

Home » Sections » Magazine » Glimpses Into American Jewish History

»

Adolphus S. Solomons: A Founder Of The American Red Cross

By: Dr. Yitzchok Levine

Published: January 1st, 2014

This is the third part of our look at the life of Adolphus Solomons. Part one appeared in the Nov. 1, 2013 issue; part two ran last month (Dec. 6 issue).

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from "Adolphus S. Solomons and The Red Cross" by Cyrus Adler, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, 33, 1934, pages 211-230.

Before describing Adolphus Solomons's role in the founding of the American Red Cross, it is worthwhile to outline the history of the founding of the International Red Cross and the relationship of the American Red Cross to this organization.

The Red Cross movement is due to the initiation of Henri Dunant, a Swiss gentleman, based upon the experiences at the battle of Solferino, fought on June 24, 1859. He happened upon the field of battle while on a pleasure trip and was so impressed by the scenes he witnessed that three years later he published a book entitled *Un Souvenir de Solferino* which passed through several editions and was translated into various languages. This resulted in the formation of a society, which in its turn brought about the meeting of the thirty-six delegates, some official and some semi-official, on October 26, 1863, resulting in the more formal meeting of the delegates of the nations at Geneva, that created the International Red Cross. This first convention was concluded on October 22, 1864, and was largely intended for neutralizing hospitals and ambulances and for the amelioration of the wounded in armies in the field. The original convention of 1864 was followed by another in 1868. Most of the nations ratified the conclusions of these two conventions promptly.

Throughout the 1870s and early 1880s, a small group of Americans, inspired by Clara Barton, lobbied for Congressional approval of the Geneva Conventions. This group often met in Solomons's home. At its first meeting in 1881 Barton was elected president and Solomons a vice president. Solomons helped draft a Senate resolution which if approved would have endorsed the Geneva conventions. Barton and Solomons also drew up a constitution of an organization they named the American Association of the Red Cross in anticipation of Senate approval of this resolution.

But it was not until March 1, 1882 that President Chester Arthur declared that with the advice and consent of the Senate, he acceded to the said convention, and the Senate ratified this action on March 16.

On March 23, one week after, there appeared on behalf of the American Association of the Red Cross, the following appeal to the American people, which bears among others the signature of A. S. Solomons:

Appeal to the American People

The President having signed the Treaty of the Geneva Conference and the Senate having, on the 16th instant, ratified the President's actions, the American Association of the Red Cross, organized under provisions of said treaty, purposes to send its agents at once among the sufferers by the recent floods, with a view to the ameliorating of their condition so far as can be done by human aid and the means at hand will permit. Contributions are urgently solicited.

Another conference was held at Geneva, September, 1884, and this was the first time at which an official representation of the United States Government was present. The representatives of the United States on this occasion were Miss Clara Barton, Judge Joseph Sheldon, and Mr. A. S. Solomons, who had become vice-president of the American Association of the Red Cross.

Upon his return from Europe Solomons was interviewed by the Washington Post and provided a detailed account of what had transpired at this Geneva Conference:

"I left here," said Mr. Solomons, "on the 30th of last July, having been appointed together with Miss Clara Barton and Judge Sheldon, to represent America at the Red Cross Congress. The sessions were held from the 1st to the 7th of September, and officers from 37 Governments were present, including even a representative from Japan. The assemblage numbered 85 persons, all engaged in official life or distinguished by title. England, for instance, sent her surgeon general; the Empress of Germany sent her private secretary to represent her in person, as well as the Government, and the other powers sent correspondingly distinguished people. We appeared small in comparison to the rest."

"Did the Congress get through much business during its session?"

"Yes, sir, a great deal, and business that will prove a blessing to many who will have to take their chances in the fields of battle. Many of the horrors of war will be materially lessened by the action of the Congress."

"In what way can this be accomplished?"

"Well, a great variety of modern appliances for the care and cure of the sick and wounded were presented and approved by the Red Cross Association. Altogether I may say the good that will come from the Congress is incalculable."

"How did the Powers receive their American cousins?"

"It was an ovation everywhere. In Geneva we were given an official dinner, at which 200 distinguished guests were present. Miss Barton was the only lady present in the room, and she received showers of encomiums from the various speakers."

According to Michael Feldberg ("The Red Cross's Jewish Star," www.jewishfederations.org/page.aspx?id=23856):

"Through the 1880s, Barton and others helped people whose homes and lives were endangered by a series of epidemics and natural disasters such as the Johnstown Flood. Solomons labored diligently behind the scenes in Washington and New York, using his business, political, and journalistic contacts to generate funds and publicity to heighten public awareness of the Red Cross's good works. The extensive correspondence between Barton and Solomons in the archives of the American Jewish Historical Society documents their close work together.

"As famine swept the Russian empire in 1892, a rift developed between Solomons and Barton. In 1891, Solomons became the American agent of the Baron de Hirsch Fund, an international philanthropy whose mission was, and remains, assisting Jews in need around the world. Because of his experience with Russia's treatment of its impoverished Jews, Solomons advised against American Red Cross efforts toward Russian relief. He expressed concern that the Russian Red Cross, a creature of the imperial government, would be in charge of distributing the relief funds. Solomons feared that the czarist regime would divert humanitarian aid away from those who needed it, especially impoverished Jews. Nonetheless, Barton insisted that American aid pass through official Russian channels. Solomons publicly questioned her judgment.

"The disagreement soured their relationship and, at the subsequent election of American Red Cross officers, Barton and her supporters failed to re-nominate Solomons for a vice presidency. Adolphus Solomons' official ties with the institution he had done so much to establish ended."

Interestingly enough, the 1890s witnessed a tide of criticism of Clara Barton's management of the Red Cross. This culminated in a widely publicized battle for control of the Red Cross during the first administration of Theodore Roosevelt and ended with Barton's withdrawal from the leadership of the organization in 1904.

About the Author: *Dr. Yitzchok Levine served as a professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey before retiring in 2008. He now teaches as an adjunct at Stevens. Glimpses Into American Jewish History appears the first week of each month. Dr. Levine can be contacted at llevine@stevens.edu.*