

Tribute to Paul Ruegger

Ambassador Paul Ruegger, who died in Florence on 9 August 1988 at the age of 91, was President of the International Committee of the Red Cross from 1948 to 1955 and continued to be an active member of the Committee from 1955 to 1973. Following his retirement to Florence in 1973 he still took a close interest in day-to-day international events, in particular those concerning the ICRC, of which he remained an honorary member.

Those who have not worked with him—and undoubtedly this applies to most people of our generation—are perhaps unaware that certain considerable humanitarian advances can be attributed to Paul Ruegger. A keen observer and frequently a brilliant performer on the stage of twentieth century history, he guided with skill and tact the destiny of the ICRC at a particularly testing time for the institution.

Up to then, he had made his career in diplomacy and at the outset in 1917 had had what he called the chance of a lifetime, that is, the privilege of being noticed by and working with two prominent figures of the time: Gustave Ador, who was then a Federal Councillor and President of the ICRC, and Max Huber, who later became President of the ICRC in his turn. A faithful disciple, friend and confidant of Max Huber, he naturally shared quite a number of his mentor's humanitarian concerns over three decades. It was therefore quite natural that the Committee should call upon him to assume the Presidency in 1948.

That was the very moment when the Arab-Israeli conflict, characterized by unheard-of violence, broke out in the Middle East. Jerusalem became a battlefield: within a few days three ICRC delegates had been seriously injured while others barely escaped with their lives.

Paul Ruegger's reaction was immediate. To his colleagues' amazement he left at once for the spot to use his personal influence to counter the inevitable intransigence of the combatants, to display his solidarity with the victims and to assure his delegates that they had his absolute

support. He involved himself discreetly in the activities of his team and only once was he known to deviate from his habitual reserve. That was on 29 May 1948. While awaiting a ceasefire negotiated in order to evacuate the Old City of Jerusalem, where more than 3,000 starving and exhausted people were expecting the worst, he did not hesitate personally to walk along the front line in a calm and solemn fashion, armed with a large Red Cross flag. The guns fell silent. Thanks to this sudden lull the beleaguered people were able to escape, to be looked after by ICRC delegates.

This gesture, which was followed by many others, at once set a new style for presidential duties. He proved that a president does not only work behind closed doors. A tireless canvasser for the cause of the most unfortunate victims of human cruelty, he was a field worker, becoming involved at the humblest levels and intervening at the highest. What appears to us as quite natural today was less so 40 years ago.

This was a difficult period, as we said, for the ICRC. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War the extent of that disaster had not yet been assessed. The world had been shattered to learn of the horrors of the concentration camps. How could all that have happened? Who had known about it and had done nothing, said nothing? Naturally, suspicious glances were directed from all sides towards Geneva, and the ICRC was the target of violent attacks.

On numerous occasions it was invited to explain its ineffectiveness and its “conniving silence”.

In that connection, even the National Red Cross Societies became prey to intolerable doubts. Meeting in Geneva in 1946, they set up a special Commission to examine the causes of certain failures and to find ways and means of making the ICRC more effective. The Commission set to work and in August 1948 submitted its conclusions to the highest body of the Red Cross, the International Conference of the Red Cross, convened in Stockholm under the chairmanship of Count Folke Bernadotte. The previous Conference (the XVIth) had been held in London in 1938: the Stockholm Conference (XVIIth) was the first one to be held after the war.

At the same time, the Committee began preparing a detailed 1,700-page report on the matter. Every aspect was subjected to minute scrutiny. With his courtly diplomacy and forthright manner, and thanks to his exceptional intelligence and perfect grasp of the subject-matter, Paul Ruegger won over the Assembly. Accusations of negligence, smugness and cowardice *vis-à-vis* the unspeakable suffering of those who had been deported for racial and political reasons proved to be

groundless. The Assembly acknowledged that shortcomings in the 1929 codification of humanitarian law had contributed to this tragic eclipse of the human conscience; also partially to blame was the incomprehensible attitude of the belligerents of 1939 who had obstinately scorned the wishes expressed at the Tokyo Conference (1934) and the repeated appeals by the ICRC in autumn 1939 for civilians to be protected. The Assembly reaffirmed its confidence in the ICRC; it stated that the ICRC's traditional composition should be retained, but the institution should be provided with more effective means commensurate with the importance of its mission.

Unfortunately, a shadow hovered over these meetings. The Cold War had already made its appearance and Eastern Europe was scarcely represented. Paul Ruegger tried desperately to re-establish links in order to proceed to the next stage, i.e. the future Diplomatic Conference.

The Stockholm Conference had urged the ICRC and the international community to step up preparations for the Diplomatic Conference on humanitarian law scheduled to take place in Geneva from April to August 1949. The purpose of the Conference was to remedy the woeful shortcomings in the law which a short time previously had left the way open to the most unimaginable horrors.

Participation at the Conference exceeded all expectations. It had been said that no State worthy of the name wanted to face the gloomy future presaged by the Cold War without previously having helped provide our fragile world with humanitarian laws better adapted to the risks likely to arise in future conflicts.

Paul Ruegger had brought all his skill and personal reputation to bear to ensure that the Conference was chaired by a man of international standing, competent and clear-thinking, able to win the confidence of east and west, north and south. He succeeded in convincing the Federal Councillor, Max Petitpierre, personally to assume the chairmanship. It was an incredible success. People from disparate political systems whose social and ideological backgrounds might have led them to adopt intransigent positions managed to work together in harmony and showed their willingness to do everything possible to ensure that horrors such as those witnessed between 1939 and 1945 would not recur.

The euphoria was short-lived. A few months later the Korean War was to polarize the world while the conflict in Indochina was growing to tragic proportions. Placing his trust in the commitments entered into in Geneva, Paul Ruegger tried to reconcile the irreconcilable by intensifying negotiations and visiting the People's Republic of China personally. What equivocations he had to put up with!

This setback did not dampen his enthusiasm and he set out to tackle other humanitarian issues, one of which was dear to his heart. He thought incessantly about all who had perished because of specious principles invoked in the name of State security. Who indeed until then had dared to enter the sacrosanct sphere known as “the internal affairs of State”, an altar upon which so many defenceless human beings had been sacrificed, with no possibility of appeal, simply because they had not chosen the right side? Nazism had run its course, but the sadism upon which it fed was still thriving.

Haunted by the plight of political prisoners, he suddenly had, as he put it, “a revelation” during one of his numerous trips. This was in July 1952. Everything he had heard and noted for some time about so many unfortunates, suddenly sounded in him like a clarion call. Back in Geneva he immediately adopted a courageous strategy, the first step of which consisted in demolishing century-old taboos. He set about convincing his colleagues, who showed disturbing reluctance. Even his mentor and friend, Max Huber, expressed doubts.

He was nevertheless given the go-ahead and successive steps in the progress of his strategy were promising. On 9 June 1983 an initial Commission composed of the most eminent international experts (not ICRC members) met in Geneva to examine the compatibility of the ICRC’s mandate with assisting political prisoners. Its conclusions were favourable and in July 1984 Guatemala accepted an offer of services made by the ICRC and allowed it to visit its political prisoners.

Thus the idea made headway and in October 1955 the Commission of Experts was in a position to reply in the affirmative to four specific questions submitted to it in relation to the validity of the ICRC’s initiative.

Today, visiting political prisoners has become one of the ICRC’s major activities and quite recently Paul Ruegger admitted with modesty mingled with pride: “in any case, thanks to this initiative, perhaps my term at the ICRC was not entirely pointless.”

There are so many points to the credit of this great President!

The considerable part he played personally in trying to solve innumerable conflicts and cases of international tension, including the Middle East conflict and the 1962 Cuba crisis; the success of his patient efforts to restore the good name of the ICRC, so to speak, *vis-à-vis* international bodies, most of whose members had had the unhappy privilege of living through the horrors of war; the belated but invaluable milestone constituted by the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949; the admission of the ICRC to so many prisons holding political detainees;

the considerable development of fraternal and friendly links between the ICRC and its Red Cross partners; the skilful and cordial way in which the respective mandates of the ICRC and the UN organizations were defined: all this and more can be credited to Paul Ruegger.

The International Committee of the Red Cross is proud to have been able to rely, in those difficult times, on the intelligence and dedication of Paul Ruegger. The ICRC pays heartfelt tribute to his memory.

The President of the Swiss Confederation at the ICRC

Mr. Otto Stich, President of the Swiss Confederation, visited on 11 August 1988 the headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Mr. Otto Stich was received by the President of the ICRC, Mr. Cornelio Sommaruga, together with members of the Committee and senior ICRC staff.

In his welcoming address, Mr. Cornelio Sommaruga emphasized the importance of the generous support regularly provided to the ICRC by the Swiss people and its highest authorities. He drew attention to the universality of the Geneva Conventions, the essentially Swiss and neutral character of the ICRC and the importance that this Geneva institution attaches to its independence in implementing its humanitarian policy.

In his reply, Mr. Otto Stich fully endorsed the Confederation's moral and financial support to the delegates of the ICRC and its interest in ensuring that they are able to continue performing their task, spreading the spirit of the Geneva Conventions, respect for the individual and a positive image of Switzerland throughout the world.

Mr. O. Stich and Mr. C. Sommaruga then continued their meeting with a broad review of the ICRC's operations throughout the world.
