

Fifty years ago

On June 25, 1917, Romain Rolland wrote to Gustave Ador, then President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, informing him of the gift he was making to the Central Prisoners of War Agency. This gesture is worth recalling fifty years later, at a time when the fine figure of the author of Jean-Christophe is held in such high esteem.

The Revue internationale has already given an account of the close relations established for a certain time between Romain Rolland and the Red Cross.¹ Mr. Robert Melley wrote at the time : " One can imagine what this fervent idealist, an object of criticism much of which was malevolent, found in the Red Cross. First of all no doubt, and with what soothing satisfaction, because here was a practical way of coming personally to the aid of those who were suffering, and also pre-eminently the place, perhaps the only one which was at the centre and above the struggle where the truth was sought for and recorded without passion." Out of the sum he had been awarded for the Nobel Prize for Literature, Romain Rolland put aside 50,000 Swiss francs to offer to the work of the ICRC. He informed Gustave Ador of this in the following letter : ²

Dear Sir,

The International Red Cross has been one of the brightest lights illuminating the darkness of these tragic years. It has been a consolation for millions of unfortunate beings, the guardian of the spirit of human fellowship in the midst of universal suffering.

¹ " Romain Rolland et la Croix-Rouge ", see *Revue internationale*, February, 1955.

² *Plate.* Romain Rolland's letter to Gustave Ador and the latter's reply. The two letters have been translated by the ICRC.

For millions of people it is still the harbinger of better times to come.

On behalf of those it has helped by its example and action, I would like to ask it to accept, as a modest token of my deep gratitude, a donation of fifty thousand francs for the International Prisoners of War Agency—whose hallowed work has enriched the names of Switzerland and Geneva throughout the world.

I would be pleased if out of this amount a sum of ten thousand francs were placed at the disposal of the head of the Agency's civilian section, Dr. Ferrière whose humble and affectionate collaborator I had the honour of being for a time.

With the assurance of my high consideration and cordial devotion,

Romain Rolland

Gustave Ador had just been appointed a Federal Councillor and his colleagues told him of this generous gesture as he was taking leave of the International Prisoners of War Agency. In spite of the heavy duties awaiting him in Berne he thanked Romain Rolland by personal letter on June 29, 1917:

Dear Sir,

When I went this morning to the Musée Rath to say goodbye to my friends, they handed me your letter of the 25th informing me of the magnificent donation of 50,000 francs which you have been so very good as to make to our Agency. Deeply touched by this much appreciated encouragement given to the work of the Red Cross by a man whose character and nobleness of sentiment I so greatly admire, I would ask you to accept the expression of all my gratitude.

It was a great privilege to have been able, during this terrible war, to do something for so many stricken families and it is indeed the rôle of Switzerland, which has been so spared, to seek to alleviate suffering.

We have had the joy of counting you as one of our collaborators for many months in the Civilian Section and we have all remembered the valuable help you gave us. According to your wishes, ten

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thousand francs will be remitted to Dr. Ferrière for the Civilian Section which he directs with such devotion.

With the renewed expression of my gratitude,

Yours sincerely,
Gustave Ador

We think it apposite on this anniversary to reproduce extracts at some length of the article published in our columns of Mr. Paul-Emile Schazmann concerning Romain Rolland who worked at the International Prisoners of War Agency.¹

The "list of persons having worked at the International Prisoners of War Agency (August 1914-December 1918)" mentions laconically amongst many others, in alphabetical order, after the name "Rolland, Madeleine (M^{lle})", that of "Rolland, Romain".

Since the middle of September 1914, Rolland who was staying at the Beau Séjour Hotel at Champel with his mother, whilst his father and sister were living in Lancy, wrote to Gustave Ador, President of the ICRC, asking him to make use of his services. On September 24, Ador wrote to him suggesting that he would be better serving the final triumph of the course of justice and freedom by writing. The day before, Rolland's article *Au-dessus de la mêlée* had appeared in the "Journal de Genève". He continued to press his point and was duly called upon to present himself at the offices set up in the Eynard Palace.

The Prisoners of War agency, then in its early days, was able to transmit prisoners' mail to their families without too much difficulty. Romain Rolland was able to do this for large numbers of Germans and Austrians interned in the South of France. It gave him some concern to observe that in 80 % of these cases it was not possible to find the addresses of missing soldiers sought by their families. "The first task of all", he wrote, "would have seemed to me to have been to collect all lists of prisoners . . . and to have drawn them up in alphabetical order. . ." If he had in fact returned to the Central Prisoners of War Agency of the Second World War

¹ See *Revue internationale*, February 1955.

A Monsieur Gustave Ador
président du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge

Lundi 25 juin 1917

Cher Monsieur

La Croix-Rouge Internationale a été une
des plus pures lumières qui aient éclairé la
nuit de ces tragiques années. Elle a été
la consolatrice de millions de malheureux,
la gardienne de l'esprit de fraternité humaine
dans la souffrance universelle. Elle reste pour des
millions d'âmes l'annonciatrice d'un avenir
meilleur.

Je voudrais, au nom de ceux qu'elle a

couronné par son exemple & son action, la prier
d'accepter, comme toute expression de ma
profonde gratitude, un don de cinquante mille
francs, pour l'Agence internationale des prisonniers
de guerre, - cette œuvre sainte qui aura rendu
chers dans le monde entier les noms de la
Suisse et de Genève.

Je serais heureux que sur cette
somme dix mille francs fussent mis à la
disposition du chef de la section civile de l'Agence,
Monsieur le docteur Fauriol, dont j'ai eu l'hon-
neur d'être pendant quelque temps le modeste
& affectueux collaborateur.

Veuillez agréer, cher Monsieur,
l'assurance de ma haute considération et
de mon cordial dévouement

Romain Rolland

Villeneuve, hôtel Byron.



INTER ARMA CARITAS

COMITÉ INTERNATIONAL DE LA CROIX-ROUGE

AGENCE INTERNATIONALE DES PRISONNIERS DE GUERRE

Genève, 29 Juin 1917

Cher Monsieur

En allant ce matin au Music Path, prendre
 congé de mes amis, ils m'ont remis votre lettre du
 25 et m'annonçant la magnifique don de 50,000
 francs que vous avy l'extrême bonté de faire à notre
 Agence - Profondément touché par ce précieux
 encouragement donné à l'œuvre de la Croix Rouge
 par un homme dont j'admire le caractère et la
 noblesse des sentiments, j'ai voulu plus de recevoir
 l'expression de ma plus vive reconnaissance -
 C'est un grand privilège d'avoir pu pendant
 cette horrible guerre, faire quelque chose pour tant
 de familles affligées et c'est bien la route de la Suisse
 si imparfaite, de chercher à soulager les souffrances.
 Nous avons en la voie de vous compter grand
 bien des mots parmi nos collaborateurs au service
 civil et tous nous avons conservé la souvenir de
 votre si utile concours - Il va sans dire que selon
 votre désir, dix mille francs seront remis au docteur
 Terrier pour la section civile j'ill s'ill - avec
 tant de dévouement. Veuillez agréer j'vous
 prie, cher Monsieur, avec la nouvelle expression
 de ma gratitude, l'assurance de mes sentiments
 les plus distingués

G. Ador.

Monsieur Romain Rolland

Hotel Byron

Villeneuve

Prière de rappeler
dans la réponse le
N° ci-dessous :

4750

he would have seen the progress made in this sphere and admired the Watson perforated card system then in use.

During his work, tedious at times, at the Agency, Rolland was amazed at the naïvety of some of the correspondents. For example, one woman, having read that civilian clothing could not be sent to prisoners for fear of escapes, sent Ador a pair of white trousers which she had dyed the regulation red for French infantrymen, asking him whether this was the approved colour. Another asked him to send her suitcase, on which she gave two pages of detail; she then concluded by expressing hopes that she could also have news of her husband, soldier "X". A dozen fiancées wrote concerning the same "fiancé". However, the tragic element underlying the comic did not escape him, such as the case of a father begging the Red Cross to transmit a letter to the Kaiser William II asking him to send his wounded son to a town nearest the Swiss frontier to enable his mother, who never stopped weeping, to go and see him there.

Rolland worked only a short time in the Prisoners of War section, before going to the Interned Civilian Section set up by Dr. Frédéric Ferrière. Women, children, the aged, all of whom entirely unprepared to face such trials, had been taken from their homes and deprived of their possessions. It was a question of coming to the aid of these unfortunate ones.

Romain Rolland was then to feel unqualified admiration for the work and new tasks of the Red Cross: "it encompasses the name of Geneva with wondrous glory", he notes in his *Journal*, "it spreads to the very depths of the French and German countryside." He knows this from letters sent from every province and even from his native town in Burgundy.

Describing some time later a visit made by the President and Vice-President of the ICRC to Berlin, where initial contact was very difficult to establish, Rolland observed that his idea of "the two Germanys" enabled Dr. Ferrière to be patient and understand the situation better, the civilian element having intervened on their behalf against the Ministry of War... Romain Rolland worked until the summer at the Agency, leaving it on July 3, 1915. Before devoting himself again to his writing, he helped Dr. Ferrière to obtain the repatriation of 3100 French medical orderlies and

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300 doctors, not through official representations but by correspondence and personal approaches, taking the International Committee's instructions into account. His own influence had greatly contributed to this result.

The famous writer had collaborated with the International Prisoners of War Agency for nine months. Two years followed during which he continued to interest himself in its work. This is indeed revealed in his correspondence such as his *Journal*. Hermann Hesse replied to his letters on "Pro Captivis" writing-paper at Berne. The initiative of Pope Benedict XIV, together with that of the International Red Cross, to obtain the internment in Switzerland of sick French and German prisoners, seemed to Rolland to be especially worthy of that great prelate and of the Geneva Committee.

In June 1917, Romain Rolland was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, amounting to 100,000 francs which he distributed entirely amongst works of charity. The Prisoners of War Agency received half the amount . . .

. . . At the donor's wish, 10,000 francs were set aside for the Civilian Prisoners Section created by Dr. Ferrière. Rolland always kept a moving memory of the time when at the Agency he sat each day beside the merciful doctor. He admired his reactions to all forms of injustice, which were so strong that he turned pale and his lips trembled, his good will in the presence of human weaknesses, and his horror of the pharisaic behaviour of the virtuous. On leaving the Red Cross, he presented it with a collection of his *Jean-Christophe* books.

"What a difference", notes the great novelist, "between his sincerity and that of most men, even of the best, who are sincere by will ! He was sincere with the limpidity of a pure source".

By messages and visits from Dr. Ferrière, Romain Rolland continued throughout the post-war period to follow the beneficent work of the Red Cross, amongst others in Vienna and Salonika in 1919. From their side, those who had had the author of the *Vie de Beethoven* with them, at a time when the Agency was beginning its vast humanitarian activity, had written through the pen of their President, Gustave Ador: ". . . We all remember your most useful help . . ."