

“THE HUMANITARIAN SPIRIT OF GENEVA”

The Swiss Confederation is celebrating its 700th anniversary this year and numerous commemorative activities are being organized throughout the country. In Geneva several events focusing on the city’s humanitarian and international vocation have already been held.

A ceremony to commemorate the *first international mission to assist wounded soldiers*, which was carried out in June 1859 on the Lombardy front by four delegates of the Geneva Evangelical Society, was held by the Henry Dunant Institute, the Geneva Red Cross, the Evangelical Society itself and the Oratory Parish Community on 12 February 1991 in the presence of representatives of the Republic and Canton of Geneva, the City of Geneva, the ICRC and the various associations concerned.

A commemorative plaque was laid by the organizers to recall that this mission of assistance and observation served as an inspiration for the work later carried out by the Red Cross in numerous theatres of operations, for Henry Dunant had it in mind when he proposed, at the time of the founding of the Red Cross, the establishment of relief societies auxiliary to the armed forces’ medical services and neutral status for medical personnel and wounded soldiers. The Committee of Five was undoubtedly also following the same example when it decided in 1864 during the Danish War to send Louis Appia to the Austro-Prussian front and Captain van de Velde to Denmark.

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Another ceremony was held on 21 March 1991 to honour General Guillaume-Henri Dufour, a co-founder of the Red Cross who has been described as the most popular and well-known Swiss public figure of

the nineteenth century.¹ During the ceremony, organized by the Geneva Historical and Archeological Society, a plaque was unveiled on the house where he lived for thirty years and worked with Henry Dunant to found the Red Cross. Mention was made of the extent to which General Dufour, a hero of Switzerland's Sonderbund War of 1847, had provided a lesson in humanity in the midst of fighting by his instructions to his troops and had shown an awareness that restraint on the battlefield was the first step towards reconciliation. General Dufour also played a key role in establishing an inseparable link between the Red Cross and Switzerland, a fact that merited recollection during this 700th anniversary year.²

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On 8 May 1991, World Red Cross and Red Crescent Day, representatives of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the Republic and Canton of Geneva and the City of Geneva inaugurated a *Red Cross historical walk*, which will remain open to the public until October. Organized by the Henry Dunant Society and the Geneva Red Cross, this walk through Geneva's old town connects twenty sites that played a significant role in the past 125 years of Red Cross history. These sites, marked by descriptive panels, include the house in which Henry Dunant was born and the Collège Calvin where he completed his secondary studies, the former Saint-Pierre Casino where the first Committee, which was subsequently to become the ICRC, was formed, the homes of Gustave Moynier, Henry Dunant and Théodore Maunoir, the Palais Eynard where the Geneva Red Cross came into being, the Palais de l'Athénée where the First International Conference of the Red Cross was held in October 1863, the Town Hall where the Diplomatic Conference of 8 to 22 August 1864 met, discussed and adopted the original Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field, the Rath Museum where the ICRC set up the International Prisoners of War Agency in October 1914, the first headquarters of the League of Red Cross Societies, the

¹ See Jean-Jacques Langendorf, *Aimez-moi comme je vous aime: 190 lettres de G.-H. Dufour à A. Pictet*, Vienna, 1987, 13 pp.

² See *Guillaume-Henri Dufour dans son temps*, proceedings of a symposium held to mark the bicentenary of the birth of General Dufour, *Société d'histoire et d'archéologie de Genève*, 1991, 466 pp.

first Geneva nurses' station and the headquarters of the Geneva Samaritans.

At the inaugural ceremony in the Geneva Town Hall the President of the ICRC, Cornelio Sommaruga, spoke as follows:

"We are gathered here in the very cradle of the Red Cross, in the crucible of charitable endeavour that gave rise to and continues to sustain the work of the ICRC. We are at the very spot at which the generous impulses and initiatives of several years converged and assumed tangible form in the signing, in 1864, of the First Geneva Convention, thus scoring a great victory for humanity and launching a universal Movement of unprecedented scale whose members strive today, as in the past, to carry forward the work begun in Solferino.

The Red Cross historical walk [...] is a fitting commemoration of the Confederation's 700th anniversary in that a parallel may be drawn between the humanitarian values of the Red Cross and those adopted by our forefathers in 1291 when the Swiss Confederation was founded: mutual assistance in the face of violence, a sense of a common heritage, respect for fellow human beings, a spirit of solidarity, humility, tolerance and a desire for conciliation and arbitration. We must not forget that it is these virtues, nurtured over the centuries in our homeland, which constitute our strength and which the ICRC has been striving steadfastly to promote for the past 128 years by a mobilization of humanitarian endeavour [...].

To retrace the origins of the Red Cross by following in the footsteps of Henry Dunant is for all of us to gain a heightened awareness of its underlying inspiration. This journey through time sheds new light on the circumstances that shaped our vocation, strengthens our resolve never to compromise our ideals and reminds us that solidarity is never more effective than when it finds expression in the sharing of humble tasks. It also impresses upon us the need to remain always in the vanguard of efforts to bring about true peace".

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Geneva's official celebration of the 700th anniversary, an event entitled "Geneva: a humanitarian tradition", was held on 1 June 1991. During this event the "Road to Peace" and its "Archway to Peace" were inaugurated in the presence of numerous officials, including Federal Councillor René Felber, the President of the Geneva State Council, Bernard Ziegler, the President of the Basel-Land State

Council, Hans Fünfschilling, the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, Jan Martenson, and ICRC President Cornelio Sommaruga.

The "Road to Peace", which curves up between the United Nations building and ICRC headquarters in Geneva, is marked by seven arches set at intervals along it and connected by a string of flags from all nations suspended above them. The arches, which symbolize humanity's progress towards peace, consist of separate branches that reach towards each other without joining until the final arch where they meet "like hands linking the United Nations and the Red Cross".

During the inaugural ceremony Bernard Ziegler spoke about the major challenges facing Switzerland on the threshold of the twenty-first century. René Felber then highlighted the importance of humanitarian commitment and solidarity with the underprivileged peoples of the world and launched a fervent appeal for greater respect for the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols. Jan Martenson stressed the humanism and outward-looking spirit characteristic of the city of Calvin, which he said had undoubtedly been strongly conducive to the exceptional development of international life in Geneva. This point was endorsed by Hans Fünfschilling, who paid tribute to Geneva's international and humanitarian tradition. Lastly, Cornelio Sommaruga, in an address entitled "Peace through Solidarity", said that the "Road to Peace", a symbol of Geneva's international and humanitarian vocation, stood for the *"steadfast and repeated efforts of humanitarian organizations to alleviate suffering, ensure respect for humanitarian law, fight injustice, underdevelopment and disease, promote the use of peaceful means of resolving conflicts and encourage international understanding through dialogue"*.

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The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum has also contributed to the 700th anniversary celebration by mounting an exhibition entitled *The Face of Humanity* in cooperation with the Geneva Red Cross, the ICRC, the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the Association of Geneva Samaritan Societies, the Henry Dunant Institute and the Henry Dunant Society.

The exhibition, which opened at the Museum on 30 May and will remain on display until 30 October, consists of drawings by 37 Swiss and foreign illustrators and cartoonists depicting in sometimes naïve, sometimes acerbic, but always humorous terms the principles and

activities of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. The drawings, which were donated to the Red Cross by the artists, are for sale and the proceeds will be used to purchase first-aid kits for young Gambian Red Cross relief workers.

J.M.
