

IN GENEVA

Resignation

Mr. Carl J. Burckhardt, member of the ICRC, has recently asked to be relieved of his duties. This resignation was announced by Mr. S. A. Gonard, the President, at a plenary session of the International Committee of the Red Cross, on January 6, 1965. A ceremony took place on that occasion at which were present many members of the ICRC, directors and heads of Services, as well as some who had worked especially closely with Mr. Burckhardt.

In an address, extracts of which are given below, Mr. Gonard first of all recalled the decisive influence exercised by Mr. Burckhardt on the ICRC's evolution. He expressed the International Committee's profound regret, but made it known that it had appointed Mr. Burckhardt honorary member and he was pleased that the Geneva institution could thus still be able to count on his presence and support.

... "A man of action with a large and wide vision was needed to develop the mechanism of relief until it achieved the importance it acquired at the end of hostilities. You were that far-seeing man of action and organizer to whom countless human beings and so many families owe their survival from their wounds, from prison or still more, their escape from death through starvation.

You knew how to adapt the real and legal scope of the ICRC's activities by extending them on a world scale, thereby enabling it to take a decisive turning in its history. For our Committee, it was also a splendid proof of vitality to be able to adapt itself so rapidly, under your impulse, to these new horizons and measures.

Whilst until then the ICRC's action had been restricted to land, you engaged the Committee on the high seas and gradually assembled a fleet of forty ships which sailed through perils, year after year, under

the Red Cross flag, transporting relief which it obtained from other continents and as far away as the Antipodes. Its distribution necessitated the use of a considerable number of railway lines and when these had been severely damaged by bombing, relief supplies were transported by road, whose total value amounted to three thousand million francs.

The setting up of a transportation and distribution organization of such a size, as well as the duty of insisting on the observance of the old Geneva and Hague Conventions, in order to obtain authorization for our delegates to enter prisoner-of-war camps demanded a series of difficult negotiations, particularly delicate diplomatic overtures, in view of the unleashing of passionate hatred between States and individuals and also sometimes of the unusual attitude of those engaged.

Amongst many other approaches and discussions, you initiated joint action by the ICRC and the League with the creation in 1941 of the mixed relief commission to aid civilian populations in countries laid waste by the war. Other more arduous negotiations with the European totalitarian States of the period resulted, thanks to your firmness, in an amelioration in the condition of prisoners and detainees. From the Allies, whose representatives were also bitter in discussion, you obtained several important exceptions to the rigorous blockade they maintained. On behalf of Greece, which retains feelings of lasting and deep gratitude to you, you negotiated the Rome Agreements of 1943 with Sweden and with the endorsement of the German and Italian governments of occupation. These Agreements set up the Administrative Commission of relief for Greece, which supplied regular aid to 1,300,000 persons during the occupation and saved them from famine.

If each one of these diplomatic actions, and how many others could I not mention, possessed its own significance and humanitarian purpose, it would appear to me that, taken as a whole, they would reach an even higher symbolical level.

In all these dealings in which the ICRC negotiated from State to State, you introduced the International Committee to a certain extent into international law, since the ICRC has been recognized not only as a subject of international law in the same way as States, not as an abstract creation of theoretical law, but on the contrary as a valuable, effective and voluntary factor in positive international law with which one had henceforth to reckon" . . .

Mr. Carl Burckhardt then spoke. He said how pleased he was, as honorary member, to be able to keep contact with the work of the Red Cross to which he was so deeply attached. He recalled, in particular, the years of war during which he had the privilege of working closely with Max Huber and he expressed all his gratitude to his colleagues and close associates for having helped him in a practical task which continued to increase since 1939. A task, he said, which certainly required much audacity but also constant prudence :

"The ICRC's very nature demands action which is prudent, appropriate to the circumstances but decided and rapid. Our tasks, which are brought about by the world's misfortunes, reach us in successive waves and are sometimes hurled by the tempest. Certainly, we have to conform to a doctrine which we must defend and we must diffuse its fundamental principles which give life to the Geneva Conventions. But, whatever the extent of the idea animating us, for the ICRC it will always be essential to carry out relief actions, of a moral nature first of all through the Agency and its various sections, then material actions which are ever further extended and which reached a decisive stage when, during the course of the last war, we extended our efforts to the civilian population. We are a relief organization and not a supreme court of law, nor are we the upholders of some lay religion. We well know how difficult it is to give aid when one has to traverse partisan passions or pass between the victors and the vanquished. In all circumstances we will only know our fellow-beings who are suffering. It is for this very reason that we should not assume upon ourselves the right to condemn or that of raising our voices in vain protests . . ."