

What has the German Red Cross done to combat poverty?

Report by Edith Köhne, 83 years old

As the social welfare offices weren't allowed to give us the names of poor people, we had to go by word-of-mouth-recommendations to find people in need. We helped them by giving clothes, furniture, money and donations-in-kind, such as butter. To be able to give these things to those in need, we had to collect donations in the form of money and things and we also drew in membership fees.

Sometimes we would also help schools if they asked us; we supplied them with toys, paper, pencils and teaching materials. Most of our help, however, went to children and single parents. Furthermore, we supported holiday trips for the disabled or the elderly.

We were divided up into different local chapters, so we only took care of people in our towns or villages. But twice in a year we had meetings with local chapters from other places to exchange our experiences and discuss some difficult cases. If there were any catastrophes we would sometimes meet more often than that.

Another area of our work was the teaching of first-aid, so that people could learn how to help each other. We also organized blood-donations. All these activities requires the assistance of local authorities. We often found it difficult to motivate them to support us.

I myself sometimes took people shopping who couldn't deal with money themselves. Sometimes, when I wanted to go on a community trip, I gave my place to others who couldn't afford to pay for such an activity.

One of the most important activities was the so called "Kleiderkammer". This was a big campaign organized to collect second-hand clothes. We received many donations, but sometimes people would give us rubbish. Some people seemed glad that they could get rid of their rubbish. I even found some used nappies and a set of false teeth one time.

We went to peoples houses to ask them for donations. But that was often not very successful. Mainly the rich people didn't want to help us.

When we gave the clothes out, those in need were often too embarrassed to come, so we had to go to their places and ask them to come so that they would choose something for themselves.

There used to be some people who would take advantage of the help, though. There were groups of Russian and Romanian immigrants who would take as many clothes as they could grab in order to go on selling them. Whatever they couldn't or didn't want to use, they threw away in the next garden, who then complained to us. So we would refuse to give these people more clothes, but then they started to threaten us.

Sometimes we collected money to give it to people in other continents. We supplied them with tents, medicine, dressing material and second hand clothes. We had become so well-known that other institutions like the churches always asked the Red Cross for help.

Another area of our work was that we assisted people who tried to find new jobs.

I have worked for the Red Cross for 29 years. I assisted many families in that time. If you want to support families but have difficulties in reaching them you have to do it the following way: You visit them at Christmas time and give them presents. That's a good way to make people trust you – which is the most important thing if you want to work together – establish trust which can be a long process. You should never be intrusive, but listen to people.

One thing that makes me sad, however, is that you can not expect gratitude. You sometimes help people, furnish their flat, but it isn't appreciated enough. A few days or weeks later, you may find these items on the street, thrown away. Even the money that is donated for the children of people

can be used for other purposes. So by and by, I have become a little sceptical if I did the right thing. To help people who sometimes do not want to be helped.

There were also some families who had become poor because of their laziness. So I persuaded them to clean up their homes. But whenever I didn't stand right next to them to observe their efforts, they went back to their old behaviour. So I started to feel like a supervisor.

Another thing that puzzled me was that all poor people -however little money they have for themselves – they own at least one pet. Sometimes these pets are even more important to people than their own children, for example when it comes to feeding them!

All in all, though, I have been successful and I have received some gratitude – so I think what I did was worth the effort. To work for the Red Cross is a full-time-job without payment, but the little successes in helping other human beings can make you happy.