



A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

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IRC HISTORY

GERMANY: HITLER SEIZES POWER

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler made himself the master of Germany, and Storm Troopers began Nazifying the country.

While free governments, immobilized by depression and isolationism, looked the other way, some of their citizens acted. Within months, a concerned group of 51 Americans, responding to a plea by Albert Einstein, met to organize a branch of the Europe-based International Relief Association. Their objectives were clear: to help save anti-Nazi leaders targeted by the Gestapo, and to guide those in imminent danger to safety in free countries.

The founders included many of the country's intellectual leaders – people like educator John Dewey, historian Charles A. Beard, philosopher Morris Cohen, civil rights leader Roger Baldwin, writer John Dos Passos, rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, publisher Oswald Garrison Villard and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, later the Chairman of IRC.

The mission expanded in 1936 as Hitler began to devour Europe (“course by course,” as Churchill put it). When the Nazis swallowed Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938, the refugee tide grew, and surged again as thousands escaped from Fascist Italy and Franco's Spain. In 1939, the infamous Nazi/Soviet pact led to the invasion and partition of Poland, and the beginning of World War II.

RESCUE FROM FRANCE

In June 1940, a new chapter in IRC's seven-year history started. Paris had fallen to invading Nazi forces, creating a massive exodus of refugees to the south of France. An armistice required the collaborationist French regime, headed by old Marshall Petain, to “surrender on demand” former residents of the “Greater Reich.” That meant all refugees who had fled from countries

seized by Hitler. The agreement especially imperiled the thousands of political, intellectual, cultural and scientific leaders among the refugees.

A new American group, the Emergency Rescue Committee, was quickly organized and engaged a young writer, Varian Fry, to go to France. In August 1940, Fry slipped into Marseilles with \$3,000 in contributions. The original goal of rescuing 200 refugees rapidly expanded, as an article in Harvard magazine reported:

“For more than a year, Fry directed an improvised rescue operation that extended protection to more than 4,000 artists, scholars, statesmen and other refugees whose lives were in jeopardy, and arranged the departure of at least 1,200. Among those rescued were the political scientist Hannah Arendt, the painter Marc Chagall, the novelist Franz Werfel, the philosopher Alfredo Mendizabal, the medical scientist Fritz Kahn, the sculptor Jacques Lipschitz, the historian Golo Mann, the Nobel Prize winning biochemist Otto Meyerhoff.”

Joining the rescue operation was a young Czech refugee, Charles Sternberg, who served as the representative of the International Relief Association. In New York, after the war, Sternberg joined the staff of the newly formed International Rescue Committee, and later became its Executive Director. And fortunately, there were French patriots eager to help the anti-Nazi cause. Among them was great sculptor, Aristide Maillol, whose studio near the Spanish border was a safe-house for refugees waiting for the right moment to cross the Pyrenees. At the age of eighty, Maillol personally led his famous young model, Dina Vierny, along the steep mountain passes showing her how to guide the refugees on their way to safety.

Varian Fry was expelled from France by Nazi collaborators in August 1941 but spent six months in Lisbon working on new refugee escape routes. What remained of the staff in France went underground. Many of them joined the French resistance movement and saved hundreds of other refugees.

In late 1944, following major allied victories in Europe, IRC opened offices in refugee-crowded Paris as well as Ankara, which had been a wartime haven for many anti-Nazis. By the war's end, between France and Turkey, was a devastated continent with millions of uprooted people on the move: prisoners of war, Jews, forced laborers, expellees, concentration camp survivors and refugees. In order to provide the most effective assistance for them (including survivors of the infamous Lodz ghetto) the International Relief Association and Emergency Rescue Committee joined forces to become the International Rescue Committee, serving refugees of all religions, races and nationalities.

THE IRON CURTAIN DESCENDS

On March 5, 1946, Winston Churchill, in his famous speech in Fulton, Missouri, declared: “An Iron Curtain has descended across the Continent. Beyond that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of central and eastern Europe.” Soon, Soviet pledges of free elections became a mockery, and a common pattern became clear: mass arrests, torture, new

concentration camps, killing. Every day, democratic-minded people took flight and, by 1948, the death-knell of democracy in East Europe was sounded when Soviet-dictated regimes supplanted the last of the free governments.

IRC quickly developed a network of refugee programs that included emergency relief, the establishment of hospitals and children's centers and U.S. resettlement. Problems multiplied with the Soviet blockade of free Berlin that threatened millions with starvation. An IRC appeal raised funds sufficient to ship 4,224,000 pounds of essential food to the beleaguered Berliners.

Soon, West Berlin became a gateway to freedom from Communist East Germany, and by 1953 the city's economy was in danger of being overwhelmed. The IRC Board of Directors asked its Chairman Leo Cherne, who had joined the Board in 1946, to go to Berlin. On his return, he led a drive that raised enough money to avert a dangerous crisis. That same year, IRC organized an independent citizens commission – a precedent for similar efforts in future decades – that urged an intensification of government and private efforts to assist the refugees. The proposal was endorsed by President Eisenhower, who stated: "Support of the principle of asylum, and assistance for refugees, are fundamental principles of American foreign policy."

Meanwhile, refugees were pouring out from Czechoslovakia, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Albania, and the Baltic states. IRC continued steadily to expand its emergency relief, health, childcare and educational programs in Germany, Austria, Italy, France and Belgium. Exiles were helped to integrate in their new environments and thousands were resettled in the United States. Some years later, the foremost academic authority and writer on refugee affairs, Professor Pete Rose of Smith College and Harvard University, was to write:

"I have come to know many of the international organizations and American-based voluntary agencies involved in relief, rescue and rescue activities. I believe that IRC is the model refugee agency and a remarkable symbol of single-minded dedication to aiding those oppressed by dictatorships of the right or left, and giving such political victims assistance in starting life anew in safety, dignity and freedom."

REVOLUTION IN HUNGARY

On October 30, 1956, IRC Chairman Leo Cherne and President Angier Biddle Duke cabled IRC headquarters in New York from Vienna: "WE MUST PREPARE FOR TRAGIC POSSIBILITY SOVIET RECAPTURE CONTROL OF HUNGARY WHEN COUNTLESS ESCAPEES WILL FLOOD INTO AUSTRIA, AND THUS MUST BE READY WITH RESOURCE."

The cable referred to the Hungarian peoples' effort, started peacefully a week earlier, to achieve independence. Without waiting for a reply, Leo Cherne crossed the border with emergency medical supplies for the freedom fighters. He was the first American to meet Cardinal Mindszenty on his release from a Communist prison.

The “tragic possibility” anticipated in the cable was to come soon. Soviet troops crushed the revolution, but not before 200,000 Hungarians, mostly young people, fled to Austria. Cherne also managed to escape and led an IRC drive that raised \$2,500,000 for the cause of the Hungarian refugees. John C. Whitehead and John Richardson, who still serve as IRC volunteer leaders, joined the effort, as did Claiborne Pell, later to serve six terms as U.S. Senator from Rhode Island, and Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee.

Many years later, in 1988, Senator Pell was to say: “When it comes to direct, effective action on behalf of oppressed people, the organization that comes first to my mind is IRC. In my private and official roles, I have often met with refugees. Regardless of their origins, their political views, or where they now live, a great many have one thing in common: they were helped by the IRC.”

IRC’s work for the Hungarians had many layers. In Austria, France, Germany, Sweden, Belgium and Switzerland, a network of programs provided emergency relief, housing, medical and healthcare, vocational and language training. IRC hostels accommodated hundreds of students. Scholarships were provided. A virtual university-in-exile was established near Salzburg. In the United States, the heavy IRC resettlement caseload included 1,162 Hungarian students, teachers, engineers, physicians, artists, scientists, lawyers, writers, and clergymen. Special attention was given to the orphans and unaccompanied children.

EAST EUROPE: UNCEASING FLIGHT

Until the end of the Cold War, some 35 years later, IRC responded with equal speed and diversity to East European refugee crises, such as the flight of Czechoslovaks from the Soviet crackdown in 1968, the Solidarity activists fleeing from Poland following the martial law declaration in 1980, the sudden flow of Albanians to Italy and Greece in 1991. Substantial increases in IRC’s resettlement caseloads inevitably followed such crises.

The basic objective of refugee resettlement in the United States is the integration of each person, each family, into the social, economic and cultural fabric of their new country. At the beginning of the process, following their initial registration and orientation at IRC’s overseas offices, caseworkers at U.S. regional offices provide basic needs such as housing, food and medical care. The newcomers are then helped to find jobs and educational opportunities. The children are prepared for school.

Many refugees have experienced the trauma of violence, imprisonment and loss of family members in their homeland or during their flight. They often need special attention from IRC. Since 1990, IRC resettled an average of 11,000 refugees every year from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East.

Among the eminent East Europe refugees resettled by IRC was the Polish writer, Czeslaw Milosz, who later won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He said: “I am one of the innumerable refugees from all over the world who had been resettled by the IRC. In my case, it happened during the 1950’s when I found myself as a refugee from Poland. I feel I can express

gratitude by nominating the IRC for the Noble Peace Prize. I do not doubt that the award for this organization will be a just crowning of efforts to make this world more humane.”

Refugees from the Soviet Union comprised a significant share of IRC’s resettlement caseload over many years, starting in the late 1970’s. In 1979 alone, more than 53,000 people departed. Most, but not all of them were Jewish, and the Soviet bureaucratic procedure demanded that their visas list Israel and their country of destination; yet 60% of the émigrés, on arriving in Vienna went to other destinations, mostly in the United States. IRC helped thousands of the refugees to resettle to America: Armenian nationals, Ukrainians, Pentecostals, and other Christian minorities, prominent human rights dissidents as well as Jews.

“My family and I thank you for all you have done for us,” one refugee wrote. “It is very great not just for the value of the aid you gave us, but the life that comes from the International Rescue Committee. You are taking care of so many people in the whole world, yet you gave so much attention to one family. God bless you all.”

THE UNIQUE NATURE OF IRC

At times, IRC has been the only American agency helping uprooted victims of oppression, as Greeks who had fled from the military dictatorship ruling their country from 1967 to 1974. Hundreds of the refugees were assisted by IRC in France, Austria and Germany until democracy was restored to Greece. A statement issued in 1967 by the Franco-Hellenic assembly in Paris said: “IRC has met and helped a number of Greek democrats, who were saved only thanks to their assistance. Our members convey their warmest thanks to IRC.”

Three other programs illustrate IRC’s unique, innovative nature. Since the late 1930’s, IRC has helped refugees who had escaped to France from Franco’s brutal dictatorship. The work goes on through Spanish Refugee Aid, a self-supporting effort of IRC. In 1987, with the Communists still in power in Poland, a program of social aid, established in partnership with the democratic forces of the Solidarity Social Foundation, had a lasting impact on the delivery of medical services. And, in New York, the Refugee Employment Project, operated by IRC and serving nine resettlement agencies has found jobs for thousands of refugees in more than 500 companies.

VIETNAM: DIVISION, WAR, FLIGHT

An upheaval of vast and long-lasting significance that would transform IRC into a global organization had erupted in 1954, when a million North Vietnamese marched southward following the Geneva agreement dividing the country, and IRC started its work in South Vietnam. At first it focused on the thousands of displaced refugee students, intellectuals and professionals. But over the years, especially following the escalation of the fighting in 1964, IRC operated a broad range of services for the war refugees, the sick, wounded, orphaned and

the homeless children in particular. Clinics, hospitals, community development, self-help projects and internal resettlement programs were established.

Soon, more than eight million people in South Vietnam were displaced by the war, and IRC recruited teams of volunteer doctors, surgeons, nurses and paramedics. Orphanages, children's clinics and schools were built. In Saigon, a 120-bed Reception and Convalescent Center served Vietnam's leading facility for children's reconstructive and plastic surgery.

In April 1973, following the cease-fire and withdrawal of American troops, a mission of IRC volunteer leaders went to Vietnam to investigate the problems of the children. Their recommendations led to the establishment of a 70-bed medical rehabilitation center in Saigon for war orphans to enable them to become candidates for overseas adoption. The IRC facility was staffed by a pediatrician, four American nurses and 35 Vietnamese personnel. Its effectiveness led to similar centers in Da Nang and Qui-Nhon. Some two thousand-war orphans qualified for overseas adoption as a result of this effort.

IRC's work in Vietnam came to an end on April 30, 1975 when Viet Cong forces occupied Saigon. Their victory marked the beginning of the flight of Vietnamese refugees into the United States. As they arrived – 130,000 in ten weeks – IRC built staffs at four U.S. processing camps. IRC headquarters in New York was expanded and regional offices opened. By the end of June, IRC had registered 18,000 of the Vietnamese for resettlement. With the conquest of Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge, and the end of fighting in Laos, even more Indochinese refugees were being admitted and by the 1990's more than one million had been resettled in the U.S.

Boat people from Vietnam – sometimes escaping at the rate of tens of thousands a month – comprised a large proportion of the refugees reaching other Asian countries, including Hong Kong, a thousand miles away where IRC devoted its work to the children's desperate needs! More than 20,000 arrived in 1990 alone and were detained in prison-like camps. That year, Liv Ullmann, IRC's Vice President International, went to Hong Kong with a delegation of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, and she described the camps as follows: "Barbed wire cities, thousands upon thousands of terrified people. Men, women and children stacked together on shelves, often three levels high. People stacked together like spoons in a drawer, in concentration camp-like conditions."

A Citizens Commission on Indochinese Refugees, headed by Leo Cherne, made the first of many missions to Southeast Asia – Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia as well as Hong Kong – in February 1978 to investigate the plight of the fleeing Indochinese refugees. The Commission's recommendations, and militant advocacy work, created a far more generous admissions policy by the American and other western governments. A particular concern was the growing tragedy of Vietnamese boat people under attack by pirates, especially the brutal raping of women and young girls. *The London Times*, on June 22, 1973 reported: "In some months, every single boat reaching shore has been attacked at least once. Nobody knows how many Vietnamese have died in this way, but the numbers must run into the thousands. Almost everyday the sea washes up bodies in Thailand's beaches, bodies mutilated by both humans and sharks."

“IN CAMBODIA, A HOLOCAUST, CLEARLY”

In 1979, the genocidal atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge drove hundreds of thousands of sick, starving and wounded Cambodians into Thailand, where, since early 1976, IRC had become the leading voluntary agency providing medical, educational, childcare, self-help and resettlement services to Indochinese refugees.

With the vast influx of Cambodians, IRC stepped up its pace, and within a year had a team of 109 doctors, nurses, paramedics, sanitarian, public health specialists and teachers strung along the border. The staffs consisted of American and foreign expatriates, Thai nationals and volunteers. Over the next decade, IRC provided the refugees with the critical care they needed to survive, and the skills and determination they needed to face the bleak future. At one time, IRC’s primary and secondary school system served more than 50,000 Cambodian children and young adults. Special classes for the handicapped were added to the curriculum.

The enormity of the tragedy was indicated in a report in *The New York Times*, published on April 22, 1980, headed “In Cambodia, A Holocaust, Clearly” which stated: “When the Khmer Rough marched into Phnom Phen on April 15, 1975, Cambodia had a population of 7 to 9 million people. Today, it has 4.8 million. The Cambodian horror comes close to having the impact of the Black Death in the 14th century, which reduced European populations by up to a third in a single year.”

When Cambodia began to open its borders in 1991, IRC moved into Kampong Province inhabited by 300,000 repatriates and war victims. The work, spearheaded by mobile medical and public health teams, served thousands of children. The program was soon expanded to other areas of Cambodia, concentrating on developing self-reliance projects for ultimate transfer to local groups.

IRC’s medical, health training, educational and self-help work in Thailand served refugees from Laos, as well as Vietnamese fleeing by boat or over land. IRC also assisted boat people reaching the shores of Malaysia. At one time, more than 40,000 Vietnamese were crowded on the tiny volcanic island of Pulau Bidon, known as Hell Island. An IRC delegation of volunteers – the first western group to inspect the island – took immediate steps to relieve the plight of the refugees, and to press for their transfer to less primitive areas of Malaysia.

When the last of the IRC staff left Malaysia in 1981, the Secretary General of the Red Crescent Society wrote: “it was indeed a blessing when IRC offered its services, and it is indeed a pity that we have to say farewell. A big thank you goes to IRC and all its stalwarts for all their help and dedicated services.”

The Burmese government aggravated refugee problems in the area in 1988 by violently suppressing pro-democracy demonstrations, forcing more than 7,000 young people to flee to Thailand. Over the years, new assaults drove thousands more across the border, where IRC developed a broad-ranged program of medical, public health, sanitation and shelter construction projects, and the provision of food. The IRC staff trained refugees whenever possible to take over the responsibility for the services. For those Burmese reaching Bangkok, IRC provided stipends for food, shelter and clothing. In 1996, a new offensive by the military dictatorship drove more refugees into Thailand, increasing their population to almost 100,000.

On May 31, 1997, with the completion of admission processing in Thailand for Indochinese refugees seeking asylum in the United States, the Joint Voluntary Agency (JVA) in Bangkok concluded the work it started in 1977 under the direction of Robert P. DeVecchi (who later would become IRC's President). A total of 497,000 refugees from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, and in recent years from Burma, had been processed. The JVA structure, which served all resettlement agencies, proved to be so effective that it was replicated in many other refugee-saturated countries such as the Sudan, Malaysia, and Croatia.

“When I chose freedom I knew I must sacrifice many things to have it,” a Cambodian refugee wrote. “Also, I have a great responsibility for my children. Now the nightmare is over, and we love all the kind people at IRC who helped us. We will try to be good citizens so none will be ashamed of us.”

The importance of the resettlement role of IRC is indicated in the fact that, in 1980 alone, IRC was responsible for resettling 16,000 Indochinese, Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laoists in the United States.

AFRICA: IRC'S ROLE EXPANDS

On another continent, Africa, decolonization and internal power struggles were meanwhile creating new masses of refugees on the move and during the 1950's, IRC was helping some African refugees who made their way to Europe. The United Nations designated 1959 as World Refugee Year and in 1962, IRC's first major involvement in Africa occurred when 200,000 refugees fled from Portuguese-controlled Angola to Zaire. IRC quickly recruited teams of medical and relief personnel to serve the victims of colonial oppression. The work was continued for several years, when it was turned over to refugees trained by IRC. In 1976, IRC returned to Zaire to help new waves of Angolans from what had become a Marxist-oriented state. The work continued for some four years, when most of the refugees were integrated into the local populations.

In 1964, IRC went to Botswana, a free black country where black refugees from South Africa were concentrated. Education for young refugees was provided to prepare them for entering schools in Tanzania and Zambia. Blacks escaping South African persecution were helped also in other neighboring countries. A few years later, in 1967, the suppression of the Biafran independence movement in Nigeria led to widespread atrocities, and IRC joined other

voluntary agencies in providing critical relief and medical services for civilian victims of the civil war.

In Uganda, Idi Amin put a new twist on mass cruelty in 1972 with the announcement that 50,000 Asian nationals would be expelled – it mattered not that they had lived in Uganda since the turn of the century. An airlift was hurriedly organized and flew several thousand to European countries. The United States agreed to admit 2,000 of the Uganda-Asians, and IRC was active in their resettlement.

Five years later, native Ugandans poured into Kenya. Among them were the nation's cultural and intellectual leaders, students and professional people and thousands of children. IRC organized a large-scale program of medical and childcare services, educational support and placement assistance. "By the scale and capriciousness of its official murder," a United Nations report stated, "Uganda is in a class by itself."

NEW AFRICAN CRISES ERUPT

By 1980, it had become clear that extensive long-term IRC assistance would be needed in Africa for victims of oppression, civil war and famine. That year, in the Sudan, IRC established medical, healthcare and training programs for refugees flowing in from Ethiopia. Four years later, the flow swelled into a massive exodus from Tigre and Eritrea, where independence movements were under siege by Ethiopia's Marxist dictatorship. Within a year, about a hundred IRC expatriate personnel, and 2,000 refugees trained by them, were providing extensive assistance in areas where more than a half-million refugees were massed.

IRC expanded the scope of the work in 1989 to the central and southern regions of the Sudan for people displaced by civil war and famine. The programs covered a wide range of medical, public health, immunization, childcare, emergency feeding and intensive refugee training activities. IRC also served as the principal agency providing healthcare services for Sudanese seeking safety across the border in Kenya.

In Somalia, starting in 1991, IRC initiated more programs for Sudanese refugees involving medical, public health and child feeding projects. Emphasis on training large corps of both refugees and Somalian locals made it possible for IRC to transfer the work to local hands. But a year later, at the urgent request of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, IRC had to return when hundreds of thousands of Somalis, uprooted by civil war and famine, massed along the Kenya border, many of them close to death. IRC quickly organized programs serving some 300,000 refugees, and soon expanded the work into Kenya. At its U.S. resettlement offices, IRC caseworkers helped many of the Somalis admitted to the U.S. to start new lives in a free country.

IRC became involved in still other regions of Africa during the 1990's. Liberian refugees forced out of their homeland by civil war were assisted in Ghana, Guinea and the Ivory Coast

through educational and self-help programs. Special attention was devoted to the crucial needs of women, including assistance in starting small business enterprises.

In 1993, true to its tradition of serving refugees returning home from exile, IRC moved into Mozambique. Years before, almost a million Mozambicans had fled to Malawi where the IRC developed programs concentrating on critical health problems. The massive death rate among children in particular had been sharply reduced, and the refugees trained to care for their own. Now, inside Mozambique, IRC helped the repatriated refugees to rebuild their lives within their native country.

THE RWANDA TRAGEDY

In 1994, IRC set in motion an emergency program in response to a tragic refugee disaster. A quarter of a million Rwandans had poured into Tanzania virtually overnight to escape a sudden escalation of the tribal and political warfare between the Tutsi and Hutu peoples. Killing, torture and death by starvation had become everyday occurrences and, as always, the helpless women and children suffered most deeply and died most easily. Life-saving relief and medical measures were quickly instituted by IRC crises teams – to be followed by preventive medicine projects.

As usual in such emergencies, IRC volunteer leaders – Board members in particular – were quickly on the scene. Among them were Dr. James C. Strickler, the eminent physician, Professor of Medicine and former Dean of the Dartmouth Medical School and Co-Chairman of the Board of the IRC. Dr. Strickler's introduction to IRC was as a volunteer in Thailand in 1980 during the Cambodian crisis, and he has been active in the major refugee emergencies since that time.

IRC's work in Tanzania was only the first of several crisis interventions involving the Rwandans. Soon, a million more refugees surged into Zaire, bringing the number of people escaping the genocidal conflict to more than two million. Inside Rwanda, a million more were violently displaced – refugees within their own country. Burundian refugees fleeing to Tanzania and Zaire magnified the already massive problems.

While continuing its life-saving work, IRC developed programs of a more durable nature, especially as the Rwandans returned to their homeland. Buildings were repaired, shelters were constructed, small business projects were instituted, the shattered agricultural economy restored. Special attention was devoted to helping women develop their earning power and to giving them a role in rebuilding their ravaged country.

“MIGRATORY GENOCIDE”: AFGHAN REFUGEES

While African refugee movements occupied much of IRC’s attention overseas, Cold War aggression had created a new and massive crisis in Asia. In February 1980, John C. Whitehead, then Co-Chairman of Goldman, Sachs & Co. and President of IRC, flew to the border dividing Afghanistan from Pakistan. His mission was to investigate the plight of Afghans escaping invading Soviet forces. Their flight – soon to reach three million people – was described by a correspondent as “migratory genocide hinged on large-scale Soviet ground offensives, aerial bombardment and burning of crops.”

The proposal recommended by John Whitehead led to an extensive network of IRC programs involving medical, public health, feeding, educational, refugee-training and self-help services. The work in primitive refugee camps stressed the special needs of women and children – 80% of the refugee population. Mobile medical units, clinics and a woman’s hospital were staffed by doctors, nurses and paramedics, many of them refugees trained by IRC.

An educational system in the camps ranged from primary schools to university-level and post-graduate education. During 1990, IRC operated or supported 2,500 primary schools, trained refugee teachers and provided educational material to 316 secondary schools serving 50,000 students. The only high school for Afghan girls in Pakistan was maintained in Peshawar in the face of sometimes violent opposition by radical Muslim groups.

Critically important was the implementation of a basic IRC principle: helping refugees to support themselves through skills-training and self-reliance programs. The achievement of self-sufficiency in camps also prepares refugees for the time they are able to return to their own country. In Pakistan this effort involved construction, agriculture, handicrafts, office management, small business enterprises. An IRC printing workshop, for example, trained thousands of refugees in the trade while producing textbooks, health education aids and other material for camps and schools.

Starting in 1990, following the withdrawal of Soviet forces, the Afghans were able to draw upon their training as they started returning to their country devastated by nine years of relentless warfare. With the help of IRC workers inside Afghanistan, their efforts focused on agriculture, sanitation, water supplies, and rebuilding the wreckage of the educational system. But IRC’s work in Pakistan had to continue as violence erupted time and again in Afghanistan, preventing refugees from returning and creating new waves of escapees.

THE TEN MILLION REFUGEE EXODUS

Although some IRC programs have a relatively short duration, they are nevertheless as vital in humanitarian terms as those that may last for many years, or decades. It was in 1971, when East Pakistanis sought a measure of autonomy from their oppressive central government

far to the west. Pakistan's leaders responded by dispatching troops that, in the first assaults alone, killed 200,000 people. Once again, the tragedy of refugees in flight was seen as ten million people, mostly Hindus in a Muslim-dominated society, fled to India. An emergency mission of IRC Board members rushed to the makeshift camps outside Calcutta. Their proposal to organize the thousands of physicians, nurses and teachers among the refugees to serve their uprooted people was quickly implemented. "A single doctor can save a thousand lives, and a single teacher can save a thousand minds," the leader of the IRC mission Angier Biddle Duke stated.

Soon, refugees were working alongside IRC relief and medical volunteers in 38 clinics in teeming camps. A single clinic at Barasat treated 250,000 sick, wounded and malnourished patients per month. IRC enlisted the cooperation of the All-India Institute of Medical Science for a massive nutrition therapy program. In its school program for children, IRC recruited 10,000 refugee teachers. At higher levels, a Research Facility in Exile was organized by IRC in the camps around a nucleus of 150 college and university instructors.

A vital force in the development of the work was Mary P. Lord, then the IRC President, who spent several weeks in the camps. Her son, Winston Lord, later became an active IRC volunteer leader, now as Co-Chairman of the Board of Directors. His far-reaching experience in foreign affairs has included the Presidency of the Council on Foreign Relations and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

The day of return was not far off. In December 1971, a liberated Bangladesh supplanted East Pakistan. Free, but devastated, the new nation desperately needed help to assist the millions of refugees returning from India. IRC representatives met with the new leaders of Bangladesh, and the result was a network of medical, public health, feeding, child care and educational programs that enabled the Bangladesh people to rebuild their shattered lives.

Critical to IRC's work were two basic programs. Vocational rehabilitation and job placement services for young war-disabled people were developed. And scholarships enabled more than 17,000 destitute students to resume their studies at scores of colleges and universities. In 1975, IRC was able to transfer all programs in Bangladesh to local organizations and shift its resources to other refugee crisis areas of the world.

FLIGHT FROM CHINA

Of far longer duration, in another part of Asia, was IRC's work in Hong Kong, starting in 1961, when a stream of refugees from China became a torrent, and IRC started a large-scale program that was to continue for 27 years. The work consisted of emergency housing, medical care, counseling, vocational training, job placement and resettlement assistance. IRC day nurseries for the children enabled destitute refugee mothers to work. A self-help project, The China Refugee Development Organization, kept thousands of refugees employed producing handicrafts.

Mao-Tse-Tung's brutal policies led to a new refugee phenomenon during the 1970's: the escape of young "freedom swimmers" from China across shark-infested waters to Hong Kong. Untold thousands drowned in their bid for freedom – yet, in 1974 alone, an astounding 14,000 swimmers made it to Hong Kong. More came in homemade sampans, rubber boats and rafts and still more breached the heavily guarded land border.

In 1980, Hong Kong authorities started cracking down on the flow, returning the refugees forcibly to China – even children trying to join parents already in Hong Kong. IRC nevertheless stayed on, helping those in need until 1988, when the work was turned over to local agencies.

CRISES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East shared the tragedies of violence, flight and displacement that plagued other areas of the world where IRC operates. In 1982, seven years of civil conflict in Lebanon culminated in warfare that led to widespread destruction and the creation of thousands of newly uprooted people. By the end of the year, IRC had organized medical and relief programs, including an emergency "trauma" unit at the American University Hospital in Beirut serving uprooted Lebanese of all faiths and races and Palestinians. In three camps, IRC established a project to rebuild the homes of Palestinian refugees severely damaged by warfare.

In 1984, IRC established an Intermediate Health Care Unit in Sidon to provide diagnostic and therapeutic services for displaced Palestinians and Lebanese. As violence in the Sidon areas intensified during 1985, the State Department pressed for the departure of Americans from Lebanon, and IRC turned over the unit to the staff of the United Nations agency serving the Palestinians. Between 1,000 and 3,000 patients had been served every month at the IRC facility, which was directed by an American doctor and nurse.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait in August 1990, and a million Asian and African "guest workers" fled to Jordan, massing hastily erected desert camps. An IRC mission of Board members, medical and public health specialists flew to Jordan and quickly established emergency projects, including the construction of shelters. By year's end, all but a few of the workers had been airlifted or sea lifted home, without loss of life. The Crown Prince of Jordan, in a letter, praised IRC for "translating your commitment to high humanitarian ideals into practical measures."

April 1991 was the start of the flight of two million Kurds from massive attacks by Iraqi military forces. Within days, IRC had dispatched a relief team to the Turkey-Iraq border where more than 150,000 Kurdish refugees were clinging to a mountainside. The needs were overwhelming. Snow and heavy rains, and the lack of food and adequate clothing, had already caused thousands of deaths, mostly of small children and the elderly.

IRC, the first American voluntary agency in the area, rapidly recruited experienced workers from its staffs in other countries. Within two weeks, teams of doctors, public health nurses and sanitarians were at work, concentrating on the critical needs of women and children. As Kurds began returning to their villages, IRC helped them with the immense task of rebuilding

for the future. Shelters were constructed, medical facilities rehabilitated, water and sanitation systems repaired, agricultural assistance provided. In April 1992, a year after its initial involvement, IRC completed its work for the Kurdish refugees.

LATIN AMERICA: CUBA, HAITI, CHILE

The Western Hemisphere has not escaped the malignancy of the massive refugee problems that beset other continents during the latter half of the century. In 1959, Fidel Castro seized control of Cuba and within three years, 155,000 Cubans had become refugees, and a million more were to follow, largely to the United States. Soon, IRC set up the Caribbean Refugee Program in Florida for Cubans as well as refugees escaping from Trujillo's Dominican Republic and Pap Doc Duvalier's Haiti. Meanwhile, Cuban jails were being filled with political dissidents and IRC steadily denounced their imprisonment and torture.

Through the decades of the Castro dictatorship, IRC was a major provider of relief, resettlement and family reunion services for repeated waves of Cuban refugees. In 1980 – when Castro briefly opened the port of Mariel, permitting American boats to pick up Cubans flocking there – 125,000 refugees were brought to Florida and IRC's caseload mounted. Under intense pressure, Castro started releasing some political prisoners in 1987. Some had been in solitary confinement for more than 20 years. IRC reunited many of them with their families in the U.S.

Starting in 1961, IRC was at the forefront of an effort to provide dissident Haitian exiles from the Duvalier dictatorship with relief, family reunion and legal services. IRC was a founding member of the National Emergency Coalition for Haitian Refugees, headed by Bayard Rustin, an active IRC Vice President and American civil rights leader. Rustin also served as Co-Chairman of the IRC-sponsored Citizens Commission on Indochinese Refugees until his death in 1987.

In February 1986, young Duvalier, who had inherited the title "President for Life" from his father, fled from Haiti. The beginnings of a democratic process that followed sharply reduced the need for IRC services. But the trend was reversed when military rule and violence returned until a freely elected government was formed in 1995.

In Chile, an unusual Latin American operation started in 1975 when General Pinochet's military junta decreed that political prisoners would be freed if granted admission in another country. Several hundred of the 2,500 refugees admitted to the United States were resettled by IRC. IRC was assisted in their resettlement by volunteer English teachers, doctors and dentists, human rights and union groups. Also resettled during this period were Argentine political prisoners, Uruguayans, Paraguayans, Guatemalans and other refugees seeking asylum from oppressive Latin American countries.

CENTRAL AMERICA: WAR AND DISPLACEMENT

In 1984, IRC moved into El Salvador, a country ravaged by civil conflict. Some 70,000 people had been killed and 500,000 – more than 10% of the country's population were displaced from their communities. IRC helped the “desplazados” through programs of medical care, public health education, self-help and gardening projects. By 1990, IRC clinics, mother-child and vaccination centers were serving 50 refugee communities. Also provided was training in nutrition, midwifery, environmental sanitation and literacy.

Salvadorans wishing to integrate permanently in refugee communities were helped through the construction of housing. Rebuilding schools and educational training were critical in creating new, self-sustaining communities. By 1992, IRC was able to turn its work over to an indigenous organization, The Committee for Integration and Reconstruction of El Salvador.

During the early 1980's, in Honduras, some 25,000 Miskito Indians who had escaped from harsh persecution in Nicaragua lived in scattered, primitive developments. Educational opportunities for the children were non-existent and in 1985 IRC organized an unusual project to overcome the problem: an education-by-radio system that reached into remote areas. Adult refugees, who were trained to serve as “monitors” in the Miskito camps, were provided with radio receivers, papers, pencils and blackboards.

Elie Wiesel, later to become a Board member and active IRC volunteer leader, visited the area where IRC had been helping the Miskito refugees and denounced the Sandinista government in an article published in the French newspaper, “*Le Matin*.” Later, upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Wiesel made a statement that expresses the credo that brings together people of many diverse backgrounds to IRC:

“There is so much injustice and suffering crying out for our attention: Victims of hunger, racism and political oppression, prisoners of so many lands, governed by the Left and Right. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone: that we are not forgetting them; that when their voices are stifled, we shall lend them ours; that while their freedom depends on ours, our quality of freedom depends on theirs.”

By 1990, with the establishment of a freely elected government in Nicaragua, refugees who had fled to Costa Rica, where IRC was helping them were finally able to return home. IRC's role for the Nicaraguan refugees shifted from relief services to programs involving both repatriation and local integration. The Costa Rican government had affirmed a commitment to permit refugees to remain, and IRC stayed on to assist in the integration process. Inside Nicaragua, IRC assisted in the rehabilitation of devastated communities receiving returning refugees.

In 1992, about half of the rural population of the tiny Central American country of Belize consisted of Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees who lived side-by-side with Belizeans in more than 80 scattered villages. The large refugee population strained the agricultural and educational systems, and IRC alleviated many of the problems by the construction of roads and bridges, the

buildings of schools, purchases of equipment, the installation of water systems, repair of health centers and the development of farm projects.

THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

The early 1990's also created severe refugee crises in three former Soviet Union republics: Azerbaijan, Georgia and Tajikistan. Although the nature of the problems varied in the three countries, they shared common roots: the displacement of people by ethnic and civil wars. IRC helped these uprooted people – not yet recovered from Soviet oppression – in a variety of ways suitable to the particular problems: agricultural support, small enterprise development, repair of infrastructures, health care, rebuilding housing and public buildings. Underlying the work was the development of self-sufficiency, in practice and spirit.

During the same period, IRC supported a unique effort in another part of the former Soviet Union: the Russian Republic. There, in Moscow, IRC participated in the work of an organization named Compassion, founded in 1989 to provide home-based medical services to Gulag survivors of Soviet terror – dissident Russians who had been physically and psychologically brutalized in Siberian jails. IRC supported the teams of physicians, nurses and health aides visiting the homes of 1,200 refugees from the Gulag. In-patient services were arranged with cooperating hospitals and a van was purchased to ensure more extensive medical care.

“ETHNIC CLEANSING”: THE BOSNIAN TERROR

In December 1991, IRC responded speedily and decisively to Europe's worst humanitarian crisis since World War II. Widespread violence had erupted in new nations carved out of the entity of Yugoslavia. The principal victims were Bosnian Muslims who were terrorized by Serbian nationals. What became known as “ethnic cleansing” was, in practice, a calculated campaign of terrorism involving mass murder, torture, the rape of women and children. Central to the genocidal warfare was the drive to destroy and occupy the homes and the communities of the Bosnia people.

IRC became the only American voluntary agency helping Bosnian refugees and then other ethnic groups caught up in the warfare. Initially, IRC's main operation was in Sarajevo – providing life-saving medicines, food, blankets and helping to evacuate Jewish as well as Muslim refugees. Soon the work spread to Zagreb and later to Split, Mostar, Tuzla and other areas of former Yugoslav countries and was broadened beyond emergency relief. Medical rehabilitation, women's and children's centers were established, sanitation projects were developed, and clean water projects were built. Business and industrial enterprises that had been damaged or destroyed were revitalized.

In Split, in close cooperation with the United Nations, IRC established a system for inter-agency coordination of reconstruction projects. Steps to enable refugee populations to achieve nutritional self-sufficiency were taken. Among special efforts was the Children's Medical

Project that provided hospital and convalescent services for more than 300 refugee children from both Bosnia and Croatia. Mental health and counseling services were provided for war-traumatized refugees.

Not neglected in the massive effort for the Bosnia refugees was their resettlement in overseas countries. In 1993, the U.S. government approved the admission of 3,000 Bosnians, a number that rose to 20,000 in 1997. The processing of all asylum-seekers was carried out by IRC at offices in Split and Zagreb and resettlement offices in the U.S. have been responsible for thousands of Bosnia newcomers.

The 1996 Dayton Peace Accord – crafted by former IRC Board member Richard Holbrooke – created hope for peace in former Yugoslavia and IRC intensified its role in helping to bring a durable solution to the problems of those still uprooted. At the same time, new victims of continued ethnic violence required IRC’s humanitarian attention. A book by the Pulitzer Prize winning writer, David Rohde, published in 1997, documented the genocidal activities carried out in Srebrenica alone in July 1995 where thousands of women and children were “remorselessly” expelled from their homes and communities and 7,000 of the men were “slaughtered” he wrote.

THE VOLUNTEER SPIRIT IN ACTION

At the heart of IRC’s strength ever since its founding in 1933 is the spirit of volunteerism pervading all aspects of the work. The principal volunteer leaders are members of the Board of Directors who determine basic policies, initiate and review programs, work closely with the staff, raise funds, provide financial oversight and lead the advocacy efforts. They travel overseas frequently to investigate refugee crises.

Volunteerism at IRC has a broad outreach. Young people especially have been attracted to the spirit of service exemplified by IRC traditions – college and medical students, nurse and paramedics, teachers and social workers. Community and human rights groups, businesses and unions, hospitals and medical schools participate through direct or financial participation. This partnership with volunteers strengthens the work not only of IRC, but also the enduring American tradition of serving people uprooted by oppression and violence.

Many IRC volunteer leaders have received the nation’s highest honors. Among them is Leo Cherne who joined the IRC Board of Directors in 1946 and was elected Chairman in 1951, a position he held for forty years when he was succeeded by John C. Whitehead. In 1964, at The White House, Ronald Reagan presented him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian award. The citation included the following passage.

“Since the 1930’s, Leo Cherne has stepped forward and with brilliance, energy and moral passion helped this Nation overcome countless challenges. His lifetime devotion to aiding his country and to serving the cause of human freedom, especially through his work on behalf of refugees, reflects the strong and generous character of a man who deserves the respect and gratitude of all Americans.”

The cause of refugees has been further served by citizens groups organized and assisted by IRC. Among the most effective of the advocacy groups is the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, established in 1989, whose primary purpose is to call the world's attention to the plight of the women and children – the large majority of all refugees. The Women's Commission strives to gain public and governmental support for their cause and, in critical situations, to initiate and to participate in programs aimed at relieving the suffering and rebuilding the lives of the refugees. Since its inception, commission members, singly and in groups, have visited refugee areas in 30 countries. Their efforts have led to striking improvements in refugee problems they have tackled.

“UNIQUELY EFFECTIVE, INNOVATIVE AND VALUABLE”

The historic achievements of IRC – carried out at unusually low costs by virtue of its volunteer leadership and participation – have led the nation's leading business publications to cite it as one of America's best managed and effective voluntary agencies. In 1994, in a survey entitled “The Top U.S. Charities,” Money Magazine stated that “IRC ranks as our most efficient relief and development charity by quietly specializing in quick responses to refugee emergencies.” In 1995, IRC was the only international agency listed by U.S. News and World Report – in its “Guide to Giving” survey – under the heading “Their peers and other experts agree that the groups singled out here are uniquely effective, innovative and valuable.”

And, in 1997, Forbes Magazine published a report entitled “Picking Charities with Peter Drucker that included a passage stating: “Among multinational charities, Drucker especially admires the International Rescue Committee, which channels \$80 million annually to such shattered places as Afghanistan and Rwanda.” A few years before the Forbes survey, Peter Drucker – the noted American economist and management authority – was among the prominent Americans who nominated IRC for the Nobel Peace Prize. In his letter of nomination, he stated: “The IRC has brought hope, freedom and life to the victims of racial, religious and political oppression all over the world. For hundreds of thousands of victims in this century of intolerance, hatred, war and terror, IRC has been the beacon of hope and affirmation of decency, of human values and hope for a world of charity, love and peace.”

On September 30, 1997, IRC received the one million dollar Conrad N. Hilton Humanitarian Prize, the world's largest award of its kind. Among the citations in the program announcing the award was a statement by General Colin L. Powell, which read: “IRC does not chase headlines. It goes to and stays in places no one wants to be. The scope of the organization's work is immense, but the mission remains simple: to help alleviate the suffering of refugees by whatever means necessary.”

1998-2000

The striking growth of IRC since 1997 was reflected in the annual budgets for the three years that followed. Expenditures in 1997 were \$78,000,000. In 2000, the amount had climbed to \$145,00,000.

On the retirement of Robert P. DeVecchi as IRC President in 1997, the Board of Directors named Reynold Levy to succeed him. In announcing the appointment, IRC Chairman John C. Whitehead stated: “We have chosen Reynold Levy – a seasoned senior executive with a unique multinational perspective on the issues and dynamics underlying the events that influence our work.” He added: “IRC will be the stronger as a result of Bob DeVecchi’s decision to continue to support our work in his new capacity as President Emeritus.”

Two years later, in November 1999, John C. Whitehead retired as the IRC Chairman. His successors, Winston Lord and Dr. James C. Strickler, stated: “For more than 40 years, John Whitehead has been the driving force behind our work. He joined our board in 1956, when he organized emergency airlifts aiding refugees who had fled Hungary after the Soviet invasion. Ever since, he has been in the thick of IRC’s responses to crises. In all his many facets – as wise trustee and counselor, as generous donor and extraordinary leader – we salute him”.

Overseas, by the year 2000, IRC was working in 33 countries. The programs involved life-saving aid – food, clothing, shelter and medical assistance; public health and rehabilitation; education from grade school to adult levels; training and self-reliance projects aimed at refugee self-sufficiency; legal and sanctuary assistance. Special attention was devoted – as throughout IRC’s history – to children and adolescents, the most vulnerable of victims of war, terror and civil conflict.

Across the United States, 22 resettlement offices continued to carry out a multi-faceted resettlement program. During the year 2000, close to 10,000 refugees from Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America were provided with a wide range of services – enabling them to achieve self-sufficiency and integration into the mainstream of American life. Among them were many ethnic Albanians who had fled the onslaught of terror unleashed by the Serbian ruler, Slobodan Milosevic.

In a note enclosing a modest contribution to IRC, a refugee said: “How wonderful the freedom world is! Thank you for helping us so much. Please let me send the very first check as a small hand to assist refugees.”

The new dimensions of the IRC’s work overseas led to increased emphasis on community-based programs, regional cooperation and cross-border teamwork. Durable solutions were sought for war and internally displaced refugees in particular. Greater attention was given to the development of consortiums with other voluntary and local agencies sharing a common purpose with IRC. Among the 13 African countries where IRC served during 2000, new programs were initiated, or current ones expanded, in the two Congos, Guinea, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Uganda and the Sudan.

In Asia, similar steps were taken by IRC in Afghanistan, Pakistan, East Timor, Indonesia and Thailand for both internal and cross-border refugees. The East Timor program followed the outbreak of violence when, in August 1999, voters chose independence from Indonesia in a UN referendum. Healthcare, education, training, home and infrastructure rebuilding were major components of the work dealing with the mass destruction.

In Europe, a succession of refugee crises precipitated new and expanded programs in Albania, Azerbaijan, Bosnia, Croatia, Georgia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Yugoslavia. IRC help for victims of the Chechnya war was vital to the survival of thousands and to the rebuilding of their lives.

For the refugees who poured into Albania from Kosovo in the spring of 1999, IRC developed a network of emergency programs. A parallel operation was carried out in Macedonia, where hundreds of thousands of refugees had fled from the Milosevic reign of terror. Following the intervention of NATO, IRC moved into Kosovo to develop extensive life-saving work, followed by a rehabilitation program aimed at rebuilding a shattered nation.

In Latin America, working through local agencies, starting in 2000, IRC provided assistance in Colombia for many of the hundreds of thousands of civilians uprooted by civil strife. That same year, the establishment of a central Emergency Response Unit strengthened IRC's ability to respond quickly and effectively to refugee crises everywhere.

Vital to the strength of IRC is public understanding of its mission. A sustained effort was therefore devoted to developing greater worldwide awareness of IRC's work in the context of refugee problems on humanitarian, political, social and economic levels.

The results of the effort were reflected in all branches of the media: newspaper and magazines; trade publications and newsletters; radio and television stations and networks. A survey on the enormous death toll (1.7 million) in the Congo, published by IRC in May 2000, was covered extensively by all media and focused widespread public and governmental attention on the tragedy.

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and children provided an increasingly strong voice in the advocacy effort. At the start of the new century, the Commission intensified its role as a vital protector of uprooted women and children. New attention was devoted to expanding the participation of women in the management of refugee communities.

IRC continued to receive top ratings in the evaluations of non-profit agencies by business and "watchdog" organizations. A survey in the December 2000 issue of Smart Money magazine designated IRC "The Leader" of agencies in the relief category. That same month, in an article entitled "Give Wisely," Forbes Magazine rated IRC as the leading agency in terms of "Charitable Commitment" and "Fundraising Efficiency." And the American Institute of Philanthropy, in its "Charity Rating Guide" awarded IRC an A rating.

At a conference announcing the formation of IRC in July 1933, the chairman said: “This is a chance for each of us to be a part of history. We cannot lean back on a comfortable cushion of sentimentality, shivering and weeping over Fascist horror stories. We cannot close our eyes with ‘I don’t know what I can do’. The serious calamity of our day calls, and we are able and impelled to act.”

The spirit of the IRC, and the basic mission, has not changed since that day almost 70 years ago.

