

## ELENA, DUCHESS OF AOSTA, INSPECTOR GENERAL OF THE RED CROSS VOLUNTEER NURSES IN THE GREAT WAR - WORLD WAR 1

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*It is our conviction that the history of the Red Cross is part of the history of medicine. The nursing activity of H.R.H. Elena of France during the Great War is a fine example of the medical emergency history. In May 1915, the Duchess of Aosta became Inspector General of the volunteer nurses of the Italian Red Cross. Her diary "Accanto agli eroi" (Side by Side with the Heros) is an exhaustive text that accurately describes those dramatic events. For her activity in the Great War we can refer to her as our Florence Nightingale.*

**Keywords:** Italian Red Cross, Word War 1, Elena of France, San Giorgio of Nogaro, Accanto agli Eroi. Italian volunteer nurses.

DOI: 10.19193/0393-6384\_2018\_3\_110

**Received** November 30, 2017; **Accepted** January 20, 2018

We firmly believe that the History of the Red Cross is part of the History of Medicine. This thesis is also upheld in many classical texts on the History of Italian and International Medicine: because this is also the History of the Medical-Surgical and Nursing emergencies<sup>(1,2,3,4,5,6,7)</sup>.

Together with Henry Dunant, founder of the Red Cross<sup>(8,9,10,11,12,13)</sup>, and Louis Appia<sup>(14)</sup>, member of the five-member Committee and war surgeon, the names of other famous protagonists of this 'grande époque' include: Florence Nightingale<sup>(15)</sup>, founder of the nursing profession, Ferdinando Palasciano<sup>(16)</sup>, famous surgeon and first promoter in Italy of the neutrality of those wounded in battle, Cesare Castiglione<sup>(17)</sup> founder of the Italian Red Cross (Milano) and Clara Barton, nurse and founder of the American Red Cross. In addition, a number of famous people in the field of medicine including Camillo Golgi, Alphonse Laveran and Ronald Ross, three Nobel Prize winners in the field of Medicine, and Emilio Roux, director of the

Pasteur Institute who discovered the first antidyphtheria serum from horse blood, took part in the 1919 medical conference in Cannes<sup>(18)</sup> which was the forerunner to the birth of the International League of National Societies of the Red Cross, and, later, to the World Health Organisation (WHO)<sup>(19)</sup>.

In the present paper, we focus our attention on Italian "Florence Nightingale", H.R.H. Elena d'Orleans, Duchess of Aosta, Inspector of the Volunteer Nurses (VNs) in the Italian Red Cross. (Fig. 1)

Elena d'Orleans (1871 - 1951), claimant to the throne of France, met Emanuele Filiberto di Savoia Aosta (who was to become the Commander-in-Chief of the 3rd. Armata, the one known as Invicta engaged in the 'Carso' - Karst Region) in London in 1894 at the funeral of her father, Luigi Filippo d'Orleans, Count of Paris. They married on 25th. June 1895. The couple had two sons: Amedeo in 1898, and Aimone in 1900. Amedeo was the hero of Amba Alagi, (Northern Ethiopia, 20th. May 1941),

and Aimone was Duke of Spoleto and a Commanding Officer in the Italian Navy.



**Fig. 1:** Their Royal Highnesses Elena and Emanuele Filiberto Savoia Aosta.

Elena was a lady of character. She contracted tuberculosis in 1907, and fought it bravely even in her time spent in Africa. She died in 1951, after a fascinating eighty-year life. Tall and slender, with a wasp-waist, in a word, beautiful, she always succeeded in getting what she wanted thanks to her ladylike approach and her strict manner. Already in 1911 she “convinced” her spouse to allow her to be a nurse on the Hospital Ship ‘Menfi’ during the war in Libya (1911-12). This was to earn her the nickname ‘the strong-willed of the ‘Menfi’ given that, having won her ‘battle’ with the King Vittorio Emanuele III, the Prime Minister, Giolitti, and her husband, she was to take with her to war Red Cross volunteer nurses. In May 1915, the Duchess of Aosta became Inspector General of the volunteer nurses of the Red Cross<sup>(20)</sup>.

To recount in a short space what the Red Cross did during World War 1 (WW1) is an impossible task given the enormous amount of work carried out during those terrible years of war. However, it may be possible to try to understand this through the enlightening flashes of the biography of a person who visited and personally directed the ‘bloody and pious’ front in which the VNs participated. We are referring to the diary of the Duchess of Aosta, which constitutes an exhaustive account, which is yet to be studied and commented: her “*Accanto agli eroi*” - Side by Side with the Heroes<sup>(21)</sup>.

This diary which was published in 1930 has an introduction by the then Prime Minister (Head of the Italian Government), Chev. Benito Mussolini, who understood the importance and grasped the scope for which it was written:

*A non-attentive reader will find this book an arid list of facts; an attentive intelligent reader will, instead, find that this book is full of passion and dramatic events, thanks especially to the nature of its bare and almost bureaucratic annotations ..<sup>(22)</sup> MUSSOLINI.*

This appears to be a bare and numeric account which, however, should be studied and glossed or annotated so that the historical accounts of the prosography (i.e., collective biography) of the VNs, medical doctors and surgeons as well as of the wounded, all of whom are mentioned in the above-mentioned diary, linking, then, the whole with the feats of arms and the detailed history of WW1.

When one reads these numbers and one knows about that mobilization, today's reader is led to think: “a huge effort, certainly now our soldiers will be assisted and cared for!...”. But, instead, “the useless massacre”, as Benedict XVth. referred to it, remained always horrible and catastrophic.

Apart from the presence of the Red Cross, a new “thing” which deserves attention and recognition when compared to the preceding wars, is the activity of the women who ‘went to the battle-front’ as Red Cross volunteers and among these many were decorated for their services and many others lost their lives “in service”!

Here, let us remember a close collaborator of the Duchess of Aosta, Marquise Anna Torrigiani of Florence, who expired in the first territorial hospital of Florence where she was on duty on 30th. Dec. 1917 because of the “deadly disease”, an infection of the respiratory airways contracted on the wards.

In 1915, medicine had made giant steps since the end of the 1800's. The triggering agents of infectious diseases had been discovered; anesthetics had come into use, and thanks to them, surgery has ceased to be a terrible atrocity. Ehrlich's first “magic bullets” i.e., the first chemotherapy drug, molecules which selectively attack pathogens and thereby saved the ill person, had been synthesized. Florence Nightingale had “invented” the nursing profession and women all over the world availed of it to compete with men also on the battlefield. In Italy, following the foundation of the first nursing schools (1908), especially those of the Red Cross (indeed, it was in one of these that in 1911 Helen of France (Duchess of Aosta) earned her diploma), the Reggio Calabria and Messina earthquakes occurred (1908), followed by the war in Libya (1911-12) in which the great names of the women of the Italian aristocracy were put to the test after they had been allowed to participate by permission of their men: fathers, husbands, brothers and lovers.

The Duchess, who had become Inspector General, created her own executive body with two ladies of her court: Marquise Anna Torrigiani from Florence, and Duchess Maria Caffarelli from

Rome; the General Secretary is Emilia Anselmi Malatesta. Immediately, Elena's task is to cleanse (i) the base: Badge-Nurses who do not know how to assist and medicate professionally are relieved of duties and sent away; and (ii) the upper echelons of the Military Health System: "nothing less than the transformation of an army base into the hospitals". She fights hard to put in place hygiene, cleanliness, assistance, subsistence, all typical aspects related to the nursing profession created by Florence Nightingale and brings her protests to the commanding generals and the Chief-of-Staff, to Gen. Cadorna, and later to Gen. Diaz, and she submits her requests even to the supreme head of the armed forces, the King. This is why we can refer to her as our Florence Nightingale!

**27<sup>th</sup>. May 1915**

*Padua, military hospital: "the happiest and the dirtiest hospital one can imagine". She finds many unsuitable nurses, she, who was one of the first to earn her qualification, wants to send them away. "They have qualified, but they know little or nothing".*

**30<sup>th</sup>. May 1915**

*Udine: "Some years ago, a group of women undertook a theoretical course, following which, without any practical experience and without examinations they all became qualified nurses of the Red Cross, with a medal and a diploma".*

Here begins her relentless work as Inspector General which will bring her to visit some 1,500 hospitals in the four years of the war. In 1915, she visited more than 400 hospitals in the space of seven months.

**11<sup>th</sup>. June 1915**

*Vicenza, civilian hospital. The nursing sisters found it inconvenient that the volunteer nurses medicated men since there was neither a director nor an inspector. Hence, they are aided by legends, such as the White Sister Carrega Bartolini in Zilieri dal Verme, who was showered with medals already at the time of the war in Libya. They either learn or go home.*

**2<sup>nd</sup>. October 1915 Monastero - Hospital 075 of the Military Healthsystem (located in a granary).**

*" .....There is no hygiene nor is there a change of bed-linen; there are some 70 patients with typhus and many with intestinal infections. There are no latrines, the sick have to go down to the courtyard; at night they evacuate in buckets without lids and without disinfectants behind a kind of screen in the corners of the granary. When the buckets are too full, they are poured from one floor to another by means of the uneven plank floorboards".*

**She begins to keep track of the worst cases which she then refers to those in charge.**

**3<sup>rd</sup>. October 1915 Palmanova, military hospital.**

***A well-kept and clean hospital***

*Three patients with head injuries, one of whom who has lost his sight is a 19 year-old Sicilian. This is one of the 1,940 young people who will remain blind forever.*

The Duchess recalls to duty the qualified nurses who had until then deserted; she quashes those inevitable 'little loves' which due to promiscuous behavior had begun to bud. Her diary proceeds with names, events annotated in a couple of lines: doctors, politicians, women who are becoming emancipated. The problem of those infected is enormous. A soldier who is a priest assisted, as a volunteer those suffering from typhus and became ill; the Duchess goes to visit him, she looks after him, and she continues to visit him until his death. The Duchess does not forget. She visits Nurses Piccolomini in Siena, and Laparelli of the Red Cross Hospital N° 30 which is full of those with scabies and syphilis; she also visits the Red Cross Hospital N° 8 with those suffering from typhus where Marianna Denti and Bianca Mocenigo are at work.

**13<sup>th</sup>. October 1915 - S. Antonio of Scodavacca, Disinfection Section of VIIth. Armed Corps - (Military Healthcare).**

In the granaries of the building She found those suffering from ringworm, erisipola, and scabies. This is where our prisoners and our contagious infected patients should be disinfected, but the means at our disposal are inadequate. *"So much negligence and so much dirt. There was also an Austrian officer who was imprisoned in the morning, neither ill nor wounded".*

She goes directly to His Excellence General Pecori Giraldi, Commander of VIIth. Armed Corps.

**11<sup>th</sup>. Feb. 1916** - *Monastero, Hospital 075 of the Military Healthcare* (visited 2<sup>nd</sup>. Oct. 1915 defined as the reign of dirt). In the present date, she notes in her diary:

*“Director Cap. Bini. The Hospital is completely different. It seems a model Hospital.*

**6<sup>th</sup>. Nov. 1916** - *San Michele al Tagliamento, Hospital N°232 ( Prisoners).*

*Director Major Cantafora, Aggregated Samaritan Nurse of the Red Cross: Chiesa Emilia, Sacrestani Caterina, Zaniboli Angelina. More than 400 injured; Austrian, Slav, Rumanian, Three Turks, one Russian prisoners, six officers are in the villa. The hospital is well-kept and the injured are happy.*

**22<sup>nd</sup>. Jan 1917** - *Doberdò - Health Section 33.*

*The village is completely destroyed, only the facades of some houses remain. One of these has had the roof repaired so as to suffice the Section.*

*The doctor says that few injured and many who are have rheumatic fever come here. The fire on Doberdò is ongoing. Two or three days ago, a grenade fell on the Section and demolished it. (famous poem by G. D’Annunzio “Doberdò”).*

**14<sup>th</sup>. Feb. 1918** - *Naples - Orphanage for the children of those orphans of mother recalled.*

*A very useful ... which brings together male and female children aged between 3-12yrs., children of soldiers on the front who have lost their mothers or are abandoned. It is a nice place, but not appropriately located in the city-centre without a garden. The children are well-kept. The Committee is composed of: Ms. Circello, the Duchess of Ascoli, Countess Millo, Miss Haldon, Ms. Consiglio, Comm. Dell’Erba, the lawyer, Mr. Ricciuti, and Comm. Mattioli*

Let us take a step backwards in history for a moment. Nursing Schools increase during the Great War; they went from 68 in 1915 to 176 in 1918. At the beginning of the War the Italian Red Cross had mobilized 1,163 medical officers, 165 pharmacists,

1,080 Red Cross Volunteer nurses (referred to as ‘crocerossine’), 157 chaplains, 273 drivers, 5,750 career soldiers, 427 administration staff and 4,122 civilian coadjutors. At the end of the war those numbers had become: 2,539 medical officers, 318 pharmacists, 8,500 volunteer nurses (‘crocerossine’), 349 chaplains, 14,650 commissioned officers and soldiers and 42,000 civilian coadjutors.

These numbers are, perhaps, underestimated, but it is obvious that the greatest increase in numbers is with the volunteer nurses which was eight times the initial number. This was Elena, Duchess of Aosta’s ‘army’<sup>(23)</sup>.

At this point we wish to clarify something related to the Field-Camp Medical School of San Giorgio di Nogaro, also known as the ‘Castrensian’ University which was the work of Prof. Giuseppe Tusini and Helen of France<sup>(24)</sup>.

The Castrensian University came to be at the bequest of the Supreme Command (Gen. Cadorna) and the King, but its apostles were the Duke of Aosta who saw his men reduced by fifty per cent in four months of battle, and Helen of France together with Prof. Tusini (8<sup>th</sup>. March 1866 - 22<sup>nd</sup>. May 1940) Tusini, full-Professor of Clinical Surgery at the University of Modena, Lieut. Col. Red Cross Doctor, was nominated by the Supreme Command as the Director of the Medical Field-School of San Giorgio di Nogaro also known as the Castrensian University. This man, of whom we know very little (apart from his biography by Pietro Marogna), rarely appears in the official military reports or in those of the Red Cross. A Castrensian University had already been hypothesized by Napoleon I at Padua during 1897 (Ist. Italian Campaign). H.R.H. Helen of France, of whom Tusini was her personal doctor, certainly esteemed him. Tusini won against all the Italian Accademia who were opposed to such a university.

Accademia did not want to accept a new university at San Giorgio di Nogaro which was beyond their ‘competence’ since they viewed it as belonging more to the Military Powers than to Accademia. As an institution, the Castrensian University was visited and praised by various Italian and Foreign Commissions. But let us come to the students, since there is little to remark as regards the professors given that they were the *creme-de-la-creme* of academia of the period and that none of those who denigrated them ever dared to attack them! The V<sup>th</sup> and VI<sup>th</sup> yr. medical students from all over Italy were given the opportunity to follow courses at the

‘front’ and to qualify. These students are to be even more commended than their professors since they constitute young people who matured under hard conditions in the field of sorrow and were committed to patriotic ideals and humanitarianism. They cannot be considered as profiteers of a qualification ‘awarded to them’ since of the 3,000 enrolled only 500 (1/6<sup>th</sup>) were awarded their degree and few with honors, and 150 gave their lives for their country!

The dispute was, unwillingly, ‘settled’ when Nogaro became part of the University of Padua and the Rector and the Dean of the Medical Faculty of Padua (which could not have been and did not want to be excluded) became the Rector and the Dean, guarantors for San Giorgio di Nogaro. Among the other merits of Tusini to be recognized are the divisions of Paediatrics, Gynaecology, Neurology and Psychiatry which also benefitted the civilian population.

Tusini (1866-1940), a native of Sarzana, achieved numerous honors and was a Senator of the Kingdom of Italy until his death. He was an officer of the Red Cross, as was his assistant and biographer Pietro Marogna, and Dr. Annibale Orani, Italian Red Cross Ten. Comm, previously secretary of the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery of the University of Turin and Under-Secretary for the Ministry of Education, who was the Administrative Director of San Giorgio. But San Giorgio di Nogaro was very close to the front and with the ‘undoing’ of Caporetto (24<sup>th</sup>. October 1917) everything came to an end. The Castrensian University had functioned only in 1916 and 1917. San Giorgio di Nogaro was, nonetheless, a glory of the Italian Red Cross.



**Fig. 2:** A noi, tra bende, fosti di carità l’ancella....

Morte fra noi ti colse ....

Resta tra noi sorella

*To us amidst the bandages, you were the angel of mercy*

*Death plucked you from amongst us ....*

*Stay with us sister*

The Duchess of Aosta received a Silver Medal for Military Honors on 15<sup>th</sup>. March 1917 and when the war ended in a message to the volunteer nurses she referred to them as “Sisters of Mercy” a term

previously used by her husband when the Silver Medal was conferred.

Side by side with many other soldiers, at the centre of the first step of the Cemetery of Redipuglia, is the tomb of a Red Cross volunteer nurse, Margherita Parodi, with a short poetic phrase which the soldiers invite her to remain with them in death as in life (Fig. 2).

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#### *Acknowledgements*

*The authors wish to thank: Mr. Grant Mitchell, Director of the Library and Archives Unit of the International Red Cross Federation and co-worker Mrs. Melanie Blondin, for providing us with the wonderful Proceedings of the Cannes Medical Conference.*

*Special thanks go to our colleague Prof. Elizabeth Guerin, Ph.D., English Language Learning-Teaching Methodology, Dep SCIFOPSI, School of Humanities and Educational Sciences, University of Florence, Florence (I) for her valuable contribution to the English version of this work.*

*This article is devoted to H.R.H Prince Amedeo of Savoia Vth Duke of Aosta and his wife H.R.H Princess Silvia of Savoia Duchesse of Aosta.*

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