

The Esperantist Movement's humanitarian activities in the two World Wars and its relationship with the International Red Cross

In memory of Rafael Fiol Paredes, distinguished physician, soldier and Esperantist, the preserver of Andalusia's devotion to the Esperantist ideal.

by José María Rodríguez Hernández

Esperantism as a movement began at the end of the nineteenth century. It advocated the adoption as an international language of the auxiliary language invented by Dr Lazarus Zamenhof, a Pole, in 1887. At first only the dream of a young man appalled by the violence in his native city Bialystok, whose four cultures, four religions and four languages were perpetually at loggerheads, Esperanto became over the years what it now is, the foremost international language ever invented.

Because of the humanitarian ideas inherent in its universal scope, Esperantism, at first a purely linguistic idea, soon became an international, or rather supranational, movement; a movement concerned with the human condition, upholding human rights, civil liberties and the rights of peoples. The Esperantist Movement is a child of its age, the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the first international organizations were formed. Among these were the precursor of the International Labour Office, which protects workers' rights, the Universal Postal Union, which regulates national postal services, and the Red

Original: Spanish.

Cross itself. From the very outset the Esperantist Movement was in touch with the Red Cross, sharing its aims of international understanding and cooperation.

The first official to popularize the use of Esperanto within the International Red Cross was Captain Bayol,¹ a Frenchman who in 1906 published a leaflet in Esperanto on the proper treatment of prisoners, intended for military medical personnel of various countries. Subsequently a number of local committees, including those of Antwerp in Belgium and Königsberg, then a German city, recommended that their members learn Esperanto, and in 1910 the French Red Cross published a review entitled *Espéranto et Croix-Rouge*.

It was only in 1921, however, after the tragic experience of the First World War, that the Red Cross gave its official blessing to Esperanto. It did so at the 10th International Conference of the Red Cross, which unanimously adopted a resolution proposed by the Chinese delegation, led by Dr Wang, urging all National Societies to encourage their members, especially Red Cross Youth, to learn Esperanto. This, the resolution said, would facilitate relief for the wounded and prisoners of war, be useful in organizing Conferences of the Red Cross, and promote international understanding and cooperation.

A number of National Societies, including the Spanish Red Cross, accordingly included the recommendation in their new statutes.

The First World War

The Esperantist Movement made spectacular progress in the first two decades of this century, holding congress after congress in many countries and publishing numerous books and pamphlets, while the number of Esperanto speakers increased by leaps and bounds. The outbreak of the First World War interrupted the pursuit of its international aims.

The Xth World Esperanto Congress was due to begin on 2 August 1914 in Paris.² Only a few days earlier the terrible events that led to the First World War took place in Sarajevo, and at 4 p.m. on 1 August 1914 the French government ordered general mobilization. By then many

¹ Sirjaev I. *Enciklopedio de Esperanto*. Hungara Esperanto-Asocio, Budapest, 1986, pp. 41, 473-474.

² Courtinat L. *Historia de Esperanto*. Published by the author, Agen, 1966, pp. 309, 402.

delegates to the Congress had already reached Paris, but some others, especially those of German or Russian nationality, were stopped at the German border and were refused permission to enter France. Esperantists already meeting in Paris found the capital in a state of fevered excitement because of the mobilization and saw thousands of soldiers leave for the German border.

The Organizing Committee of the Congress held an emergency meeting, and although it could not believe that the war would begin as soon as the day after mobilization it considered whether the Congress could still be held. It decided to go ahead if possible with the first day's programme, including the various religious services and the solemn opening session. Few delegates were present at the official opening ceremony; only 900 of the expected 4,000 delegates were able to present their credentials to the Organizing Committee. During the night of 1 August the situation became so complicated that as a precautionary measure the French government advised foreign Esperanto delegates to leave Paris on the following day rather than risk being stranded there, perhaps for an indefinite period. Finally the organizers called off the Congress. War broke out on 2 August and the delegates to the Congress began to leave Paris. The Russian delegates and those from Balkan States had great difficulty returning to their home countries and had to do so via Switzerland or Scandinavia. Nationals of other countries, including Britain, had to stay on in Paris for some weeks.

The start of the First World War was a grievous blow to the Esperantist Movement. Thousands of its members were killed or wounded in battle, but even so it found scope for its humanitarian work. The outbreak of war caught thousands of people working, studying or holidaying abroad; many of them went to bed as "guests" and awakened as "enemies".

The Universala Esperanto-Asocio (UEA — Universal Esperanto Association) accordingly provided a new service³ on the initiative of its Nuremberg representative, Dr Orthal. This official wrote to the Head Office of the UEA in Geneva asking for information on persons in "enemy territory" of whom nothing more had been heard. His request gave the Swiss founder of the UEA, Hector Hodler, the happy idea of extending such a service to a wider public. He promptly sent a letter to all UEA representatives the world over, who translated it into their national languages and had it published in hundreds of newspapers and periodicals.

³ Courtinat L. *op. cit.*, pp. 309-402.

The letter pointed out that the sudden outbreak of war had caught many people by surprise in enemy countries and that they had not been able to get in touch with their families. To help them, the UEA Head Office in Geneva had informed its representatives in the countries at war that the UEA was willing to act as an intermediary for the exchange of private letters. Letters were to be sent to the UEA's office in Geneva, which would send them on, if necessary with a translation. Only unsealed letters containing no mention of political or military matters would be accepted.

At first this announcement yielded meagre results — about ten or fifteen letters a day. Later on 50 to 100, and in the end about 400 requests were received daily. To cope with this new situation the Geneva Head Office enlisted the aid of a dozen volunteers and set up separate sections to forward letters, trace individuals, send parcels of various kinds, contact civilian internees in concentration camps, repatriate young persons and children, aid prisoners of war, and, finally, negotiate with military authorities and the International Red Cross.

The largest section, the one dealing with letters, was continually seeking new ways of helping enquirers. For example, when the Russian army occupied Galicia in Polish territory, cutting Russian-occupied Galicia off from the part of Galicia already occupied by the German army, the UEA's Head Office in Geneva daily passed on letters to its Moscow representatives for forwarding via the Russian Field Post Office and sent letters for German-occupied Galicia to Berlin. Families living only a few kilometres apart but separated by a front line thus had to communicate with each other over distances of thousands of kilometres, but by this means thousands of people were able to get in touch with their families, thousands joined relatives and others were sent parcels of food, clothing and medicine. The successful conclusion of this enormous task was due in part to the remarkable efficiency of a network of UEA representatives having a common language, and to the humanitarian spirit inspiring their Association.

Besides restoring contact between civilians in warring countries, the UEA asked its representatives there to apply to the military authorities for permission to visit prison camps, always in association with the International Red Cross. The request was a useful one, for the UEA had always believed that the first thing that makes people look upon each other as enemies is that they do not speak the same language. Once this difficulty has been overcome by using a common, neutral language — that is, a language that is not that of any of the warring powers — one is well on the way to believing that, as the Red Cross proclaims, the wounded and prisoners are not enemies. For that reason a number of Esperantist

and other organizations supported the teaching of Esperanto in internment camps. The YMCA, for example, sent prisoners thousands of manuals for the study of Esperanto. In addition, Esperanto-speaking prisoners taught their fellow prisoners Esperanto, often with the permission of the officer in charge of their prison camp; for in the First World War none of the powers involved objected to Esperanto or the Esperantist Movement.

By the end of the First World War living conditions in the defeated countries were appalling. Galloping inflation and food shortages were rife in Central Europe, and in some parts of Germany and Austria there was extreme poverty. Early in 1920 the Esperantist Society in Styria, Austria, wrote to the Esperantist Association Frateco (Brotherhood), of Zaragoza, Spain, appealing for aid. Describing the privation experienced by hundreds of children in that part of Austria,⁴ it urged the Spanish Esperantist Movement, and especially its Zaragoza group, to send help, seeing that Spain had remained neutral during the war and had not suffered its consequences. The President of the Association called a general meeting in February 1920 to discuss ways of helping Austrian children.

The meeting showed its solidarity by deciding to grant all requests made to it to give a home to Austrian children for as long as necessary, and formed a Committee for the purpose chaired by the Aragónese Esperantist Emilio Gaston. After great difficulties the first group of Austrian children reached Barcelona by sea on 10 October 1920, and a week later a second group arrived with Karl Bartel, the Austrian coordinator of the operation. Many families took the children into their homes and the Association itself housed one of them at its headquarters. To cut a long story short, the children spent over a year in Zaragoza before returning to Austria in July 1922.

The recent exodus of refugees from the former Yugoslavia to safer countries was a terrible ordeal, even when facilitated by rapid transport and means of communication within almost everyone's reach. How much more admirable, therefore, was the solidarity shown by the Zaragoza Esperantists, who in 1920 freely offered all they could give to alleviate the plight of those who suffer most in war: children.

⁴ Marco Botella A. *Analoj de la Esperanta Movado en Hispanujo*. Frateco, Zaragoza, 1987, pp. 132-134.

The Second World War

A few years before the Second World War the Esperantist Movement was harshly persecuted in the USSR and even more so in Germany. The totalitarian régimes of those countries, especially the Nazis, did not look kindly on a Movement that was in touch with foreign countries, a Movement that did not believe that one race was superior to all others or support the systematic persecution of the Jewish people. They therefore outlawed the Esperantist Associations and broke up the network of representatives of the Universal Esperanto Association that had worked so well in the First World War.

Nevertheless, in 1936 the organization Esperantista Interhelpo⁵ (Esperantist Aid) was formed in the countries of Central Europe to aid victims of the Nazi terror, especially German Jews. When the Second World War broke out this organization extended its services to Czechoslovakia, Austria, Poland and the other countries occupied one after another by the National Socialist forces. Its main purpose was to help civilians who had had to flee from their homes and had reached neutral countries. It also cooperated with the International Red Cross and the Swiss government in sending mail and food to concentration camp inmates. In addition, Esperantista Interhelpo channelled economic aid from the United States to victims of the pro-Nazi régime in Romania. The Nazis' iron grip on the postal services and the isolation of the Swiss government unfortunately cut off this lifeline in 1942.

Despite these setbacks, the history of World War Two offers innumerable examples of aid given by individual Esperantists to prisoners, victims of persecution and indeed all kinds of innocent victims of human barbarity. Sometimes even German soldiers who spoke Esperanto risked their lives to help fellow Esperantists in occupied countries. In Denmark,⁶ for example, several Jewish families were given timely warning, by means of a microphone secretly installed by an Esperantist German soldier and linking German army headquarters in Copenhagen to the home of a Danish Esperantist, that they were to be arrested. In other cases help came in the form of letters of guarantee sent to the German government by Esperantists in neutral countries, which facilitated the release and repatriation of certain persons detained by the Nazi régime. Also worthy of mention is the Swiss journalist Hans Ugger⁷ of Associated Press, who was

⁵ Lapena I. *et al. Esperanto en perspektivo: Faktoj kaj analizoj pri la intemacia Lingvo*, CED, London-Rotterdam, 1974, pp. 367-368.

⁶ Lins U. *La Danjera Lingvo*, Bleicher, Gerlingen, 1988, p. 132.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

arrested and interrogated by the Gestapo for keeping in touch with, and helping, persecuted German Esperantists.

The most outstanding example of humanitarian aid by an Esperantist during the Second World War is, however, that of Swedish journalist Valdemar Langlet.⁸ Langlet learned the international language in 1890. He was later instrumental in founding the Uppsala Esperantist Club and was active in the Swedish Esperanto Association, of which he was President from 1906 to 1909. He was also the editor of the review *Lingvo Internacia*. From 1890 to 1900 he travelled widely in Russia, Asia and all over Europe as a journalist writing for Swedish periodicals.

Valdemar Langlet took up residence in Hungary in 1932, working simultaneously as Reader in Swedish at Budapest University and as an employee of the Swedish Consulate, helping families in need. He was caught in Hungary when the Second World War broke out. On 19 March 1944 the country was occupied by the German army, and the Gestapo immediately began arresting persons on previously prepared lists. After meeting a young man who had managed to escape from a concentration camp, Langlet decided to help victims of Nazi persecution. He had already seen that unaided attempts to help them made by the Red Cross and the Swedish Legation had come to nothing. As the Budapest representative of the Swedish Red Cross he decided to organize a safety net on a grand scale, providing thousands of people with Swedish Red Cross letters of protection. This document was soon baptized the "Langlet Passport".

More than once his conduct bordered on the heroic, when he saved the lives of people already lined up against a wall to be shot, and with his wife Nina barred the way to groups of Hungarian collaborators about to force their way into a convent. His most distinguished act, however, was on 14 November 1944, when on arrival at the Swedish Red Cross office in Budapest he found a large group of Jews waiting at the entrance to the Legation, surrounded by members of the Hungarian Nazi movement who had begun to evict them from the premises. Langlet at once made a direct complaint to the Hungarian authorities, and the attackers began to withdraw. Some of them, however, forcibly abducted a number of the refugees. Langlet ran after them, a riot supervened, and with his bare hands he tried to free the captives from dozens of armed men. The Hungarians began to fire in the air and one of them prepared to throw

⁸ Knivilä K. Esperantisto kontraŭ malhomeco. *Esperanto*, Rotterdam, May 1995, pp. 82-84.

a hand-grenade at the Swedish Red Cross offices. Jozsef Heñrah, like Langlet a member of the Swedish Red Cross, stopped the would-be assailant and warned him that the building formed part of the Swedish Embassy. It was therefore Swedish territory, and any attack on it could be interpreted as an act of aggression against a neutral country. In the end all the arrested persons were set free.

In May 1945 Valdemar Langlet and all the officials of the Swedish Red Cross in Budapest had to leave Hungary. On his return to Sweden Langlet formed a committee to provide aid to Hungary, and in 1946 wrote an account of his dramatic experiences under the title *Verk och dagar i Budapest*. In 1955 a street and a school in Budapest were named after this Swedish Esperantist who together with the Red Cross had fought so hard and so long.

The two World Wars were severe setbacks for the Esperantist Movement. Many of the people who from the beginning of the century had so zealously propagated a language created to be international, and had striven for the international ideal it embodied, had died in battle or in concentration camps, and the survivors' internationalist aspirations had been disappointed.

For all that, Bayol, Hodler, Langlet and others of their kind realized that Esperanto, and the Esperantist Movement that promotes and disseminates it, could - emulating and cooperating with the International Red Cross - offer valuable humanitarian protection to civilians caught up in armed conflicts.

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