

## “OBJETS DU SILENCE”

### *Creative expression in captivity*

What can prisoners of war or political detainees do in their cells to kill time or prove to themselves that they are still alive, in spite of everything, or simply to express themselves? They can take a piece of wood, or fabric, or tin can, indeed anything they can find and with their imagination and determination, in the silence and passage of time, they can transform the object into a small statue or bag or cap or even a kerosene lamp. It may become a masterpiece in its own right; it always makes a statement.

These objects made by prisoners, and which are displayed at the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum until 27 September, have great sentimental value. Perhaps more eloquently than words ever can, they tell us about life in prison. They show how a seemingly insignificant object, when fashioned with loving care, can save the prisoner from despair and how these objects come to be identified with their creator. An expression of suffering, they are at the same time an antidote to suffering.

No matter how modest, the object may also serve as a sign of recognition and friendship for the person who has brought the detainee out of his or her isolated existence, if only for a moment, and offered a humanitarian breath of respite. The persons particularly in mind here are the ICRC delegates or Red Cross workers who, by bringing news or much-needed relief items, but especially by their presence and involvement, by speaking personally and individually with the prisoners, guarantee that they will not fall into oblivion, that their protection is assured and their dignity defended. “The collection thus reflects both humanity and inhumanity — that is its double message”, write Marie-Agnès Gainon and Jean-Pierre Gaume in the introduction to the book<sup>1</sup> which illustrates the exhibition.

This is not a mere catalogue but a well-prepared and clearly structured publication designed to inform the general public about the activities carried out by ICRC delegates in places of detention throughout the world, and also to provide answers to the questions often asked by visitors and readers alike: How are prison visits conducted? What is the legal basis for this work? Under

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<sup>1</sup> “*Objets du silence*”, an exceptional exhibition of articles made by prison and camp inmates, 1900-1992. Preface by Jean-Pierre Hocké, foreword by Laurent Marti, International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum, Geneva, 1992, 192 p. (The English edition is currently being prepared).

what conditions are these visits made? What is the relationship between prisoners and delegates?

The first part of the book offers a description, accompanied by comments from prisoners and delegates, of articles that were made in camps between 1900 and 1992 and have been collected by the Museum. Utensils, decorative objects, drawings and paintings, fabric and woven creations, and jewellery file before the spectator's eyes, like modest markers in the humanitarian memory.

The second part, of a legal nature, is devoted to excerpts taken from the basic instruments of international law on the protection of prisoners of war, internees and civilian detainees, persons deprived of their freedom, political detainees and prisoners of conscience.

The third and final part of the book provides valuable theoretical and practical information on a wide variety of aspects of the work to protect prisoners which is carried out by the ICRC, but also by other governmental and non-governmental organizations. We are familiarized in turn with the role of the ICRC's Central Tracing Agency (CTA), the role of ICRC doctors during their visits to prisoners, the activities of the Committee against Torture of the United Nations Economic and Social Council and also those of Amnesty International.

With its attractively spaced out presentation, its illustrations and statistical tables, the book is not only an indispensable guide to the exhibition but also a very handy reference work for researchers and all those wishing to know more about the world of detention and the problems involved.

*Jacques Meurant*

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## **BOOK REVIEWS**

- Walter Zürcher, *Die Schweizer Handelsschiffe, 1939-1945*, Koehlers Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, Herford, 1992, 170 pp.

This work, which describes the development of the Swiss Navy during the Second World War, tells how the ships used by the ICRC to carry Red Cross parcels for prisoners of war and relief supplies to civilians in countries occupied by the Axis powers managed to get through to their destination and the dangers they faced in doing so.

The book, which is illustrated with numerous photographs, also contains accounts by officers who served on board those vessels; for example, it retraces the epic voyage of an ICRC ship, the *S/S Henry Dunant*, which lifted anchor in Lisbon to ferry relief supplies to the Netherlands. It was forced by