

## B O O K S

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FRIDTJOF NANSEN <sup>1</sup>

by

Fritz WARTENWEILER

The *International Review* has already had occasion to recall Nansen's fine personality when, on the occasion of the centenary of the birth of that great servant of humanity, it published an article, in May 1930, by Mr. Edouard-Aug. Frick, former Delegate General of the ICRC.<sup>2</sup> We now present a biography first published in German in 1930 and now translated from an adaptation by Mr. Jean-François Cabrières, who had the privilege of meeting Nansen when he was a student. The impression made upon him was so strong that he was determined to increase the circle of admirers of a man whom Fritz Wartenweiler described as "the intrepid Viking".

The first part of the book deals with Nansen's childhood, one which had as its motto "harden yourself early". The author describes a serious child, hardened to physical suffering but compassionate towards others, tenacious, fearless, sensitive to the pleasures of a home full of austerity; dreaming also of deeds inspired by his questioning spirit and his taste for fighting. From an early age, "he submitted his body to domination by the spirit", thus forming a balanced whole which was to prepare him admirably for the hard existence which was to be his. First of all an explorer, discoverer of the vast spaces of the North, learned naturalist anxious to "verify the soundness of his intuitions which were often brilliant and also a patriot who played a major rôle in his country's struggle for independence"; then the more we read of this enthralling book the more do we become aware of the other aspect of his personality which was to crown his achievement and make Nansen an excep-

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<sup>1</sup> Labor et Fides, Geneva.

<sup>2</sup> See *International Review*, October 1961.

tional person. By his deep sense of the human side of things, his unchanging devotion to others he was to be an effective champion of many victims.

To him life was throughout the great profound mystery enchanting the mind. "In the polar nights or in the great white desert when all seemed congealed and numb he could discern the pulse of life under the ice". To pierce the outer shell to reach the human being in his intimate, most painful secrets, that seems to be his action as a friend of man, and which was to make him say: "Humanity is the one sphere of which I have a certain knowledge". It is in fact for humanity's sake that he was to undertake a new action, as fruitful and rich in useful results, when he was nearing sixty, an action which was to be the crowning of his remarkable destiny.

The second part of the book is mainly devoted to the great philanthropical work for which he abandoned the task which he had intended to complete: to resolve the mysteries of the Arctic. Under the heading "The vision of a World renewed", and with the sub-title "The war and its consequences", the author describes the numerous activities in which Nansen engaged himself with the Norwegian Government at a time when his country was undergoing difficulties of every description; then his journey to Washington where he was sent to obtain supply facilities; finally his nomination by the League of Nations to the post of High Commissioner for the repatriation of prisoners of war.

In a forceful and expressive style, the author describes the various difficulties, financial, material and political, which he had to overcome to carry out a task which seemed to be out of all human proportion and which, however, was achieved, as shown in the chapter dealing with this action "Half a million men saved"; although this is a short chapter, it recalls the poignancy of those who know the considerable participation of the Red Cross in this effort.

The following chapter gives a brief historical sketch of the "Nansen passport". One had first of all to find countries of asylum and opportunities for work for hundreds of thousands of fugitives of all conditions, and with the help of leading legal experts, to supply them with the essential identity documents, entitling them to the right of living legally in those countries. Nansen himself

created an international employment office, a first attempt at establishing a labour market, to cope with unemployment amongst the fugitives, whose " ramifications were to spread throughout the world ". We are thus in the presence of a wide-ranging innovator in the legal and social sphere.

It would have seemed, once this arduous mission had been completed, that Nansen could in all conscience have resumed his scientific work. This was not to be the case. In fact the chapter " To the rescue of starving Russia " informs us that on August 12, 1921 he received a telegram from Gustave Ador, then President of the ICRC, asking him urgently to lend his support in the struggle against famine in Russia in co-operation with Herbert Hoover. And we see him once more fighting with the same tenacity against ill-wishers, political intrigue and the refusal of governments to finance this action. Far from becoming discouraged by the many obstacles barring his way he showed redoubled vigour and determination. In a Europe where all seemed in a state of chaos, he succeeded in organizing a relief action in Russia ; in addition he played a major rôle in Greece during the transfer of populations and in European Turkey where one hundred thousand Armenian refugees found themselves without shelter and did not know where to go.

Finally, the last chapter " The evening of a life " is filled with melancholy. Nansen has returned to his own country where, as nearly everywhere else in Europe, there were ominous currents which filled him with anxiety since he could not disinterest himself in events whatever they might be. Moreover, he never despaired and in that he teaches us a great and moving lesson. Against everything which depresses and threaten to destroy the spirit he only upholds one attitude " work harder, make ever greater efforts ". The whole book indeed confirms this attitude. The seeker after truth and the apostle of peace so admirably combine as the author rightly says, to form the rarest thing of all, a man.

*J. Z.*

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