

Geneva Convention Commemoration

On August 22, 1964, an impressive ceremony took place at the Swiss National Exhibition in Lausanne, to commemorate the centennial anniversary of the signing of the Geneva Convention of August 22, 1864 for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field. The celebration was held before the pavilion housing the stands representing the work of the ICRC and the Swiss Red Cross.¹

A procession passed through the Exhibition grounds. It comprised a Swiss army medical detachment with its lorries and ambulances bearing the sign of the Red Cross, numerous deaconesses, nuns and nurses representing all the country's nursing schools, voluntary Red Cross hospital assistants, members of the Junior Red Cross and the Swiss Samaritans Association, first aid workers from the French, German and Swiss Red Cross Societies as well as other groups. The pageant was met on a large esplanade by numerous dignitaries and guests including the founding bodies of the Red Cross and representatives from the countries which first signed the Geneva Convention. The presence was noted of representatives from the Swiss Federal authorities and from the Cantons of Geneva and Vaud, members of the International Committee of the Red Cross, delegates from the League of Red Cross Societies and the leaders of the Swiss Red Cross.

In a nearby showcase was displayed the actual original Convention on loan from the Federal Archives. Visitors could also admire the painting by the French artist Armand Dumaesq lent for the occasion by the Geneva State Council.²

Several speakers stressed the profound significance of the events in Geneva a century ago. The gist of their speeches is given below.

We would add that music was provided by a band and this moving ceremony was concluded to the chiming of the Exhibition bells.

¹ *Plate.*

² This was reproduced in the August 1964 issue of the *International Review*. The picture represents the signing of the Geneva Convention on August 22, 1864, and its usual place is in the "Alabama Room" of the Geneva Town Hall. It is the property of the State of Geneva.

Mr. Gabriel Despland, *President of the Swiss National Exhibition*

On February 17, 1863, five noble-hearted men whose names should be recalled with respect and gratitude, set up in Geneva the "International Standing Committee for Aid to Wounded Soldiers". General Guillaume-Henri Dufour was elected President. He had at his side Henry Dunant, Gustave Moynier, Dr. Louis Appia and Dr. Theodore Maunoir. Their aim was to convene an international conference in order to "remedy the inadequacy of army medical services in the field". At the invitation of the Swiss Government, this conference met the following year in Geneva. Its work resulted in the signing of the First Geneva Convention on August 22, 1864 by the representatives of twelve States. It is due to this Convention that the generous ideas of Dunant and his Genevese and foreign friends were introduced into international law. It was, as it were, a birth certificate of that wonderful institution known as the Red Cross which, since then, has been extending its benefits to the whole world and has aroused in innumerable people an ever-ready devotion to the alleviation of suffering and distress whether the result of ignorance, the vanity of men or the whims of nature.

The International Committee of the Red Cross wished the centenary of this event, one of the most striking in the history of mankind, to be celebrated publicly at the Swiss National Exhibition. We feel proud and grateful for the honour thus bestowed on the Exhibition and, through it, on the Swiss people of which it is the offspring and the symbol . . .

. . . We do not wish to appear vainglorious of the achievements of our ancestors, but we can be justifiably proud that there were in our country noble-minded men whose generosity, combined with an acute sense of realism, led to the creation of such an institution as the Red Cross, recognized and respected today in every country of the world, whatever sign is used as its emblem. We wish to express our admiration and our gratitude to them and to all who from the outset, in foreign countries, understood them and gave them their backing. They must have had uncommon courage and love of their fellow-men to have accepted, a hundred years ago, the tenet that the world is populated by human beings, every one possessing a spark of divine grace whatever may be their beliefs, nationality or race and that all are entitled to the same respect and consideration.

The international Convention which they promoted has guided the human mind towards greater comprehension, mutual assistance and charity whenever man is stricken by the hardships of unfortunate circumstances. May we always have the resolute will to do them honour and to follow their example.

You will allow me to mention in conclusion that apart from its universal humanitarian action, the Geneva Convention which we are celebrating today, has had beneficial repercussions on Switzerland's place in the world. It has, as it were, hallowed our country as a land of asylum and refuge and as a centre of international relief actions. It has contributed very considerably to the respect of our neutrality and it has at the same time made our people understand that their neutrality is justified not by egoism or indifference but by permanent duty to human solidarity. It is this need for mutual assistance, for human contact and respect which the National Exhibition is intended to assert. That is why I thank you wholeheartedly for having associated it with the tribute to those men who were worthy of their country and humanity, and to a work which we should all be eager to carry on and promote with a will.

Mr. Léopold Boissier, *President of the International Committee of the Red Cross*

It is fitting that this Exhibition, this eloquent testimony to the faith of the Swiss people in their future, should include within its programme a display by an institution which, born in Switzerland, has extended its message of hope to all mankind.

That a group of confederates had the courage to stand united against a tyrannical power in 1863 and that the following year, on August 22, 1864, twelve States signed the First Geneva Convention, these are indeed events worthy of celebration. Moreover, the signing of this Convention is the starting point of a decisive development in international law and, in a wider context, in relations between governments.

Although from that time on States were still able to resort to war, they were no longer free to act with unbridled violence in any manner which suited them and to treat their enemies as they wished. Strict rules obliged them to respect the wounded, the sick,

and the medical services of the armed forces in the field. And it was at that time that there appeared on the battle-field the sign of the red cross on a white background, the inviolate emblem of law and humanity combined, to protect the enemy who formerly would have been defenceless.

The impetus having been given, governments in the course of the century were to sign the four Geneva Conventions which constitute humanitarian law, one of the most noble achievements of our civilization.

After the wounded and sick of armed forces on land, it was the turn of the victims of fighting at sea to be given protection. Then, after the experience of the First World War the indefeasible rights of prisoners of war became embodied in a third Convention. Finally, in 1949, a fourth Convention of great importance was added. It provided an indispensable safeguard to civilian populations. Henceforth, belligerents must respect non-combatants, of whatever nationality, race or faith they might be. No one may be imprisoned without proper trial. The taking of hostages, forced labour and deportation are forbidden. The delegates of the International Committee of the Red Cross are empowered to visit internees and demand that their conditions be improved and their families be informed. Had this Fourth Convention been in force in 1939, millions of human lives would have been saved.

And that is not all. Civil war, often more terrible than conflicts between States, is no longer exempt from the authority of humanitarian law. Opposing forces may no longer make war without mercy and inflict terrible reprisals on a beaten foe.

Those who take up arms against their own government, those who try to disrupt established order, however guilty they may be, are also protected by some of the provisions of the Fourth Convention. They may be assisted and given relief by delegates of the International Committee . . .

. . . The work of the Red Cross is continually expanding. It calls upon all men and women of goodwill and particularly on the Swiss people to espouse the cause not only of the National Red Cross Society but also of the International Committee which, I repeat, sends its delegates throughout the whole world for the accomplishment of missions which are often dangerous and always necessary. Let us therefore assess today calmly and with courage the duties which await us tomorrow.

Mr. Jacob Burckhardt, Representative of the Swiss Federal Council

In his address on the occasion of the Red Cross Centenary celebration last year, the President of the Confederation mentioned that this event called for modesty. The same may be said of today's ceremony : a call for modesty and a call upon our profound gratitude to that generation which one hundred years ago proved itself able to convert an ancient tradition of humanity on the battle-field—but applied only sporadically up to that time—into an obligation under international law. The praise for this goes to private initiative. The work was sanctioned when official representatives of twelve States, replying to the Federal Council's invitation to attend a conference in Geneva in August 1864, signed the First Geneva Convention. It was due to the broad vision and the courage of these men that this " Magna Carta " for humanity—so brief but so important—saw the light of day.

Thanks to the kindness of the Federal Archives Department, which is responsible for its preservation, this original Convention is on display here today.

Although this is an instrument of international law, this charter is in its proper place here. It testifies to a spirit which our country recognized as its own : a spirit of humanity radiating to all nations without discrimination. Under the impetus given by the Confederation, the Geneva Convention of August 22, 1864, is the starting point of Switzerland's humanitarian and international vocation and of a policy to which we have held firm ever since.

We are fully aware of the honour paid to our country by the 1864 Conference when it decided to adopt the inverted colours and the emblem of our country as the sign of protection and neutrality applicable to the wounded and medical services.

Today nearly every government in the world is bound by treaty to respect this emblem both in peace and war in order to maintain its effectiveness.

The value of the sign of the Red Cross on a white background has often been put to the test in circumstances which were nothing short of atrocious. Thanks to the validity of that sign, suffering has been alleviated and innumerable acts of fellowship have been inspired. In the course of a century the popularity of this emblem has become immense.

The Federal Council was well placed to see to what extent the

Geneva Convention has conquered the world in the course of its hundred years of existence. As the custodian and administrator of the Convention, it is indeed the Federal Council which receives ratification and adhesion from governments . . .

. . . When he opened the Geneva Diplomatic Conference in 1864 with a simple and realistic speech, General Dufour said :

“ Gentlemen, the object of our present meeting is so simple . . . it is merely a question of the neutralization of ambulances and medical personnel of armed forces in the field as well as of the wounded. This is the sole purpose.”

These were his words. But the fundamental idea was a fertile seed. This sole purpose was not the ultimate aim. Three other Red Cross Conventions followed that of the 22nd of August 1864, and the texts have been revised on several occasions to adapt them to circumstances. The work of codification is still going on, living and growing . . .

. . . Allow me to conclude by recalling August 22 at the National Exhibition of 1939, when the Federal Councillor Motta ended one of his last speeches as a statesman by saying :

“ Switzerland is jealous of this Convention against suffering, for she knows that August 22, 1864, is a memorable date for mankind. If the international complications of today should result in war—may the Lord preserve us from this—and if providence wills that Switzerland should remain outside the conflict, she would not forget her duty to further the work of the Red Cross ”.

We did not forget. And although today the world situation is fundamentally different from what it was in the dark days of August 1939, neither will we forget in the future.

Mr. A. von Albertini, *President of the Swiss Red Cross*

The providence which has spared our country from the turmoil of war since the signing of the 1864 Geneva Convention also accounts for the fact that it is precisely in our country that the Conventions concerning the protection of war victims are little known.

Nevertheless the Geneva Conventions are of great importance for us too. This is true for each one of them whether for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded of Armies in the Field ;

the Treatment of Prisoners of War ; or Protection of Civilians in Wartime.

The Swiss Red Cross and the authorities of our country are in duty bound to make the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 known, not only in the army but also and more especially among the population which ought to know its rights and duties in the event of war or occupation by an enemy Power.

One of the first consequences of the Geneva Convention for Switzerland was the establishment of a National Relief Society in 1866 under the name of " National Aid Society to Servicemen and their Families " which later became the Swiss Red Cross. It was an institution which, in conformity with Dunant's proposals, was set up to reinforce the Army Medical Service by making available voluntary personnel and material. Although none of the ten articles of the 1864 Convention lays down the rights and duties incumbent on " Medical Voluntary Aids " nor stipulates that the nursing volunteers should be given protection under the terms of the Convention, revised versions of the Convention do. This protection is however conferred on them only if their National Relief Society has been recognized by their Government. In Switzerland this recognition was granted for the first time in 1903 by the " Federal Ordinance concerning Voluntary Relief to the Wounded and the Sick in Time of War ". Article I of the " Federal Ordinance relative to the Swiss Red Cross " of 1951 stipulates : " The Swiss Red Cross is recognized as the only National Society of the Red Cross on the territory of the Swiss Confederation and, as such, it shall in time of war lend assistance to the Army Medical Service."

The particular situation of the Swiss Red Cross arises from these legislative instruments which, moreover, define the close ties uniting our National Society to the Army Medical Service . . .

. . . Under the terms of the First Geneva Convention, National Red Cross Societies of States not involved in a conflict may be called upon to send medical units to the battle-field abroad. The Convention expressly specifies that such aid shall in no way be considered as intervention in the conflict.

On several occasions the Swiss Red Cross has agreed to make available in this manner doctors and nursing personnel and sometimes fully appointed teams and ambulances. This was the case in particular during the Boer War, the war in the Balkans, the war in Finland, on the East German front and later in the Congo and the

Yemen where our Society is operating at the request of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

It is a great honour for Switzerland to have custody and control of the Geneva Conventions. But this does impose upon our country a great responsibility and the obligation to maintain at a high level in our country these Conventions and the humanitarian ideal which inspired them. This implies also the duty to disseminate them and to apply their principles each time it is possible for a peaceful and neutral State to do so, by preparing our country's defence and by carrying out humanitarian actions abroad.

Mr. W. Ch. J. M. van Lanschot, *President of the World Veterans Federation*

It is a very great honour for me to be present today at this ceremony commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the "Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field". It is a particular privilege for me to express to the International Red Cross, in the name of the twenty million former combatants and war victims represented by the World Veterans Federation, our profound admiration for the invaluable contribution it has made, both by its ideals and its activities, to the implantation and development of humanitarian ideas in the world.

Who better than these twenty million former combatants and war victims can testify to the profound reality of the Geneva Conventions and of the efforts accomplished by the Red Cross in order that the principles of these Conventions may be put into effect and thus prevent or alleviate suffering. One must have experienced the anguish of battles, the rigours of captivity, the immeasurable tragedies inherent in war, to feel and understand fully the significance of the Red Cross and all it represents in the field of moral comfort and hope. And those who, like me, found themselves in concentration camps to which the Red Cross protection could not be extended, know how much this absence made the darkness which surrounded them even more gloomy.

Symbol of the perennality of human values, the Red Cross demonstrated by its existence and its action that even in the most cruel moments when men confront men, intent on destroying each

other, compassion, understanding and co-operation can prevail.

And that is why today's commemoration is so important for us. Tribute must indeed be paid to the 1864 Convention as well as to the other Conventions and agreements concluded later under the auspices of the Red Cross and which have prevented or alleviated innumerable sufferings. But beyond these practical effects, whatever their importance, the Geneva Conventions have played and still play a capital rôle in the setting up of an international community. Signed and ratified by most of the world governments and respected by them in practice, these Conventions decisively show that men can understand each other and co-operate towards constructive aims. They must serve as examples to all those who are working towards the extension and widening of international agreements, thus making possible, through international co-operation, the establishment of peace in liberty. And this is why, Mr. President, the World Veterans Federation is particularly happy and proud of the relations it maintains with the International Committee of the Red Cross and the League of Red Cross Societies.

I am sure to express the unanimous feelings of our twenty million members in telling you how keen we are to support with all our energy and enthusiasm the efforts of the Red Cross and in so doing to strengthen our action with a view to promoting international co-operation and thus contribute to the reign of peace in liberty.
