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A Museum of Humanitarian Aid in the Heart of Geneva

Nancy Novick

06.19.25 | 566 | 0

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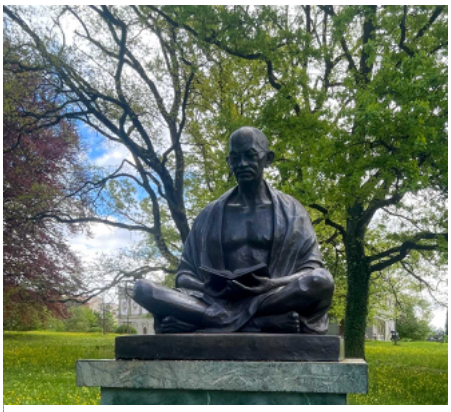
Possibly best known for the exuberant jet d'eau that rises from its harbor against a backdrop of stunning mountain views, the charm of its old city, and the luxury shops that line Bahnhofstrasse, Geneva, Switzerland is also home to some of the most important institutions dedicated to health and human rights. Among those accessible to visitors, is the **Musée International de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant Rouge** (Museum of the International Red Cross/Red Crescent) located a short distance from the city center.

From the closest bus stop, the shift in focus is immediately apparent. A walk along the Avenue de la Paix (Peace) takes one past sculptor Daniel Berset's monumental broken chair statue, conceived to encourage a multi-national ban on anti-personnel mines and cluster munitions. In the background, stands the European headquarters of the United Nations in the beautiful Palais des Nations (originally built in 1929 to house the League of Nations). A bit farther on, a statue of Gandhi greets passers-by, adorned one recent day with tributes to the late Russian political activist and prisoner, Alexei Navalny.

Broken Chair



Gandhi statue

The Red Cross/Red Crescent museum itself sits at the foot of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) headquarters, a large white building atop a hill. A modern glass and steel structure houses the collection where visitors are invited to learn more about the organization's origins, as well as the long-standing alliance between individual Red Cross and Red Crescent national societies that provide humanitarian relief around the world.

While the organization of exhibits in the museum's permanent collection is not strictly chronological, a sculptor's dramatic all-white rendering of Henri Dunant seated at a desk—and accompanying text—explains the Geneva resident's role in the founding in 1863 of what is now the International Red Cross. Dunant, who was first inspired to create a relief effort to alleviate the suffering of

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A powerful museum reveals the global impact of the Red Cross and Red Crescent through art, history, and testimony.

▼ ABOUT THE AUTHOR

soldiers after witnessing the 1859 battle of Solferino, Italy, also participated in the framing of the original Geneva Convention of 1864. On display in a nearby case, copies of that document contain language that reflects the authors' optimism, "Ambulances and military hospitals shall be recognized as neutral…Wounded or sick combatants, to whatever nation they may belong, shall be collected and cared for." Subsequent versions that expanded on the protections outlined—thereafter referred to as the Geneva Conventions—were drafted respectively in 1906, 1929, and 1949, with the lattermost document still remaining in effect.

Artist's rendering of Henri Dunant

Young child with photo of relative

To safeguard both those providing care and wounded soldiers, the Convention "established a universally protective symbol: a red cross on a white background." (There has been some debate about whether the white cross on the emblem was intended to carry religious significance or was simply chosen as a readily recognizable symbol, i.e., the inverse of the Swiss flag.) A

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little more than a decade later, use of the red crescent—a symbol more readily recognizable to Muslim soldiers—was initiated, with formal adoption of this symbol in 1929. Today, the red crystal emblem is used by allied societies in regions where the population does not identify with the cross or the crescent.

Throughout the museum, the response of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent to humanitarian crises around the world is documented through a variety of materials including photographs, artifacts, and facsimiles of official records. The experiences of survivors in more recent conflicts and natural disasters are brought to life through additional media, including music, graphic representation, and recorded testimony. A striking example is found in the Hall of Witnesses where visitors can sit face-to-face with greater-than-life-size videos of survivors describing their experiences—among them, a former child soldier, a civilian who lost his legs but now works with other amputees, and a woman who experienced multiple displacements from her home country.

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The youngest victims of conflict come into focus in a haunting display of photographs posted along the wall of a nearby room; the accompanying text explains that the children portrayed are survivors of the 1994 Rwanda Genocide. Separated from their relatives at such an early age many did not know their family identities, or even their own names, making reunification difficult and sometimes impossible.

Fortunately, there is hope to be found as well. In the Restoring Family Links section of the museum, more testimony may be viewed and heard, describing instances in which families separated by conflict have been reunited by the Red Cross and Red Crescent. Stories of recovery and resilience, even among individuals who might have given in to despair, amaze and inspire.

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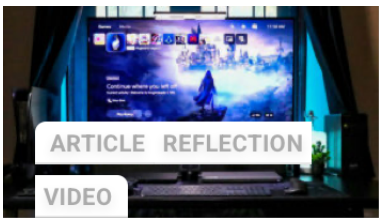

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Moroccan prisoner artwork

In another gallery, a display of artwork crafted by prisoners and made primarily from found materials serves as testament to the desire for creative expression among those who have yet to attain their freedom. Among these works: a locomotive made by a French prisoner in Germany in 1941; a set of playing cards drawn by a Moroccan prisoner held by the Polisario Front (a group seeking independence in the Western Sahara) in 1998; and a miniature palace put together by Lebanese prisoners in Israel in 1999. (A book of this artwork is available in the museum shop.)

Locomotive by French prisoner WW II

With not all threats to human dignity stemming from civil wars, nationalist movements, repressive governments and militia, the Red Cross and Red Crescent also work to

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prepare vulnerable populations for natural disasters. A small area of the museum is devoted to this work, while a newer threat, cybersecurity is addressed at the Data Detox bar, where a pick-and-choose your own cocktail metaphor is used to provide "…steps you can take to control your digital privacy, security, and wellbeing"; cards that summarize this information are available to take home.

Leaving the exhibits behind, in the lobby of the museum, the departing visitor is reminded of the power of literature and art to communicate our moral obligation to alleviate human suffering, as well as our capacity to do so. A quote from Dostoevsky that runs along one wall recalls our universal responsibility to one another, while nearby, observers are invited to add their own bit of weaving to artist Zahrasadit Hakim's tapestry-in-progress, an example of how the cumulative efforts of many changes, supports

and enhances the whole.

Dosteevski's quote

The Museum of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent

https://redcrossmuseum.ch/

Av. de la Paix 17, 1202 Genève, Switzerland.

Photo of the Red Cross/Red Crescent museum from wikicommons

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