Death of Mr. Carl J. Burckhardt, Honorary Member of the ICRC

It was with deep regret that the International Committee learned of the death of Mr. Carl J. Burckhardt on 3 March 1974. When he was appointed a member of the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1933, Carl Burckhardt tirelessly worked with Max Huber, another eminent member and a former President of the ICRC. From November 1939, he devoted himself fully to ICRC activities and gave all his time and energy during the whole of the Second World War to the manifold tasks that had to be carried out.

It was vital during that period that the man at the helm should have a wide sweep of imagination and foresight. None other than Carl Burckhardt, as a strong and farseeing organizer and diplomat, earned the gratitude of countless human beings who escaped death from starvation or survived wounds and imprisonment.

At first, he was at the head of the department responsible for sending relief supplies to prisoners of war and civilian internees. Later on, he chaired the Joint Relief Commission representing the International Red Cross organizations responsible for channelling aid to civilians. A fleet of forty vessels was formed to carry relief under the protection of the red cross emblem, across seas infested with submarines. Again, it was Carl Burckhardt who secured a partial lifting of the allied blockade so as to bring relief to the starving civilian population of war-ravaged countries. He played a prominent part in the lengthy and difficult negotiations that had to be undertaken, and it was he, too, who worked out the agreements which, in Greece, led to the organization of regular assistance to over one million persons during the occupation.
Vast as this relief work was, it was nevertheless conducted parallel to action for the protection of war victims, in particular by watching over the observance of the Geneva Conventions. Some of the steps taken by Carl Burckhardt were of vital importance and, in retrospect, would seem to demonstrate the victory achieved, however late, over the powers of destruction. This is most evident if one views his vigorous action at the end of the war, when he went to see the leaders of the Third Reich in person and extracted from them concessions regarding political deportees.

He was at all times alive to his own responsibility towards the ICRC and, through that institution, towards all those in pain and suffering. When he was elected President of the ICRC, in December 1944, he uttered a phrase which sheds light on, and is characteristic of, the significance of his commitment: "It is up to us, by giving of our very best, to play our part in carrying the torch handed to us and, when night falls, watch over its flame and pass it on." Some months later, he ceased his presidential functions and kept, until 1948, the office of "President on leave".

On his seventieth birthday, in 1961, he was awarded the ICRC gold medal. In 1965, when he asked to be released from his duties, he was appointed an honorary member of the institution he had served for so long.

Carl J. Burckhardt had ample opportunity to put to good use, in the work of the Red Cross, his sense of active humanism and his keen and highly developed intelligence which enabled him to grasp the essentials of any subject immediately. If the Red Cross permitted him to deal with practical problems in his own way, it owes him still more for his devotion and for the exemplary service which he rendered to the humanitarian ideal. His memory will be faithfully cherished by the grateful International Committee.