

CHRONICLE

Fridtjof NANSEN

On the 10th October, 1961, the Centenary of the birth of Fridtjof Nansen was celebrated throughout the world and his adventurous life was recalled from his first journeys in the polar regions up to the time when, still an indefatigable traveller, he devoted all his energies to the problem of prisoners and refugees.

He was certainly a great explorer of the arctic regions and his exploits on the vessel Fram (Forward—a wonderfully suitable name) remain legendary. He was also an extremely enthusiastic authority on oceanography and a historian of the early Vikings, but his most fitting title is that of philanthropist which he merited more than anyone. At a time when problems are often resolved by force, he showed by his everyday actions the power of the mind and the way in which a man with all his faith can profoundly stir the hearts of men and nations.

In April 1920 the League of Nations authorized him to study the relief measures to be taken in favour of prisoners of war and for hastening their repatriation. As he himself declared before the Assembly of the League of Nations in November of the same year, a means of repatriation was already being organized by the International Committee of the Red Cross, to whom he then paid a very fine tribute.¹ Having seen it in action he gave it all his support and, following his nomination as Special High Commissioner for Repatriation, he established the closest co-operation with the ICRC.

From then on he embarked upon the great adventure which was to occupy him completely: organizing the repatriation of prisoners of war who, in their hundreds of thousands, were waiting in despair for the moment of return to their own country. But when a heart becomes so attentive to despair, misery and loneliness of every sort cry out to it

¹ See *Revue internationale*, December, 1920.

for help. The situation of the refugees, too, was dramatic, and in February 1921, the International Committee of the Red Cross asked the League of Nations to set up a High Commission which would deal with the amelioration of the plight of Russian refugees, with particular regard to their legal status and the organization of their means of existence through work. Some months later Nansen was nominated High Commissioner of the League of Nations for Russian refugees and in this work he co-operated closely with the two organizations which had already begun a relief action, the International Committee and the Save the Children International Union. Later, in 1924, his mandate was extended to Armenian refugees, then, in 1928, to Assyrian, Assyrian-Chaldean and Turkish refugees.

Nansen spared neither time nor trouble, going to every place where his presence might signify help and hope. His practical approach served him under all circumstances. There was a terrible famine in Russia during 1921 and 1922 and he was detailed to organize a practical assistance work with which, once again, ICRC delegates were associated. Everywhere he observed that stateless refugees, deprived of their passports, could no longer travel and, therefore, could not go to countries where it would have been possible for them to find work. He immediately proposed a novel solution : the passport bearing his name, recognized by more than fifty countries and which marked a return to a new life for numerous refugees.

The Red Cross world joined whole-heartedly in the tribute to Fridtjof Nansen on the 10 October, 1961. A meeting took place in Oslo, which afforded an opportunity to remember this famous Norwegian who, in 1922, received the Noble Peace Prize, and on this occasion, the Nansen Medal was conferred on King Olaf of Norway to honour both the sovereign's personal contribution to the international work of aid to refugees and the long-standing Norwegian tradition of aid to refugees. The International Review cannot do better than reproduce an article originally published in French in its columns in May 1930, at the time of Nansen's death¹. Written by Mr. Edouard-Aug. Frick, a former Delegate General of the ICRC, it describes in a most moving manner the personality and the work of a man who remains one of the great figures of our time.

(Editorial Note)

¹ Translated by the Translation Section of the ICRC.

In memory of Fridtjof NANSEN

As the afternoon was fine—the Nordic spring has a poignant softness about it—he wanted to sit down on the balcony of his house which overlooked the garden and the fjord. His daughter-in-law who was near him heard him say suddenly : “ How good it is to have planted these lime-trees in the garden . . . , their greenness is so fresh that it seems to prolong the spring ”. Then, as he appeared to nod forward, she went to him and lifted his head which had sunk to his chest. He reopened his eyes, gently kissed the forehead in front of him, said : “ Oh, yes ” and died.

I remember my first journey to Lysaker. The International Committee of the Red Cross had undertaken the enormous task of supporting and hastening the repatriation of prisoners-of-war : Russians from Austria and Germany to Russia; Germans, Austrians, Serbs, Rumanians, Italians etc. from Russia to their respective countries, often to new countries.

From the beginning the financial question was a redoubtable and seemingly insoluble problem. It was then that the League of Nations intervened and decided to ask Dr. Nansen to direct this great work of repatriation on its behalf.

The first feeling of the men already engaged on this work was one of apprehension : were they going to bureaucratize our enthusiasm ; would they act as quickly and as forcefully as circumstances demanded ?

As soon as we saw the great Nansen we were reassured ; his only thought was to serve well the work already begun, to give to it all that his name, his personal influence with Governments of different countries, his energy and his work could bring to it which would be of use.

He, who had remained apart from the struggle, lost no time in pointing out the horrors of war or the risks of victory ; he wanted

to act and act unceasingly. Nothing corresponded more directly to the intentions of the International Committee of the Red Cross and there was no occasion during the long campaign of repatriation and the subsequent effort of helping starving Russia and refugees, when Nansen did not reply immediately when he was asked for the support of his word, his pen or his active co-operation.

Need I say that he immediately conquered the hearts of those who, for ten years, were to work for him ? He possessed that gift of raising men to the level of his confidence in showing it to them, completely and absolutely, as the trusting confidence of a child.

Yet, few men know what it cost him to devote so many years to these humanitarian activities when, at his home at Lysaker his scientific work was waiting, which represented for him the life-work which he valued the most. It was nothing in his eyes to sacrifice his money, his well-being and his magnificent health, which he never spared, but not to carry through research on wind patterns, on currents, on problems of arctic navigation, that was the true sacrifice which he nevertheless offered to prisoners, those starving in the Ukraine and the Volga, to refugees of every sort and, finally, to the constant effort to introduce into the vast assembly of the League of Nations a breath of real unselfishness and altruism.

What did he look like ? Those who saw him will never forget the long silhouette to which the power of the head gave an impression of thinness ; in reality he was big and strong without an ounce of superfluous flesh on him, built to last a hundred years. One could recognize from afar his wide brimmed soft hat which he wore at a jaunty angle and his clothes, which often seemed too small for him, like those of an adolescent grown too quickly. He had a most magnificent head with a particularly vital form of thinness which gave great prominence to the bone structure. He had close-set hair, a Viking moustache and beneath the large clear forehead, eyes so blue, so alive, so frank that they revealed at a glance his great and generous heart, always ready to suffer injustice and baseness, to smile at the weak, to be enthusiastic with the young, to love the adventurous life of a crusader for good. He had the wonderful hands of a man who knew how to do everything, to construct and to repair, without forgetting how to be gentle. They moved with that tranquil firmness which security

inspires and which maintained that strength and clarity in his writing.

A film of his life should be made for the children of today and tomorrow, which would perpetuate the lesson which he taught us so many times and which can be summed up in three words : willpower, unselfishness, confidence.

We were all sceptical about the possibility of obtaining funds for repatriation. He went straight away to London, and saw members of the Government who were impressed by his reputation as an explorer and a scholar. He compelled these ever busy statesmen to consider the vastness of the problems about which he was telling them, a thing which nobody other than he could have done. He obtained promises and they knew that he would work unceasingly to see that they were kept. He recognized the importance of the Press. He interested the journalists in what he wanted to undertake and in a simple manner, like all those who achieve important results, he repeated to all those he saw a few simple ideas which they would not forget.

When it was a question of aiding Russia he left no stone unturned : journeying on the distant Volga, taking films, conferences, special appeals and appeals to the League of Nations. In all this he exerted his willpower and even today we are astonished at the results obtained.

Very few people could resist him, without doubt because of that shining unselfishness, the virtue of his which compels our respect more than any other.

I wonder if even those who thought they knew him realized that he lived an extremely modest life in his far-off Norway, that he brought his children up the hard way and that nothing gave him greater pleasure than to do himself the jobs of work in the garden and the garage. It is not generally known that he was so scrupulous in spending on himself the least portion of the considerable funds placed at his disposal for his work, that he frequently made long and uncomfortable journeys travelling second class. It is not generally known that this man, who sometimes could have done with a little more comfort around him, gave away all the money which came to him (including his Nobel Prize) in order, as he put it, to be able to accept with a clear conscience gifts such

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as that of the old Dane who, one day, sent him everything he possessed because he had been so deeply touched by Nansen's appeal on behalf of the starving.

Unselfishness and modesty, those were the two sources of his indefatigable youth and of that magnificent confidence in life and his contemporaries which he retained to the end. It was the constant theme of his talks and his books.

In substance, what he said to his readers was : Do not believe all the apostles of pessimism and anxiety. Life is beautiful, it is a magnificent adventure in which one conquers oneself by pursuing the most difficult objectives and by devoting oneself to the most arduous tasks, in seeking amidst the wastage of circumstances and the human race the silver lining from which light is suddenly diffused. Believe in the result of the struggle being waged, even if it escapes your notice.

Is not the confidence of the man who serves well, with all his strength, similar to that sense of well-being which perfect physical power gives ? Is not confidence the very root of true friendship between men, the most certain element of social balance, our obscure but constant defence against the forces of injustice, baseness and death ? And surely did he not, throughout his life, confidently follow through every work begun to its successful conclusion and did he not maintain right to the end that spirit of optimism which comes from a perennially young heart ; and that, surely, prolongs the springtime for us and for all those who still see it from afar in all our gardens, just as the lime-trees in his Norwegian orchard did for him on the day he died.

There is no need to ask ourselves what remains of the great Nansen, because we see him too well.

In the discouraging aftermath of war, which has more or less hit every one of us, he symbolizes the declaration of true youth and true faith. Just as he travelled alone or with a few friends across the vast tracks of Greenland or the moving ice-floes of the Pole, he was not afraid to stand up alone among all the doctors of politics and sociology of the time and affirm the necessity of immediate, beneficial and unselfish action wherever a cry of distress drew attention to misery which needed to be alleviated.

The generous ideas which were in the air, such as disarmament, economic liberty and ever closer ties between nations, always found in him a certain champion, and his powerful voice, accustomed to the vast, cold and echoless spaces, shouted them above all the pedantic arrangements of the diplomats and the compromises of the politicians.

None of that is lost ; forces thus exerted live on in the hearts and minds of men ; they now form part of our heritage of hope. Even now, side by side, with the grief of having lost him, there remains with us the encouragement of his shining example, the reproach and the appeal of his kindly eyes and that phrase which we shall always hear in times of duty and difficulty : " It is very important to do that at once ", because life does not wait and it demands that, like him, with the same simplicity, the same humility and the same passion for confidence, we give ourselves to it completely, even to our last " Yes ".

EDOUARD-AUG. FRICK
