

International Council of Nurses

Records, 1946-1970

MC # 112

Extent:

16.5 linear feet

Provenance:

Constance Holleran, Executive Director of ICN, Geneva, Switzerland

Access:

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Citation:

International Council of Nurses Records, Center for the Study of the History of Nursing, School of Nursing, University of Pennsylvania

Sponsorship:

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Historical Sketch. The International Council of Nurses (ICN) was founded as a federation of national nursing associations in 1899 in London. Today its headquarters are located in Geneva Switzerland. During the Post War years of World War Two, the agency provided a means of establishing and verifying credentials for over 3,000 refugee nurses throughout the world. Fleeing their war stricken homelands, many left with only what they could carry. Any documentation they might have possessed was often left behind. Many of the educational institutions they attended were either destroyed or their records lost during the war, hampering any attempts at verification of credentials.

The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), begun in 1942, under the auspices of the United Nations (UN), undertook the original responsibility of providing assistance to these nurses. As noted above, the particular problem was authenticating nurses' qualifications which UNRRA continued until June 30, 1947. After that, the International Refugee Organization (IRO) (1946-1951)ⁱ assumed responsibility for this taskⁱⁱ, while still under the auspices of the United Nations.ⁱⁱⁱ Due to the overwhelming mission at hand, a Special Committee of the Fourth Session of the UNRRA Council in June of 1946 recommended that, "a specialized international agency be organized" to deal with the problems facing displaced refugees^{iv}. In this way, the entire Displaced Persons Operation of UNRRA was transferred to IRO. IRO continued this operation until June 1950 when ICN took over the responsibility of the Displaced Persons (Nurses) Professional Register and all associated correspondence.

At this point, the guardianship of these files became the duty of Alice C. Sher. In 1948 she was appointed assistant executive secretary of the ICN. Previous to this appointment, when had served as the president of the International Nurses Screening Board, "a body set up by UNRRA and later taken over by IRO, composed of refugee nurses of different nationalities who had held leading positions in their own countries"^v This experience had:

been of great assistance in bringing the work concerned with refugee nurses within the compass of the ICN; and by being so closely involved with the re-settlement of these nurses the ICN had established friendly contacts with nursing registration authorities in various parts of the world^{vi}.

The ICN possessed the names and personal records of over 4,000 displaced nurses. Sher's experience as president of the International Nurses Screening Board had prepared her for the work of establishing the professional status of refugee nurses. Her dedication to the plight of displaced nurses extended well into the 1960s. During Sher's tenure, her diligence and devotion remained consistent, regardless of which organization was in charge.

The ICN was aware of the special problem facing displaced nurses. The November 1946 issue of the Bulletin, ICN's Journal, noted

[the] shortage of nurses, the destruction of many hospitals, the tragedy of 'displaced' persons, the feeling of isolation from which so many countries had suffered; and yet of the progress made in nursing and nursing education despite shortages of material.^{vii}

In fact, the Danish Council of Nurses recommended that national nurses associations should be encouraged by the ICN to establish contact with each other in order to facilitate opportunities for nurses to give information on nursing conditions and standards in various countries, so that nursing employment could be arranged through its auspices.

Representatives from a number of other countries further proposed that nurses should present recommendations from their national organizations to prove their identity and qualifications. These suggestions provided the foundation for the exchange of nurses programs, becoming a central aspect of the ICN'S identity.^{viii} The ICN's role was thus extended to verify credentials and to aid refugees to communicate with their home schools.

In 1965, the ICN moved its headquarters from London to Geneva, Switzerland and its focus changed from refugee issues to those dealing with nurse's education. At this time the ICN's educational thrust emphasized its Nurses Abroad Program. Individual countries became more responsible for their own domestic nursing problems. Political issues arising from countries seeking to redefine their national identity brought new challenges for the organization. In particular this occurred in Germany due to German Socialism, in China and Cuba because of communism, and with the rise of Palestine and Israel as independent states.

The majority of this collection consists of correspondence between the ICN, particularly with Alice Sher, and the individual nurses seeking credentials needed to become practicing nurses in their new homes. The countries in Series I include: Bulgaria, China, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, (West) Germany, East Germany, Hungary, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Palestine/Arab, Poland, Romania, Russia (Stateless), and Yugoslavia. While the majority of nurses were female, Cuba had the largest percentage of male nurses seeking the verification of their credentials. In addition to the countries mentioned in Series I, Series II includes: Bolivia, Egypt, India, Italy, Japan, Lebanon, Liberia, Mauritius, Netherlands, Peru, Sierra Leone, Singapore, South America, Spain, Syria, Thailand, and the U.S.S.R. The series also includes the refugees that were rejected; and Personal Data forms.

Endnotes

Bibliography

Abeles, Elvin and James T. Watkins IV. "United Nations." Colliers Encyclopedia. 1963.

Bridges, Daisy Caroline. A History of the International Council of Nurses, 1899-1964: The First Sixty-Five Years. Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott Company.

United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. UNRRA: The History of the United Nations of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. 3 vols. New York, Columbia University Press, 1950.

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Summary. This collection contains the correspondence between the ICN, particularly Alice Sher, and the individual nurses seeking credentials needed to become practicing nurses in their new homes. It would be of interest for anyone examining Displaced people from the Post World War II era. In addition, these files should be engaging for those examining the long-term impact of the war in terms of the loss of identity that results when people are forced from their homeland. The UNRRA/IRO/ICN's involvement with the credentializing program, from an organizational standpoint, provides a useful example of the cooperation needed to tackle the refugee problem, whose scope had been unsurpassed prior to the war. The impact of over 4,000 refugee Nurses attempting to seek employment in foreign lands helped fill the need for qualified Nurses throughout the United States and Canada.

Series Description. This collection has been arranged into two series:

Series I. This series contains correspondence between the ICN, particularly with Alice Sher and 1,934 individual nurses in their new homes. The date spans of these records range from 1948-1968. The records are arranged alphabetically by country and then alphabetically by individual. The countries include: Bulgaria, China, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, (West) Germany, East Germany, Hungary, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Palestine/Arab, Poland, Romania, Russia (Stateless), and Yugoslavia. The original codes given by ICN to designate individual countries are included with the countries' names as well.

Series II. This series consists of 81 files. Among the topics within the series are "Incoming/Outgoing ICN Correspondence Re: School of Nursing Individuals" arranged alphabetically for the following countries: Bolivia, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Egypt, Estonia, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Korea, Lebanon, Liberia, Mauritius, Netherlands, Norway, Peru, Romania, Sierra Leone, Singapore, South America, Spain, Switzerland, Syria, Thailand, U.S.S.R., West Germany, and Yugoslavia. These records have date ranges from the mid to the late 1960s. In addition, there are files containing "Refugees: Rejected Cases" from the period of 1945-1950, also in alphabetical order. The series also includes: "Displaced Persons, Rejected Cases in Italy-1947-1951," as well as "Displaced Nurse Aides in Austria, Personal Data Form, 1955."

i. Abeles, Elvin and James T. Watkins IV. "United Nations." Colliers Encyclopedia. 1963: 642

ii. United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. UNRRA: The History of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. 1950: 301.

iii. *ibid.*, 491

iv. *ibid.*, Vol. I, 312.

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v. Bridges, Daisy Caroline. A History of the International Council of Nurses, 1899-1964: The First Sixty Five Years., 148.

vi. *ibid.*, 159

vii. *ibid.*, 126

viii. *ibid.*, 130.