

SOME REMINISCENCES

**The First “Prisoners of War Agency”
Geneva 1914-1918**

by J. Chenevière

Mr. Jacques Chenevière has recently published a volume of memoirs in which he recalls various souvenirs, chiefly concerning his life as a writer¹. In addition, he has however devoted a large part of his life and energies to the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross. As an active participant he has, therefore, lived through various periods of great importance in the history of the ICRC.

With the editor's kind permission, we publish hereunder some passages², extracted from this volume, which deal with the First World War. (Ed.).

On the morning of September 12th, 1914, I presented myself at 3, rue de l'Athénée, the surprisingly modest headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Gustave Moynier, who was then unknown to me, one of the founders of this Genevese institution fifty years earlier, of which he had been President until 1910,

¹ *Retours et images*, Editions Rencontre, Lausanne, 1966, 336 p.

² Translated by the ICRC.

said that he was also its door-keeper, because it was he who had the keys to the small, three roomed flat. It was there where the Committee's as yet by no means very considerable records were kept.

President Gustave Ador rose to greet me with the same cordiality which he had always shown me since my childhood. "There is a great deal of work to be started immediately", he said in his deep voice.

He pointed to two trays full of letters: appeals sent to Geneva by the families of soldiers reported missing.

"That is today's mail; twice the amount we received yesterday".

He then gave me some concise instructions, typical of a man of authority. "Sort this out into nationalities. Put it into alphabetical order and report back to me. It's hardly a job for a poet, is it?".

He was tall and still sprightly in spite of his sixty-nine years. Beneath his light jacket, with a small yellow rose in the button-hole, could be seen a splendid white waistcoat. Gustave Ador then took me into an adjoining room, no larger than its neighbour. There I met a gentleman of medium build whose smile between his black goatee and his pince-nez was reassuring. This was Paul Des Gouttes, a perspicacious lawyer; he was not one of the eight members of the International Committee, but its Secretary-General. This modest title had not then been inflated to its present proportions; one function of his office was to write out by hand the minutes of the Committee's meetings; somewhat in the role of a historiographer.

Whilst I was arranging my trays of papers, which were spilling over on to a sort of Napoleon III occasional-table, Des Gouttes, in his precise manner, explained to me that the Committee—the founding and central body of the Red Cross movement throughout the world—was composed exclusively of Swiss citizens, who were co-opted, so that it was only its activities which gave it its international character.

"You must know the basics. So far the two Geneva Conventions, which form the framework of the Red Cross, have made no mention of *able-bodied* prisoners of war. The question was broached by the International Conferences in Saint Petersburg (1902) and London (1907) without any conclusion being reached. The Washington Conference in 1912 finally recommended each National Red

Cross Society to set up a special commission to provide relief to servicemen in captivity. Gustave Ador, who was Chairman at that memorable meeting, stated that the Geneva Committee was prepared to send Swiss delegates to visit prison camps and supervise the distribution of such relief supplies, food and clothing ”.

I nodded—I had yet to learn!

“ Then there was the matter of moral relief which had been omitted, though essential: to collect from the official bureaux of belligerent countries full details on prisoners and to centralize this information in Geneva (my pro tem Mentor grew animated). In this respect nothing has been decided. It is a serious omission! So on August 15 the Geneva Committee decided to set up here the *International Prisoners of War Agency*. We have announced this to the whole world ”.

All this went dancing around in my head. Perhaps I had not been listening attentively enough: there were so many letters waiting to be dealt with . . .

“ Well, cheer up! ” my Mentor concluded. “ You can take your trays and work in the next room ”. This I did.

On that first morning, truth to tell, the “ Agency ” was for me only an abstract idea: a few sheets of paper bearing the emblem “ red cross on a white background ”, a pile of mail on a long deal table in a corner, with two antiquated brown chairs. At one end of the table sat a single, lonely typist, by no means sure of herself, doing her utmost to type I know not what on card-indexes from the Lord only knew what document. Never mind! I got down to work slitting envelopes and reading the mail.

I was thereupon suddenly seized with an emotion which grew with every letter: sometimes a neatly written well composed request, sometimes a slip of paper with a scrawled message and no idea of spelling. Between my fingers I felt the vibrations of a universal anxiety: the seamy side of battle, the reverse of heroism. This mail flowed in from Germany, France and England, and even further afield. Those left behind, to wait in anxiety, turned to the “ Cross of Geneva ” as their only hope of relief from the torment of knowing nothing about the fate of a missing relative and consequently fearing the worst. One poor little envelope, bore this address: “ *Genève, pour trouver mon fils* ”. That was how it reached us!

Another was addressed to "*Gustave Adoré, Genève*"; no more than that. I showed it to the President. Without a word he unfolded it. I returned to my reading. From that moment on I was no longer my own master.

Several people gave me a hand. The following morning I was joined by Mademoiselle Marguerite Cramer (later to become Madame Edouard Frick) whose organizational ability wrought miracles. One of her cousins strengthened our numbers for a long time. We three, overtaxed apprentices to begin with, had to cope with an ever-increasing volume of work. From time to time, Gustave Ador popped in to sustain us with a warm word of encouragement, only to vanish again.

"Do just as you feel is for the best" he said.

This left me plenty of scope, but little guidance! More helpers of both sexes, and varying abilities, offered their services. They had to work in shifts; it was out of the question to be more than four in that small, cramped room. All accepted our impromptu authority. The sometimes impetuous initiative of these kind hearts had oft to be held in check; in addition, everything had to be improvised, such as methods of labelling, filing, communications. On the first day we started writing out a white card, by hand, for each enquiry, showing the name, christian names, and regiment of the person sought, and the address of the persons to whom information should—when possible—be sent! These cards were then filed alphabetically in suitable boxes. In a fit of boldness we ordered thirty, each containing two hundred cards: later the Agency had more than three thousand such boxes!

By the end of a week we were once again short of space. Action stations for removal!: we moved across the street, lock, stock and barrel, with all our gear, and camped in two rooms of the Palais Eynard, lent by the town. However, ten days later these rooms too were congested. On October 12th we transferred the Agency—for good this time—to the Rath Museum from which hundreds of collections were evacuated. Art had to make way for us! At first it seemed like the great open spaces on the ground floor and in a huge room in the basement, to which light filtered through a glass wall. It was from here that had fled—in the arms of odd-job men—the pristine goddesses and naked stalwarts, cast in the mould of

antiquity. Our first lonely typist was transferred to a neighbouring building where she was at once submerged by some thirty other sisters of the keyboard.

After two months of war, by the end of September, requests for news were piling up but "official information"—that indispensable concomitant—was, alas, lacking. Could the Agency much longer justify its existence? Our anxiety increased. Ministries and army staffs, though besieged by the ICRC, remained aloof and silent. "We are at war and the prisoners are out of the game" we were given to understand. We could not let matters rest. President Ador left for Bordeaux, where the French Government had installed its headquarters. His persuasive authority induced—or pushed—to action the so-called "competent" authorities which, during two world wars, I have frequently known to be obstructive. Shortly thereafter, Gustave Ador laid on my desk a sheaf of papers he had gleaned: the names of German prisoners in French hands. No less pressing steps were taken in Berlin and produced similar lists of French, Belgian and British prisoners. Things had started to move! From then on these invaluable documents reached us regularly from both sides.

But how to exploit them to the best effect and rapidly? There were no precedents to guide us. It was impossible to proceed merely by a tally system. We therefore drew up a *coloured* card for each soldier traced. The typing pool, now doubled in strength, kept up an output of two streams of cards; one white, representing the missing, and the other coloured, green, yellow pink, etc., each colour representing a different nationality. This produced two parallel series of boxes, but comparison of details, one by one, was slow and unreliable and apt to lead to omissions. A bold decision was called for: the combination, in one system, of the white and the coloured cards, of which there were already several thousands. This was a considerable task and one requiring great precision. The plan was good: thanks to alphabetical accuracy the "news" card joined the "query" card which had been in suspense pending this encounter. The two concurring cards, clipped together, were sent to the department responsible for replying, which checked the information from the official lists and immediately transmitted it to the enquirer. The cards were thereupon returned to the general records until new

information came: a change of hospital, or of camp, or concerning a prisoner's state of health, etc. For enquiries and replies of various types, a series of forms for completion was printed. Thereby much time was saved. For every death a separate letter was written to the bereaved.

This system appears elementary today, but we had to devise and perfect it.

The flood of mail continued to rise. The Agency spread throughout the whole museum, even into the attics. The carpenters were hard at it: on the ground floor several of the high exhibition rooms occupied by us were even divided horizontally, half way to the ceiling, by a floor on beams where new departments came to roost. Cliffs of wooden filing boxes arose everywhere. Lighting was improvised as well as ventilation to cope with the needs of this swarm of workers. Departments were organized according to nationalities and space was allotted to each. The Anglo-Franco-Belgian section took up all the basement. The repertory boxes—not then known by the euphonious title of card-index—were piled one on top of the other. They were to spend some four years there, just like us.

Some twelve hundred staff devoted themselves to the Red Cross in Geneva for the four years of war and even for a long time after the armistice. With the exception of a small minority, they gave their time and labour free, several hours each day. They were a mixed lot, of every age and condition and of both sexes, but they were united by an ideal and in action. A strictly observed time-table enabled work to go on uninterruptedly, some two hundred persons took shifts in the many cells of this hive. The buzzing of these two hundred workers, one on top of the other (in a manner of speaking) was hardly audible. Attention to the job required silence: a wrongly filed card meant that some person being sought was almost certainly lost. Yet each card represented hope—and sometimes joy—for someone, somewhere. Thus, on the fringe of the war, in the background, we acquired a profound human experience. Our hearts were in the job. Methodical and thankless toil was transformed. As for me, thus fully absorbed, day and night, I scarcely remembered my former life or my work as a writer which had remained in abeyance. Of what use was fiction when history was there in the making, immediate, compulsory and blood stained?

In the last weeks of 1914, the amount of incoming mail was twelve thousand letters each day and the outgoing thirty thousand.

At this point I wish to recall the memory of a Frenchman, Etienne Clouzot, who was a palaeographer and exempt from military service for reasons of health. On the advice of Frédéric Barbey—subsequently a member of the ICRC—a former colleague of his at the Ecole des Chartes, we invited Clouzot to join us. He accepted by cable and soon became, in technical matters, a pillar of the Agency. From then on he settled in Geneva and devoted himself entirely to the Red Cross for some twenty years.

The official lists of prisoners were often lacking in precise information. In order to ascertain the fate of a wounded man, the circumstances of a death, the despatch to Geneva of a dead soldier's belongings—we opened special enquiries, even in hospitals and field dressing stations.

The ICRC set up a section to deal with civilians, dispersed by the war in enemy territory or enemy occupied territory, who were not covered, by the Conventions. It very soon grew in importance, seeking the missing and establishing contact, at least by correspondence, through the Agency in Geneva.

President Ador and his colleagues worked in two small rooms on the second floor. As the "Guardians of the Conventions" they maintained diplomatic and other correspondence with governments and National Red Cross Societies. They also negotiated the permission for Swiss delegates to visit prison camps. Thus, the Committee, relying on us, merely supervised our work from above and surveyed the Agency from afar. And yet visitors of high rank, official or private—Government ministers or senior military officers on mission to the ICRC—now and then descended to our labyrinth of rows of planks and shelves and tiers and cliffs of boxes. One day H. G. Wells came from London and had me explain to him in detail our methods, our failures and our successes. Apparently somewhat distraught as he listened to me this well known Englishman nodded his head. Then he enquired about two or three of his military friends who had been taken prisoner. There and then we were able to bring their cards out from the files. I handed them to him and from behind his somewhat bushy moustache came the words: "Wonderful. Thanks so much for our boys and our people." On

his impassible countenance I detected a sign of emotion; but hardly had I done so than he shook my hand and hurried away.

Of all these passing faces I still see one particularly who appeared in the middle of the autumn of 1914. At first I thought I had misheard the name which was whispered to me across the threshold. I went to meet the new arrival. A diminutive boy-scout was shepherding him between the cliffs of filing boxes. He gave me his name, Romain Rolland, and was silent. Somewhat embarrassed at first I ventured to tell him how much I admired *Jean-Christophe*. He interrupted me gently: "Thank you. But I came to offer my services."

Whilst I gave him an outline of our work I observed him: frail and seemingly chilly in spite of a heavy overcoat, thinning hair above his forehead, a moustache but sparse and fair. A slender, almost colourless face above a high, starched collar. His limpid gaze remained steadfast on me.

"What type of work would you prefer, Sir?" I finally asked this man, so famous yet reserved. "Anything which is useful; and immediately if you wish."

And useful and faithful to us Romain Rolland was, for several months; but he seemed to wish to fade into the background among his fellow clerks engaged in tallying and making annotations. When I passed near him and "his boxes" he would give me a nod. I soon suggested he take on more varied work, such as special letters to families. With his customary gentleness of voice and manner he said: "It is up to you to decide. There is so much to be done here! One struggles against such distress."

.....

If I have dwelt too long on these matters it is because, as I have said, they marked a new trend in my life. My country came to represent something more profound for me. Here was an awakening of conscience. To "neutral" Switzerland fell certain duties and powers which, though restricted, arose out of its singular geographic, political and moral situation. In this small haven of peace, in the centre of this man-made storm, it was given to us to help some at least of our fellowmen.

THE FIRST PRISONERS OF WAR AGENCY

The same Cross of Geneva, borne in the midst of battle, on arm-bands and ambulances, also flew above our vast hive of industry. This flag enlisted me almost without my knowing it and later was to influence me to my very roots for the rest of my life. This work must be pursued and developed so long as fatal rivalries continue to oppose nations, inflicting offence on the persons of the vanquished and infringing on their liberties.

Jacques CHENEVIÈRE
Honorary Vice-President
of the International Committee of
the Red Cross
