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THE HISTORIC MISSION OF THE RED CROSS

The International Review has already mentioned in a previous issue the lecture delivered by Mr. Rodolfo Olgiati, member of the ICRC, at Berne University in June 1963. The occasion was the ceremony in commemoration of the Red Cross Centenary and we recalled the main themes of the event. Similarly, it was also on the occasion of our movement's anniversary that Mr. Olgiati made a speech on September 1, at the Wasserkirche, in Zurich. He analysed that same evolutionary process which gave rise to the structure of international humanitarian law of which the Geneva Conventions of 1949 are the finest positive expression. We quote below from Mr. Olgiati's Zurich lecture in which, by way of introduction, he recalls that the idea of the Red Cross was born on the battlefield and that for this reason it is associated in men's minds with war.

Nowadays, men understand that war could well wipe out the human race. At a time, therefore, when a great part of national effort everywhere and of international efforts especially, are devoted to the maintenance of peace, it seems appropriate to define the position of the Red Cross.

Although the founders of the Red Cross looked upon war as a scourge, they did not make a direct assault upon it. But by championing the cause of humanity, they made a decisive contribution towards establishing, at least partially, the idea of the rule of law in international relations, thus morally condemning war in no uncertain manner. If there is a contradiction between this condemnation and the international regulation of the evils of war, the fault must not be attributed to the Red Cross, but to human nature. The task of the Red Cross is to alleviate suffering.

Ideological war—the consequences of which affect us all—sets the Red Cross a particularly serious problem, for it is human life which is at issue, the protection of which is the very purpose of the Red Cross. It is this kind of conflict which results in total war.

As an example of the confusion arising from the ideological wars of our times, we may mention difficulties which occurred when prisoners of war in Korea were being repatriated. According to Article 118 of the Third Geneva Convention, “prisoners of war shall be released and repatriated without delay after the cessation of hostilities”. Although the Conventions were not in force at the time of the Korean War, the belligerents had declared their intention to be guided by the humanitarian principles on which they are based. Thus, during negotiations for repatriation of prisoners, both sides explicitly invoked this Article 118. On the one hand, this article was given a narrow, purely literal interpretation, construed to mean that POWs could be compelled to accept repatriation. On the other hand, it was held that Article 118 aimed solely at preventing the detaining Power from holding POWs after hostilities and not at compelling a prisoner of war to accept repatriation against his will.

It can be realized, in this connection, that the Geneva Conventions are founded *inter alia* on the idea that for all those taking part, fighting is limited to the line of fire and that behind this front line the combatants remain steadfastly loyal to the cause for which they are fighting; in such cases prisoners of war look upon their return to their homeland as the greatest of bounties and once home they are welcomed back to the fold of the national community. Nowadays, however, when ideologies are in violent conflict, the real struggle is not always at the firing line, but in the minds and hearts of the combatants.

Already in the First World War, the ICRC was several times obliged to intervene to prevent prisoners of war from being compelled to take up arms against their own country.

Thus, as in these times of struggles involving conflicting ideologies, certain precepts have been inhibited, or their values subverted, many achievements which are humanitarian in scope, even though embodied in codified law, are in danger of being deprived of significance and even, in extreme cases, of becoming harmful.

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Has the Red Cross fulfilled its historic mission? Is it still prompted by the idealism which inspired its founders and is it still guided by their realism and wise moderation? It is ready to pursue its action on behalf of those who are defenceless, who are in need, and this irrespective of the opinion of authority. Has it always been sure of its ground when urging on the powers that be, measures which it knows will not be welcomed? Does it, as in the past, abide by the principles of universality and non-discrimination, even though, since the Second World War, the world seems divided against itself?

Born of the generosity of a few, and developed into the sturdy institutions which it is today, the Red Cross has not always or completely fulfilled this historic mission. It has, at least, in innumerable ways, strengthened conviction in this mission during its first century of existence. The Red Cross of yesteryear has passed on this mission to us in the world of today and it is no mean task with which we are entrusted. Indeed, for the Red Cross the situation today has hardly changed in principle from that which confronted Henry Dunant, who was considered a Utopian at the time, and the other members of the Committee of Five. It is true that the Red Cross institutions have developed since then; they have acquired general recognition, but much has yet to be done before the very idea of the Red Cross is triumphant. It may perhaps be salutary for its development that the period of optimism it has experienced, an optimism often too easily aroused, be followed by that stark reality which constitutes its daily task, so that it should be neither flushed with success nor discouraged by failure. The aphorism by William of Orange, the liberator of the Netherlands, is particularly applicable to the Red Cross: "Hope is not essential to trying, nor success to perseverance."
