

A TRIBUTE TO THE ICRC'S WORK FOR PRISONERS OF WAR

From 1 to 3 November 1968, the VIth Congress of the International Confederation of Former Prisoners of War—an organization with a world-wide membership of almost two million and affiliated to the World Veterans' Federation—was held in Geneva. The ICRC was represented by Mr. F. Siordet, its Vice-President, and by Mr. J. de Preux, legal adviser.

Apart from the problems related to the pathology of captivity and the lasting consequences of life in prison camps for the health of some former inmates, the Congress broached wider issues concerning the construction of tomorrow's world, with a broad outlook and international understanding based on common experience. French, German, Belgian, Italian and Austrian delegates raised various problems, particularly the strengthening of their solidarity, assistance to developing countries, and their relations with European institutions. At the closing session, Mr. Georges Lepeltier, delegate-general, delivered a paper on the present crisis facing civilization, the origins of which, in his view, date back to the Renaissance and herald a general change in values. During the same session, Mr. Kiessling, as the Confederation's Vice-President, expressed its gratitude to the Swiss people and Government, and to the ICRC, for what they did for the seriously wounded casualties interned in Switzerland during the first world war.

On the last day the Congress members visited the ICRC and were shown its main departments. They were welcomed by Mr. Siordet, Vice-President, Mr. J. Pictet, ICRC member and director general, and by several others of the institution's officials.

Mr. R. Nachez, President of the International Confederation of Former Prisoners of War, flanked by Mr. R. Laumont, Secretary-General, and Mr. G. Boulens, President of the Swiss section of the Association of Former French Prisoners of War, presented Mr. Siordet with a bronze medal as a tribute to the ICRC for its

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work for prisoners of war.¹ Mr. Siordet thanked him with the following words:

It is with special joy and emotion that, on behalf of the International Committee, I receive this magnificent medal, for nowadays the Red Cross receives more criticism than compliments. When a country devotes huge resources to waging war against another country or against part of itself, destroying towns and starving the population, then public opinion is moved. But some people become even more agitated if the Red Cross, with its meagre resources, does not manage to rebuild at the same pace on the ruins and raise the dead. This has always been the case. Whoever tries to save something voluntarily is condemned to succeed. Perhaps, in one present-day conflict or another the ICRC might have done better or more. The future will tell. But this I can say: It is not the Red Cross which bombs people and starves children.

This medal, testifying to your gratitude, is received by us also as a token of friendship. For you are our friends. We know you all by name; you are all here in these forty-five million index cards of the Central Tracing Agency which you will shortly see, where any one of you may find a record of your captivity. That we were able to act for the benefit of prisoners of war was due to our hundreds, even thousands, of volunteers, who gave up a few hours each week, or many days each month, year after year, attending to these cards like the nurse tends the wounded. For them, some of whom are still with us, these records were not just pieces of cardboard; each represented a man behind barbed wire, wounded perhaps, an anxious mother or wife. That forges bonds of fellowship.

Whilst we are here gathered as friends, allow me to acquaint you of something which is a matter of concern to us. The Red Cross in general, and the ICRC in particular, was able to assist some prisoners of war during the second world war because there was a Geneva Convention, the Prisoner of War Code, which defined the status of prisoners of war. In 1949, this and the other Geneva Conventions were revised, strengthened and extended, and today they have been ratified by almost

¹ *Plate: Tribute to the International Committee of the Red Cross from the International Confederation of Former Prisoners of War (3 November 1968).*

every State in the world. These Geneva Conventions lay down standards for the treatment of non-combatants or persons who have laid down their arms and are held by the enemy (military wounded and sick, prisoners of war, interned civilians, the population of occupied territories), but they do not make any regulation for the actual conduct of operations. This is a matter for what is called the law of war, or the Law of The Hague. But this dates back for the most part to 1907. There are experts who maintain that this law, dating back to before the advent of military aviation and the discovery of nuclear energy, does not apply to air warfare and the atomic bomb.

And that is the situation. The infantry officer at the head of his troops who sets fire to a village and massacres all the inhabitants, women and children included, is considered a war criminal even in his own country. But let a pilot destroy a village from the air and slaughter the inhabitants, and nothing is said. It's modern warfare! A pilot or artillery gunner taken prisoner after destroying a village may brandish a Convention and demand treatment as a prisoner of war. All very well; but the women and children who perished in the village had no legal text to flourish to protect them from bombs or shells.

You will agree that this can hardly be tolerated. It is surprising that governments have not shown the same eagerness to bring the law of war up to date as they did to strengthen, sign and ratify the Geneva Conventions. The ICRC has been doing its utmost to draw attention to this situation and to propose remedies. In spite of the all too frequent inertia it encounters it has persevered, and will continue doing so. But it is probable that nothing short of almost universal opinion can induce States to revive, strengthen and give greater precision to the rules for the conduct of hostile operations in order to avoid useless suffering. We were able to observe how laudable were the discussions at your Congress, oriented towards the search for ways and means of contributing to peace and understanding among men. We therefore believe that former prisoners of war, like all Veterans in general, are well qualified to play a part in creating a favourable current of opinion.

After Mr. R. Nachez had restated the high esteem of former prisoners of war for the work of the Red Cross, two films were shown and groups were formed to visit the Central Tracing Agency.