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The international expansion of the Rotary Organization after Second World War; internationally

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In 1936, after the recovery from the earlier depression Rotary had 1004 clubs and 170 000 members.

The Second World War stopped the further development of new countries to explore. In Germany in 1937 the first German bans of Rotary were given and in the end of the year all 42 German clubs returned their charter to RI, rather than compromise their ideals. The year before Spain had banned the 36 clubs, who then were shot down. Even the clubs in Italy and Austria were closed. Japan invaded China and closed the clubs there. As the war erupted 484 clubs and 16 700 members were wiped off the rolls of Rotary. Some clubs however continued to meet in the same form but secretly and not using a reference to Rotary. Some members had to pay a high price when executed for their deviation.

Even the internal development had a drawback. After the end of the war, ten countries in East Europe were closed behind the Iron Curtain. Also Germany and Spain was dismissed from the organization. Many Rotary Clubs did however after the war remarkable efforts to support the build up of society.

By 1945 there was 5 441 clubs with 247 212 male members. Paul Harris, founder of RI, died on the 27th of January 1947.

Rotary continued to grow world wide and after the dramatic political changes in Central- and Eastern Europe Rotary has been able to reestablish its position in those countries. Clubs have even been chartered in former Soviet, today's Russia, where clubs did not exist before. The first clubs to open in the new countries and states were in June 1989 in Budapest and Warsaw.

It is interesting for us as an International RC with a different meeting language than the language spoken in the country where we operate to recognize the foundation of host districts for the new countries. Rotary has to move forward and adapt new ideas. I presume that the most important change was in 1989 when the male only requisite was dropped.

Reflecting society in 1905, the organization had been limited to male members and remained so officially until 1989, when the Council on Legislation, Rotary's parliament, voted to eliminate the male-only provision, opening up membership to qualified women across the world (though the U.S. women Rotarians began to appear during the 1986-1987 Rotary year). Today, there are approximately 145,000 women Rotarians worldwide, many of them serving in leadership roles.

In July 1997 RI had 28 736 clubs in 521 districts over 157 countries and 34 geographical areas and the cumulative number of all members of the world was 1 213 748. Today we count 32 000 clubs in more than 200 countries and about the same number of members; 1,2 M.

This is a development that Paul Harris back in 1905 never could have dreamt about even if he was a visionary person the way he acted. The development shows the inherent strength of the organization.

Rotary served as the model for other service clubs; 1915 in Kiwanis International was founded and in 1917 Lions International, today the largest of the kind with Rotary as the second.

It can be worthwhile to mention what The Houston Chronicle wrote in 1919 after a visit by Paul Harris: **"He organized a strange kind of club, from which men get nothing but actually pay for the privilege of doing good"**.