

THE CIVIL WAR IN JORDAN

An Episode in the Life of an ICRC Delegate

We know what work is carried out by the ICRC delegates in Jordan ; we know that, thanks to them and their intervention, as soon as it was possible the relief mission of the ICRC, aided by the National Societies, could be started and developed. One of the delegates in Amman during the civil war, Mr. Louis Jaquinet, relates below some incidents in the danger-fraught life of a delegate during a crisis.

Wednesday evening, 16 September 1970, in Amman, and all is calm—too calm. No shots tearing the silence; no cars roaming the streets. The feddayeen are at their posts in the trench they have dug at the corner of the delegation and in the building under construction on the other side of the road, their ammunition beside them ready to hand. The barricades of old tyres are no longer ready to be set alight; they have disappeared.

The royal army, easily recognized by its black or red berets, has also disappeared from the town, having withdrawn to the outskirts. I take the opportunity of sending a message by our radio to the ICRC in Geneva, asking it to prepare, as a matter of urgency, a medical team and relief supplies.

We are accustomed to hearing firing every night, but tonight none occurs. At 4.30 in the morning I go out onto the delegation balcony, on the top storey of a stone house. The town is still peaceful until, suddenly, from the hills to the west, I see a red flare rise, followed by another to the south; at that very instant a bullet smashes my window and flattens itself against a wall of my room. It seems to be the starting shot for the fighting.

A feddayee comes up to our floor and installs himself with his bazooka in the flat which had been evacuated a few days earlier.

He starts firing at the armoured cars patrolling the streets. My three colleagues, roused by the firing, join me in the vestibule and we crouch against the wall for shelter. Just then a shell from a tank comes through the adjoining flat, pierces the wall and explodes inside the building. We go down to the living-room and with up-turned armchairs and a mattress improvise a protection of sorts.

From the outset of the fighting, water, electricity and telephone have been cut off. The generator for our radio has been damaged and we are out of touch with the outside world. For four hours we are unable to move: fighting is going on even in our corridor. In the meantime another shell smashes its way through the roof and reduces our balcony to a shambles. Bullets are whining all over the place.

Four hours later a lull occurs. We rush down to the ground floor where there are already fifteen other people. We are stuck there for four days while fighting goes on day and night.

On the third day a Bedouin patrol comes in looking for fedayeen. We hastily write a note to an embassy with communications with the outside world to advise Geneva that its four delegates are safe and sound.

Why does the fighting last so long? Because the royal troops from their armoured cars are firing at windows where they think there are fedayeen, or they fling grenades, but they do not occupy the buildings. During the night the fedayeen who have withdrawn move back into their positions and in the morning the fighting starts all over again.

On the morning of the fifth day, during a truce, we are relieved to see an ICRC car pull up, flying the Red Cross flag. A doctor-delegate, Dr. Spirgi, has been able to leave his hotel and comes to take us to the Jordan hotel which, in spite of a few broken windows, is far more comfortable than the delegation where we spent the previous four days.

At last the situation enables us to start our work as ICRC delegates in this devastated city where help is so desperately needed.