



Christiane Reimann 1888 - 1979

The lady behind the "Nobel Prize" in nursing

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Christiane Reimann 1888-1979. The lady behind the "Nobel Prize" in nursing.
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FOREWORD

Christiane Reimann, Executive Secretary of the International Council of Nurses from 1922 to 1934, was a highly educated nurse, an uncompromising personality, and a visionary pioneer. With an almost superhuman effort she headed the reconstruction of ICN after the First World War, spending a large part of her own personal fortune to reach her goal. ICN remained very close to her heart, and in her will she founded a fund that would finance the most distinguished award in international nursing, the Christiane Reimann Prize. It is awarded every four years at the ICN Congress. The Christiane Reimann Prize was awarded for the first time at the ICN Congress in 1985, and the first recipient was Virginia Henderson in the ensuing line of distinguished nurses.

A special reason for the Danish Nurses' Organization to mark the occasion is the fact that 2013 sees the 150th anniversary of professional nursing in Denmark. 150 years ago, the Danish Deaconess Foundation and with it the first systematic nursing education was founded. And 100 years ago, one of the icons in Danish nursing was appointed the first matron of the new and modern Bispebjerg Hospital in Copenhagen. Charlotte Munck was the first matron in Denmark in accordance with Florence Nightingale's principles for nursing management and education, and her hospital became a Danish paragon of leadership within nursing and nursing education. Furthermore, she was the highly esteemed president of the Danish Nurses' Organization from 1927 to 1932. Christiane Reimann entered the second class of nursing students at Bispebjerg Hospital, and Charlotte Munck soon spotted her potential and induced her to go to the United States after World War I to earn her Master of Arts at Teachers College. She was the first Danish nurse to acquire an academic degree.

Christiane Reimann was a highly intelligent and gifted woman and nurse, a cosmopolitan and benefactor to the advantage of international nursing. The Danish Nurses' Organization is proud to honour her with this biography.

Grete Christensen
President of the Danish Nurses' Organization



Christiane Reimann when she earned her Master of Arts at Teachers College, Columbia University in 1925 (Danish Museum of Nursing History)

Christiane Reimann (1888-1979), born in Denmark, was during the period 1922-34 a prominent personality in international nursing circles because of her remarkable and tireless efforts as Executive Secretary of the International Council of Nurses (ICN). On her death, she bequeathed a considerable fortune to a foundation from which an international nursing award should be presented at future ICN congresses. The Christiane Reimann Prize, also known as the Nobel Prize in nursing, was awarded for the first time in 1985. But who was Christiane Reimann and what characterized her life and work?

Daughter of the upper middle class

Christiane Reimann was born 6 May 1888. She grew up in an upper middle class environment in Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark. Her parents were Carl Christian Reimann (1853-1929), a stockbroker, and Margit Reimann (née Meisterlin 1863-1927). Her childhood and youth fell at a time when the Danish society was characterized by a strong attachment to the Danish national church - the Evangelical Lutheran Church - and by a patriarchal structure. That dictated the values and characteristics that were desirable in a woman. Prospects for a girl of the bourgeoisie were that she through her childhood acquired the virtues that enabled her to undertake the vocation determined by her gender: to become a wife, housewife and mother. A woman remained in her childhood home until she married. In other words, it was not at all popular for a woman of Christiane Reimann's standing to leave home to become a nurse, except as a respectable exigency plan in case the prospect of a suitable marriage should fail (Malchau 2000, Hammar 2000).

We do not know much about Christiane Reimann's childhood and upbringing, but her own account in the application for membership of the Danish Nurses' Organization in 1917 indicates that it was completely in accordance with contemporary bourgeois norms. In the application, she pointed out, "As a 16-year-old I passed the Main 4th Form Exam. From that time until my 25th year, I have, with the exception of approximately two years in Germany and England to learn the languages, lived in my home and taken lessons in singing, piano-playing, and music theory".¹



June 1914, Christiane Reimann and her class photographed with Matron, Charlotte Munk in the garden of Bispebjerg Hospital (Danish Museum of Nursing History)

From lady to nurse

Christiane Reimann grew up in an era when professional nursing became established. She was 25 years old when she inspired by the philanthropy of the time decided to become a nurse. Her family strongly opposed her decision, by no means finding nursing a suitable occupation. Her social class – the upper middle class – did not engage in that type of work. As described by herself: “When I decided to become a nurse, my parents were distraught; my uncle would not even shake hands with me,” A nurse is not a lady” (TFS 1960). Despite the resistance, she pursued her ambition, and in 1913 she was admitted as probationer at the recently opened Bispebjerg Hospital in Copenhagen. One of the pioneers in Danish nursing, Charlotte Munck (1876-1932), had just been appointed Matron at the hospital – the first appointment of that kind in Denmark. The position permitted Charlotte Munck to take initiatives that were epoch-making for the future development of Danish nursing (e.g. an organized three-year education). The inspiration for this she had picked up in America, where she had completed a nursing education at Presbyterian Hospital in New York 1906-09 (Koch 1941, Olesen 1994).²

Charlotte Munck thought that the qualifications of future nurses were important. She believed, as did her contemporaries, that personality and natural talents for nursing were the most important prerequisites, but she also thought that education mattered. Her attitude was that “a greater recruitment from the classes of culture would give the nursing profession a lift” (Koch 1941:75). With her cultivated personality, Christiane Reimann fell within this category (Kruse 1979:22). On completion of Christiane Reimann’s nurse education in 1916, Charlotte Munck stated that she, in time, was a candidate for a senior position.³ A statement that was followed up by practical action, as Charlotte Munck persuaded Christiane Reimann to further education in nursing. Since this was not possible in Denmark, it was decided that she should go to the United States. Charlotte Munck helped organize the studies and persuaded Christiane Reimann’s reluctant father to meet the costs (TFS1960).

Further education and working years

The First World War had just ended and it was difficult to get to the States. Nevertheless, Christiane Reimann travelled to New York in 1918 on the first passenger ship that departed from Copenhagen after the war. The passengers consisted mainly of business men and only a few women. It was not a pleasant voyage: “We were very worried about mines, of which there were still many, and about icebergs”. However, nothing dramatic happened (TFS 1960:273).

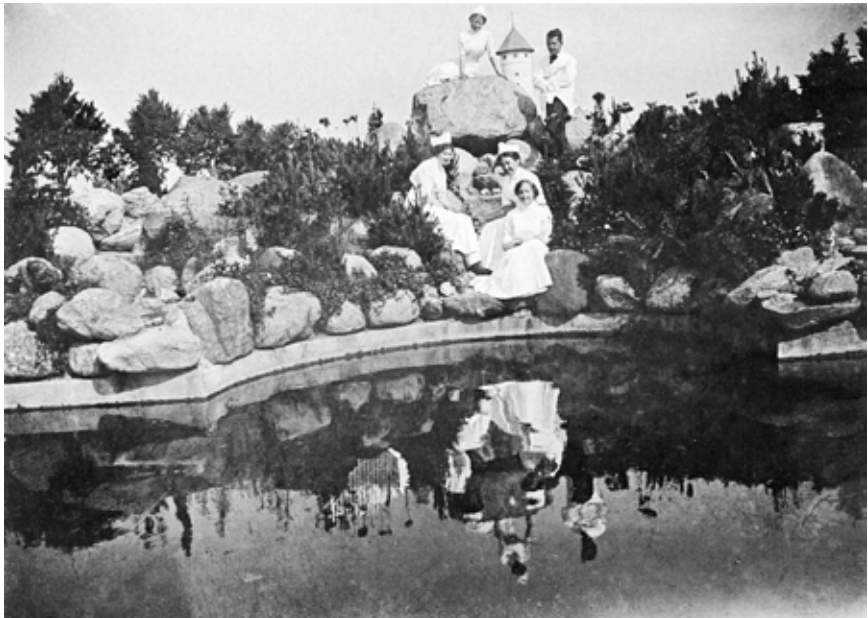


Christiane Reimann sitting in the back row as 4th from right. She has been photographed with her fellow students at Teachers College, Columbia University. The photo is not dated, so we do not know whether it is from her first or second study visit. (Danish Museum of Nursing History)

After arriving in New York, Christiane Reimann worked for a few months at Presbyterian Hospital, where Charlotte Munck had got her training. Then she worked as a district nurse at the Henry Street Settlement. She then enrolled at Teachers College, Columbia University, where nursing pioneers such as the first professor Mary Adelaide Nutting and the gifted Isabel Maitland Stewart were found in the internationally leading faculty (Apple 1992, Schorr and Kennedy 1999). They were, as Christiane Reimann put it, "great personalities who often invited me to visit their homes". The studies were an "exciting intellectual experience", and her personal efforts yielded results. In 1921 she graduated as a Bachelor of Science and in 1925 as a Master of Arts, and thus became the first Danish nurse with a graduate degree. Not until the end of the 1930s did others follow her example. 1921-23, between the two degrees, she returned to Denmark and was employed by Charlotte Munck as the first instruction nurse at Bispebjerg Hospital. It was not an easy job, as the head nurses were sceptical about the emphasis she put on theoretical education. For example, they found the subject bacteriology quite unnecessary. Her time in Denmark provided other possibilities for future work as Christiane Reimann was elected secretary for ICN in 1922 (TFS 1960).

International organization of nursing

Social progress and implementation of health reforms in the western societies during the 19th century meant that professional nursing became a reality towards the end of the century. The organization of nursing was another matter. Several national nursing organizations were established, in 1899 leading to a new dimension: the founding of an international nursing organization. That year, the International Council of Women met in London. One of the participants was the English nurse and suffragette Ethel Gordon Fenwick and other nurses active in the Women's Rights Movement. Immediately thereafter these nurses attended the Matrons' Council of Great Britain and Ireland where the International Council of Nurses, ICN, was founded. The initiative was taken by Ethel Fenwick who stated: "The nursing profession above all things requires organization; nurses, above all other things, need to be united" (Brush & Lynaugh 1999:1). The vision was that ICN should be a federation of national nursing organizations lead by and representing only nurses, independent of state control. A provisional committee was established, and the following year Ethel Fenwick was elected the first president. American Lavinia Dock became secretary; she too was active in the Women's Rights Movement (Brush & Lynaugh 1999, Stalknecht 1999).



From the garden of Bispebjerg Hospital (Danish Museum of Nursing History)

The Danish Nurses' Organization was allegedly not in agreement with the ICN connections to the Women's Rights Movement and that, along with other internal affairs, meant that Denmark did not become a member of ICN till 1909, but even then it was the first Scandinavian nursing association to join. In 1915, the president of the Danish Nurses' Organization, Henny Tscherning, became the first Danish president of ICN. She remained in office until 1922 because the war came across the usual election. During her presidency, Henny Tscherning did everything in her power to keep ICN, which was falling apart due to the war, together. She succeeded, and the organization was very grateful for the way she handled the difficult period when national interests and conflicts divided the individual member countries. At the request of Lavinia Dock, Henny Tscherning in 1922 succeeded to arrange a meeting of the Grand Council in Copenhagen where she passed on the presidency to Sophie Mannerheim from Finland. At the meeting, Christiane Reimann was elected Honorary Secretary, an unpaid honorary office. The choice reportedly came about because ICN's retiring secretary, Lavinia Dock, whom Christiane Reimann had met during her stay at Henry Street Settlement, recommended her for the post (Petersen 1990 and 1998, Wingender 1999).

For the next three years, Christiane Reimann handled these unpaid duties simultaneously with her work and studies. She was re-elected at the ICN congress in Helsinki in 1925 with the modification that she became the first paid secretary of the organization, titled Executive Secretary. She was based in Geneva, Switzerland, where, on her recommendation, ICN set up headquarters the same year (Bridges 1967, Brush & Lynaugh 1999).

Reconstruction, visualisation and manifestation of the ICN

Full of energy and enthusiasm, Christiane Reimann started reconstructing ICN that had nearly ceased to function during the First World War. She got the full use of her great work capacity and intelligence, and not least her language skills. She was a good choice for the post as she was professionally accomplished, internationally experienced, and at the same time capable of maintaining visions and being realistic. Meanwhile, her parents had died and left her a large personal fortune which she generously spent. A generosity that later became a problem for ICN (Kruse 1979).

Part of Christiane Reimann's time was spent following up on ICN's meetings, but her overriding goal was to highlight and mark ICN as an international voice of the nursing profession: "To make ICN a recognized international organization, nurses' international spokesman, an international centre for nursing and health care" (Kruse 1979:22). Christiane Reimann's way to pursue this goal can be described by three of her causes.

The first main goal was to establish an advisory service on nursing matters for governments and health authorities, and to establish partnerships with international organizations employing nurses or dealing with health issues such as the International Red Cross. In 1929, she began to collaborate with the International Labour Organization (ILO) which was created to promote peace, combat injustice and oppressive working conditions; a collaboration Ethel Fenwick greatly disapproved of. She found it outrageous that “a reputable and intellectual profession, such as the nursing profession, had any connection with a body like the ILO, which existed merely to ferment class warfare” (Bridges 1967:87). Only few on the board of directors supported Christiane Reimann, but undaunted she continued the collaboration. After her departure in 1934, it was interrupted and resumed only after the Second World War (Quinn 1989, Wingender 1999).



ICN Head quarters in Geneva 1926: The conference room (Danish Journal of Nursing 1926)

The second key issue was to keep in touch with ICN's member organizations and generally inspire nurses worldwide to unionize. To that end, Christiane Reimann travelled extensively, at her own expense visiting 20 European nurses' organizations between 1925 and 1927. Her policy bore fruit in as much as the number of member organizations rose from 13 to 29 during her twelve years as Executive Secretary. Furthermore, she was responsible for establishing international exchange programs for nurses (Kruse 1979, Quinn 1989).

The third main goal was an ICN journal. As early as 1922, Christiane Reimann took the initiative of publishing, at her own expense, ICN's first official periodical, *The Bulletin*. The name was changed in 1926 to *The ICN* and again in 1930 to the now

familiar *International Nursing Review*. Christiane Reimann was the editor of the journal and wrote most of the articles. For that purpose she founded and financed an extensive specialised library based in Geneva and lent books to nurses throughout the world (Malchau 2001 and 2007).

During her early years as Executive Secretary, Christiane Reimann implemented these issues. It was a remarkable achievement and quite understandable that the ICN Board of Directors in 1927 recognized her work as an “almost superhuman piece of work” (Brush & Lynaugh 1999:84). At the same meeting, Reimann asked whether the funds of the journal could be administered directly from headquarters in Geneva rather than by the treasurer in England. The treasurer, Dame Ellen Musson, and Ethel Fenwick both spurned the proposal even though they still accepted her financial support. The rejection was probably due to the fact that they would



From the ICN Headquarters in Geneva. Ethel Fenwick appears in the front row to the left, Christiane Reimann as no. 4 from the right side of the back row. Charlotte Munck, president of the Danish Nurses' Organization is standing to her left. The photo is undated. (Danish Museum of Nursing History)

maintain their own position of power – or at least limit the power of Christiane Reimann. It was certainly no insignificant position of power that Christiane Reimann by now had built for herself in ICN – she acted autocratically in many areas.

The explanation behind this development was that she held the post of secretary while she was a voting member of the ICN Board of Directors. That gave power. Furthermore, the organization was dependent on her personal funds. That did not make her any less powerful. Thus she had an ever-increasing influence on decision making in the organization, often in such a way that she took important decisions without consulting the board of directors. It was an increasing problem. “This was an uncomfortable, even unpalatable situation for some board members who felt ambivalent about Reimann’s role” (Brush & Lynaugh 1999:85). From Christiane Reimann’s point of view, she was within her rights to act as she did, especially as she personally covered the costs. But it was not that simple. The ladies on the board of directors were not “Mrs. Anyone”, which was emphasized in a statement by ICN’s former president, Margrethe Kruse⁴: “Christiane Reimann was certainly not “easy”, neither were the “matrons” and “directors” who then constituted the ICN Board of Directors. There were frictions, and Christiane Reimann was by nature uncompromising” (Kruse 1979:23).

Retirement with intermezzo and the road to Sicily

In the years that followed, Christiane Reimann’s effort in building up ICN was enormous. Despite their discrepancies, the board of directors greatly appreciated her work. Her reports clearly demonstrated the great responsibility she had assumed over the years. As expressed by Ethel Fenwick: “The secretary is in practice Secretary, Librarian, Field Secretary, Editor of the Journal (which is in itself a whole-time job) and many other officers” (Bridges 1967:90). It was therefore with deep regret, the Board of Directors at its meeting in 1933 received Christiane Reimann’s announcement that she, due to failing health, resigned from her post January 1 1934.⁵ However, her departure dragged on, but October 22 1934 she informed the president, Alicia Lloyd Still, that she withdrew from all her duties (Bridges 1967). ICN said an official goodbye in 1935 through the resolution: “The Committee wishes to record its appreciation of the devoted service given by Miss Reimann to the affairs of the ICN, especially in her relations with the National Associations in smaller countries. As Editor of the International Nursing Review she excelled. We hope that the relief from all work and responsibility will ultimately restore her to health” (Bridges 1967:93).

Christiane Reimann’s reason for her departure was ill health – apparently without further explanation. From various sources, it is believed, however, that her disagreements with the board of directors were of decisive importance. As described by Margrethe Kruse⁶: “One fine day it all caved in. She was accused of having “disorder in the accounts”; which she probably had. At least, she had spent

much more money than had entered the ICN account, but there was never a deficit" (Kruse 1979:23). Margrethe Kruse concludes that it was a bitter and disappointed Christiane Reimann, who left ICN. The question is whether this is true. Firstly, Reimann later left a fortune to ICN - it does not indicate bitterness. Secondly, she married in 1934, the same year as she left ICN. But for some reason, she kept the event a secret. In the mentioned resolution, she was referred to Miss Reimann and not Mrs. A marriage would indeed be a convincing reason to leave ICN.

Christiane Reimann married in August 1934. It was announced in the Danish Journal of Nursing in October 1934: "In August, Executive Secretary of the International Council of Nurses in Geneva, Miss Christiane Reimann, entered into marriage with Herr. Dr. Wilhelm F.C. Alter" (TFS 1934:483).

A few months later the same message appeared in The American Journal of Nursing with a little more information about the couple, including that they would settle in Syracuse in Sicily (AJN 1934:1176). In the German biographical nursing lexicon, it appears that Dr. Alter was from Germany. Born in 1875, he obtained medical degree in 1900 and a few years later also the medical doctorate. He specialized as a psychiatrist, had a long career as hospital administrator, and he was the editor of *Nosokomeion*, the official organ of the International Hospital Association. He was dedicated to his work for the nursing cause, and his research centered on the working conditions and health of hospital nurses. Privately, he left a marriage behind him with Elisabeth née Erdmannsdorf, but whether he was a widower or divorced, we do not know. He settled in Hessen in August 1932, where he stayed until his death February 1943 (Wolff 2004).

The biographical data show that there were many good reasons for the paths of Dr. Alter and Christiane Reimann to cross. But there is no mention of it - and nothing about their marriage. It is an unsolved mystery for posterity. There is no evidence of this particular marriage besides the messages and a mention by Margrethe Kruse a few months after Christiane Reimann's death. In a letter she referred to a photograph from a hospital congress in Vienna in 1931 where Dr. Alter allegedly was portrayed⁷. Here the trail ends. It has not been possible to trace any further information about him - not even his nationality. The fact remains that the marriage and eventual divorce were passed over in silence. But why? Was it a marriage of convenience? Were there insuperable political differences between the spouses? It was after all a time when National Socialism took its grip on Europe. Was it a mistake to be forgotten as quickly as possible?



From the second International Hospital Congress in Vienna 1931
(Danish Museum of Nursing History)

As far as we know, Christiane Reimann remained single the rest of her life under her maiden name. The marriage was evidently an intermezzo in her life. After her departure from ICN, she went to Sicily to take up residence, as reported by the American Journal of Nursing. Here she bought Villa Fergotta, a beautiful but dilapidated property outside Syracuse. The house was sequestered by the British during the Second World War, but she was allowed to keep a couple of rooms in return for working as a private secretary for the commander. The war also cut her off from Denmark and the funds she had there, and to earn a living she began to cultivate the surrounding soil. She planted thousands of orange and lemon trees, and until her death she managed the groves she had established (TFS 1960, Sgandurra 2000).

Christiane Reimann tirelessly maintained her interest in ICN. She followed developments closely in the years to come and, true to form, she was always ready to give her opinion and to praise or criticise (Kruse 1979).

In 1967, Alice Girard, president of ICN, received a letter from Christiane Reimann "In the letter she offered her house, grounds and the orange and lemon groves she owned to ICN, the house to be used for a "rest" or holiday home for nurses, and her fortune to set up a very prestigious international award. She saw the latter as a type of Nobel Prize for nursing, and there were conditions attached to the legacy, one of which was that the house must be maintained for the stipulated use, and could not be sold." (Quinn 1989:128).

In ICN, the generous offer did not stir unconditional joy. The offer of the award was one thing - that was happily accepted, but it was quite another thing to take over property in a state of disrepair. It was, and would be in the future, an expensive affair for ICN (Quinn 1989).



Christiane Reimann in the garden of Villa Fergotta, Sicily (Danish Journal of Nursing 1960)

President Alice Girard and Executive Director Sheila Quinn travelled to Sicily to discuss the terms with the almost 80-year-old Christiane Reimann. She was “a very determined lady who knew exactly what she wanted” (Quinn 1989:128), meaning that she insisted on the conditions regarding the conveyance of her properties. ICN, on the other hand, claimed that the costs were too high - they could not leave such a burden to future generations. The discussion between Christiane Reimann and ICN continued for the next decade. When Adele Herwitz became Executive Director in 1970, she continued the negotiations where the others left off. By 1976 she was completely exhausted by the ongoing and never-ending discussion, which she described as something that eventually resembled “a bad Italian opera except that I don’t know how to sing and can’t seem to get off the stage” (Brush & Lynaugh 1999:163). The parties reached an agreement the following year. Christiane Reimann decided to donate her house and the surrounding groves to the University of Syracuse. At the same time she bequeathed part of her fortune to a foundation. The interest from this was to be used, after her death, to fund a nursing award wearing her name: the Christiane Reimann Prize (Quinn 1989).

Christiane Reimann died April 12 1979 at the age of 92. She remained in Syracuse, where she is buried. With her death, her testamentary provision for a nursing award was met. The framework and conditions for the award were laid down the following years by ICN in collaboration with Christiane Reimann’s lawyers. In order to increase the return of the fund, it was decided that the prize be presented for the first time at the ICN Congress in 1985 and thereafter every fourth year at ICN congresses. The guideline for nomination for the award was: “Nominations may be submitted by individuals or groups of individuals, with the exception of ICN Board of Directors, standing committee and staff members (including a national nurses’ association) may sponsor only one nomination”.

Conditions to be fulfilled for the award were: “The prize is to be awarded to one or more registered nurses (authorised by the state to practice nursing at the first level) who has/have, during the years immediately before the prize award, made considerable effort either within the nursing profession - through research or practical nursing for the benefit of mankind - or the nursing profession”.⁸

The Christiane Reimann Prize was awarded for the first time in 1985. It went to Virginia Henderson from the United States. It has since been awarded to Dame Nita Barrow from Barbados in 1989, Dame Sheila Quinn from the United Kingdom in 1993 and as a shared award to Hildegard Peplau from the USA and Mo-Im Kim from Korea in 1997 (Brush & Lynaugh 1999). 2005 the prize went to Dr Margretta Madden Styles, USA, and in 2009 to Dr Máximo A. González Jurado, Spain.



Virginia Henderson receives the Christiane Reimann Prize 1985. Here she is seen with Kirsten Stallknecht (left), President of the Danish Nurses' Organization 1968-1996, Jette Molin, County Constituency President and Eva Holm Christensen, Executive Secretary of the Danish Nurses' Organization (privately owned)

An impression on nursing, in the past, present, and future

This is the story behind Christiane Reimann, the person and her prize. It is the story of one of the international nursing pioneers. It is the story of the “lady” who defied her parents to become a nurse. She probably never imagined that her choice would lead her into an international nursing community. But it so happened that Christiane Reimann was in the right place at the right time with her talents, namely when ICN needed a person who would untiringly follow the goal of building up a well-functioning international nursing organization. Christiane Reimann left her thorough impression on the organization at the time. Today, her name is on our lips each time her prize is awarded to a nurse who, like her, leads the development of the international nursing community.

October 2002, Christiane Reimann was inducted in the Hall of Fame at Teachers College Columbia University (Courier in 2002 and 2003 INR 2002).



The Diploma from the induction of Christiane Reimann in the Nursing Hall of fame at Teachers College Columbi University

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Notes

- ¹ Christiane Reimann's "Enrolment form" to the Danish Nurses' Organization dated 14 January 1917 (Archives of the Danish Nurses' Organization).
- ² Charlotte Munck was moreover president of the Danish Nurses' Organization 1927-1932. She succeeded Henny Tscherring in this position (Wingender 1999).
- ³ Charlotte Munck wrote in 1917 in an enrolment recommendation for Christiane Reimann as an ordinary member of the Danish Nurses' Organization: "Will, with time, be material for a superior position" (Archives of the Danish Nurses' Organization).
- ⁴ Margrethe Kruse (1908-1983) was throughout her working life very committed to the international nursing community. Through the years she held several positions in the Danish Nurses' Organization, including First Secretary. She was president of ICN 1969 -1973 (Wingender 1999).
- ⁵ Christiane Reimann's announcement of her retirement in 1933 resulted in ICN reorganising their head office in such a way that the Executive Secretary was no longer a member of the Board of Directors. In addition, the Executive Secretary should have assistance from a number of secretaries at the head office. Finally, the journal, International Nursing Review, was separated from the head office, and a full-time editor was employed (Bridges 1967).
- ⁶ It is presumed that Margrethe Kruse was a personal friend of Christiane Reimann.
- ⁷ Warm thanks to Dr. Mathilde Hackmann in Hamburg, Germany, who has helped trace the German-language source material about Dr. Alter.
- ⁸ <http://www.icn.ch/awards.htm> - 19-02-99.

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