



THE EMPRESS SHOKEN OF JAPAN

—Founder of the Empress Shoken Fund—

The Empress Shoken the Person

The Empress Shoken Fund which has been making a great contribution to the development of peacetime activities of Red Cross Societies all over the world is administered by a Joint Commission of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the League of Red Cross Societies in Geneva. The revenues from interest of the Fund are distributed, each year on April 11, the anniversary of the death of the Empress Shoken, among several National Societies to be used for their peacetime activities considered expedient by the Commission.

The Fund was donated to the International Red Cross 57 years ago by the Empress Shoken who earnestly wished for promotion of Red Cross services in time of peace. This is how the Fund was established and why the name 'Shoken' is prefixed to the name of this Fund. She was the Empress of the Emperor Meiji, grandfather of the present Emperor. She was born in Kyoto in 1850 as the youngest of three daughters of Tadaka Ichijo, nobleman at the Imperial Court of Japan, who later bore the title of Prince. She was named Fuki-hime first and then Suehime or also Masako at the age of 10.

She was married in 1869 to the Emperor Meiji at the age of 19 and she was called Haruko thenceforth, but after her demise she has been called the Empress Shoken according to the custom of the Japanese Imperial Household.

Japan in Those Days

Here let us just look back over the historical background of this period. It was the period when the reign of the Tokugawa Shogunate regime over the span of 300 years was at long last nearing the end and the influence of Western countries began to be exerted on almost all the phases of social life—not only political but also economic, spiritual and cultural life—of the people secluded so long from the outside world. The affairs of State at this time of the Restoration were nothing but turbulent complications both in diplomatic relations with foreign countries and in domestic problems, and the Imperial Household was in narrow circumstances after the demise and the following Imperial funeral of the preceding Emperor in 1868. Therefore, the Imperial wedding ceremony in 1869 could not but be a very quiet affair.

After the Imperial rule was restored from the hand



The Empress Shoken

of the Tokugawa Shogun, the Emperor Meiji removed the seat of the capital from Kyoto to Tokyo in March 1869 and there he assumed the helm of state affairs. During his reign from that year to 1912, the nation directed all its efforts towards the renovation of the *ancien régime* by adopting cultures of Western countries to catch up with their trend of modernization, and by engaging itself in reformation of old structures, readjustment of diplomatic relations, development of various industries, etc. Thus she had to face plenty of troubles in many kinds both at home and abroad. In 1877 the 'Seinan-no-eki' or the 'Southwestern Rebellion' broke out in the southwestern part of Japan, and it was followed by the two big wars of the Sino-Japanese War in 1894-1895 and the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-1905. At all times of storm and stress in the Meiji era, the Emperor Meiji through the graceful assistance of the Empress Shoken stood firm in any kind of trials.

Benevolence of the Empress Shoken

After the Imperial Consort's bridal entry into the court, it soon became clear that the Empress was an outstanding woman of action and determined character. She initiated a reform of the Imperial Court beside other things and many positions of court ladies were consequently abolished. She also took the lead in running the Imperial Household without a hitch.

The philanthropic spirit, the understanding and enthusiasm towards the education of women and a genius for poetry, all these womanly virtues and gifts she possessed by nature.

Her mercifulness was almost comparable to that of the Empress Komyo (701-761 A.D.) who was eminent for her very benevolent disposition and established the 'Seyakuin' (free dispensary) at Nara, then the capital of the nation, for the purpose of distributing medicines to rich and poor alike. Here is one of the Empress Shoken's poems:

"May the benevolence be the only cornerstone of the solidarity of people's hearts." (Translation)

As a rarely accomplished poet she is told to have composed as many as forty thousand 'Waka' or a typical form of poem as shown above in 31 syllables in Japanese. This poem expresses her sincere and overflowing solicitude for the everlasting happiness and prosperity of the people who were considered the foundation of the newborn Empire.

During the reign of the Emperor Meiji, his Government abolished 'Daimyo' (feudal lords) system in which all the estates and populace were in possession of feudal lords, deprived the 'Bushi' (warrior) class of their privileges and aimed at the establishment of classless and democratic nation.

Now the downtrodden people came to be ruled by the Emperor with a heart full of benevolence. However, the new politics for solidifying the foundation of the country were pursued at the sacrifice of welfare of the weak and poor. Social work of the government had to be limited to the minimum despite a great deal of demand. The progress in social work made during this period was, therefore, solely attributable to the solicitude and the constant encouragement given by the Imperial Household.

Imperial Concern over the Red Cross

In 1882 the Jikei-kai Hospital was established under the auspices of the Empress Shoken to give free medical care to the indigent population. She assumed the presidency of its Patronesses' Committee. She also gave her patronage for its charity bazaar and granted repeatedly monetary gifts for the improvement of the hospital. These were done before the Red Cross was born in Japan.

The Red Cross Society was organized in Japan by Count Tsunetami Sano under the name of the 'Hakuaisha' or the 'Philanthropy Society' at the seat of hostilities during the Southwestern Rebellion in 1877 following the

examples of Red Cross Societies in Europe. From March 1883, Imperial grant was made annually to the Society from the Privy Purse of the Empress.

When a hospital was built under the supervision of the Hakuaisha in November 1886, the Empress honoured the opening ceremony by her presence. In 1887 the Japanese Government adhered to the Geneva Convention and the Hakuaisha changed its name to the Japanese Red Cross Society. In the following years the Empress honoured again and again the Society by visiting its hospital for inspection or consolation of patients and also various meetings of the Society by her presence. Imperial grants were also repeatedly bestowed to the Society. Moreover, thinking of the hardship of charity patients of the hospital, she donated them winter clothes and cloth every winter since 1887.

"Whenever I come and see the sick, I cannot but wish that I could heal, and let them go home again."
(Translation)

Needless to say, the Red Cross which the Empress always supported as a patroness was set up to administer relief to the sick and wounded regardless of friend or foe. During the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese war, the Empress paid visits to the Army and the Naval hospitals to comfort sick and wounded soldiers in person. During the Russo-Japanese War, she actively engaged herself in rolling dressings at workshops together with Imperial Princesses and a great many ladies of the nobility. They sometimes worked hard from very early in the morning until late at night, which finally brought forth a donation of 200 tin cases of dressings (each tin case contained 12 rolls). Also artificial limbs and eyes were granted to disabled ex-servicemen and prisoners of war.

There is a well-known story telling the virtue shown by the Empress Shoken during the War. Umeko, wife of the then Prime Minister Hirobumi Ito, paid frequent visits to the families of soldiers at the front living around Oiso, Kanagawa Prefecture to console them by giving various kinds of gifts. One day an anonymous contribution of 500 yen was sent to her in aid of her action. She was deeply impressed by this gift and presented this story to the Empress. After gracefully listening to her, the Empress revealed that it was no less a person than herself who made that gift from her Privy Purse.

Imperial Offer of the Fund for the Encouragement of Relief Work in Time of Peace

The Japanese Red Cross Society came into being on the battlefield as an organization to take care of the sick and wounded as in the case of other National Societies. However, in 1888 when a volcanic eruption took place at Mount Bandai, Fukushima Prefecture, in the northeastern part of Japan, causing great damage to human lives and properties, the Empress was so moved and was benevolent enough to suggest the Society to do anything it could for the relief of the sufferers. The Society immediately

organized medical relief teams and sent them to the stricken area. Up to that time the Society had not functioned in this field of relief service, but with this as a turning point, relief work in time of disaster became one of the objects of the Society duly stipulated in its statutes. Thus she paved the way for the future extension of the Society's work in time of peace including such fields as medical care, prevention and eradication of tuberculosis, public health and hygiene, child and maternal welfare, etc. Since that time onward the Society sent relief teams and rendered aid to victims in every possible way at the time of natural calamity.

Boundless Charity

There were no boundaries at all in the wishes of the Empress for ameliorating the suffering of people and promoting relief work in time of peace.

When the IXth International Red Cross Conference was held in Washington, D.C. in 1912, the Empress kindly took this opportunity to make an offer of 100,000 yen (this was a great amount of money in those days) to the International Red Cross as a fund for encouraging Red Cross peacetime relief activities.

It is said that the most gracious Empress considered at that time as follows:

"The Red Cross work originated in benevolence innate in the heart of man, and, therefore, it naturally requires that relief should be extended not only to the sick and wounded soldiers on the battlefield but also to the helpless victims of disasters in time of peace, and benevolence does not know the boundaries between States. If Red Cross Societies of various nations of the world cooperate and help each other in relief works in time of peace, peoples of these nations would come to live on much more friendly terms with each other, and thus indirectly realize the aim and principle of the Red Cross."

The Conference unanimously adopted a resolution to appreciate the Empress' offer of the donation and President Taft of the host country, the United States of America, sent a telegraph expressing his cordial thanks to her. However, the decision upon how to use the Fund had to be delayed due to the outbreak of the First World War and the Fund was kept in the hand of the International Committee of the Red Cross until 1921, when the regulations were drawn up to the effect that 1) the Fund should be kept as a permanent fund and 2) only the interest from the Fund be distributed to Red Cross Societies of the world, upon their application, for the benefit of their relief services in time of peace.

Current Situation of the Fund

The Empress Shoken left for the other world on April 11th, 1914 at the age of 65. However, today, 50 odd years after her demise, we can still see the embodiment of her humane love in the Empress Shoken Fund which exists in Geneva as a permanent Fund of the International Red

Cross to help peacetime relief work of several Red Cross Societies every year.

Since its establishment, the Fund has been increased on several occasions. When the XVth International Red Cross Conference was held in Tokyo in 1934, the Empress Teimei (the Empress of the Emperor Taisho, father of the present Emperor) and the Crown Princess (the present Empress) graciously made an additional contribution of 100,000 yen to the Fund.

In 1963, the Centenary Congress of the International Red Cross was held in Geneva and the following year happened to be the 50th anniversary of the Empress Shoken's demise. Taking this opportunity, Her Majesty the present Empress again granted an additional donation of 10,000 U.S. dollars to the Fund from her Privy Purse.

The Japanese Red Cross Society for its part has been organizing a special fund-raising campaign for this Fund and the first remittance of the money thus raised was made in 1968. The Japanese Government has also made contributions for the past several years, the inalienable capital of the Fund thus increasing and, as a consequence, making the amount of distribution to each receiving National Society bigger and bigger each year.

The Fund stands 1,097,621 Swiss Frs. as of December 31, 1968 and the significance of the Fund has recently been highly recognized throughout the Red Cross world. Further, after that date, T.M. the Emperor and Empress of Japan granted an additional donation and the Japanese Red Cross Society made the second remittance of the contribution specially raised.

Ever since the establishment of this Fund, 61 National Red Cross (Red Crescent, Red Lion and Sun) Societies together with the League of Red Cross Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross received the total sum of 835,700 Sw. Frs. which includes that of the 48th distribution of the Fund in 1969. The allocation of the Fund used to be made mainly for such Red Cross activities as nursing, disaster relief, medical care and welfare of dependent, neglected or abused children, but recently the objects have been expanded even to facilities, equipments and materials for blood programme or vehicles for various fields of activities of the Red Cross.

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