begin at 7:30 p. m. Monday at First Christian Church.

The second meeting of the first-aid course will be at First Baptist Church at 7:30 p. m. Thursday, and all successive meetings will be at the same place. Walt Viard will be the instructor.

A number of Guardettes are already trained as surgical dressings supervisors. Although the Red Cross is supplying equipment for the room, more chairs are needed, and anyone willing to donate one or more straight-backed chairs for the Guardette offices and surgical dressings room may call Lt. Lulu Koepp, 2-4131.

All members of the Guardettes will be required to give at least three hours a week to bandage folding. The room may be opened later to all women of the community.

The relief department takes care of collective and individual packages, forwarding the former to confidential representatives of prison camps, chosen by the prisoners from their own ranks. From October, 1940, to March, 1943, the International Red Cross committee had been entrusted with 122,321,879 kilos of merchandise to be forwarded (one kilo is equal to two and one-fifth pounds). In addition, more than 1,000,000,000 Swiss francs have been used to purchase goods. Distribution is made on the basis of equality, or with special consideration to the least fortunate among the prisoners and internees.

Since most packages have to cross oceans to reach Geneva, they travel by rail from the port of Lisbon, via Spain to Switzerland. A maritime service of small neutral Swedish, Portugese and Spanish ships, displaying their own flags and the insignia of the International Red Cross Committee was established between Lisbon, Marseille and Genoa. From Geneva warehouses, each of which has a workshop for repairing and repacking goods damaged in transit, several hundred railroad cars loaded with food and clothing are sent weekly to the prisoners camps.

From September, 1939, to last July, 13,459,982 packages, weighing 157,497 tons, had been forwarded. More than 1,000,000 books had been sent to prisoners camps up to June 30. A special section sees that prisoners receive material for intellectual and spiritual uplift.

Deserving of special mention is the fact that the Swiss government, public and private institutions and the public in general contribute about 75 per cent of the funds necessary for the maintenance of the Central Information Bureau for Prisoners of War. A new national house-to-house canvass for the International Red Cross was launched last September.

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