

# The International Red Cross Committee and the national Red Cross societies [The End]

Autor(en): **Jobin, L. S.**

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## THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS COMMITTEE AND THE NATIONAL RED CROSS SOCIETIES.

(Continued from our last issue).

Besides the then aged General Dufour, there was Gustave Moynier, a jurist and active philanthropist of exceptional capacity and experience; Dr. Appia, a surgeon who had seen service in the field; Dr. Th. Maunoir, a physician and eminent figure in society. Each of these collaborators had a distinct and special contribution to make toward the common end, and as the "Committee of Five," they held their first official meeting on the 19th February, 1863. Eight months later, a private international conference in Geneva saw the Red Cross officially into the world, to be followed in less than a year's time by the diplomatic assembly which, by the signing of the Geneva Convention, became a milestone on the upward path of human progress.

This was the "solemn agreement which, approved and ratified," became the foundation upon which the national Red Cross societies raised their world-wide edifice. Since 1864 it has been twice revised to meet altered conditions and cover a wider range of humanitarian endeavour. It was the instrument by which the governments pledged themselves to guarantee the Red Cross workers and their work in time of war; the scope of that work remained a matter for the Red Cross societies to decide and develop as time went on.

But who would guarantee the guarantors? And who would protect them, on their side, against wilful or inadvertent breaches of the rules by this or that national Red Cross? For it should never be lost sight of that both the societies and the Convention have their chief *raison d'être* in the fact and incidence of war, and war is a circumstance in which even the safest promises tend to become precarious. For a function as delicate as the guardianship of a treaty and the protector of Red Cross principles in their integrity, none but a neutral body could suffice.

But what is neutral? Not the assembly of nations, each with its own interests to defend. And since preparation for all contingencies in advance of the event was the essence of the Red Cross idea, how could a neutral group be formed when no one knew what the future might bring forth in the way of international discord? The play of international politics made almost every country as likely a participant as every other, with none more essentially neutral than the next. No, the body to which the safe keeping of both the Convention and the Red Cross would need to be entrusted, could not be international—it must be supra-national. Nothing less could gain or keep the confidence of all the governments and all the national Red Cross societies alike.

To be supra-national is to be neutral by definition, and vice versa. One such country existed, and one only—Switzerland. The neutrality of the Swiss Confederation had once taken the form of participating in everybody's wars; later, it took the form of participating in nobody's. Since the days of Napoleon the policy of all the great Powers had confirmed the traditional neutrality of this oldest of the world's democracies as one of the pillars of European security. The soil of such a country was propitious for the establishment of an "International Red Cross

Committee," guardian of the movement and the treaty; the protection of an absolutely and permanently neutral government offered far-reaching assurances. Yet all this might not have been enough, were not the members of this trustee institution themselves not only neutrals but neutrals of a single nationality. A council whose international attitude was fixed and homogenous to that extent, could ensure the countries with whose problems of war relief it had to deal that all of them would receive fair and equal treatment at its hands, and in all its deliberations and activities it would escape innumerable pitfalls which await less safely constituted bodies.

Hence the International Committee was, is and always will be entirely Swiss, both as to its members—never more than twenty-five—and its collaborators, paid or voluntary, many or few. Outward and inward neutrality and impartiality are its watchword. Even in its own country it holds itself unswervingly aloof from the political, social and ideological currents in continual ebb and flow around it. Its strength is in its immutability, and in its total independence.

The International Committee is not heir to ills which beset the national societies. These, because of their close connection with their governments and armies, and their dependence upon the nation, are subject to several dangers. A national Red Cross is a public institution; a government decree could refuse it further support. Its country might withdraw from the Geneva Convention, in which case it would automatically cease to be. Political changes affect it; new points of view may even call its purposes in question, and discredit it before public opinion. The occupation of the national territory in war-time may paralyse or abolish it; civil war may split it in two, and revolution put it out of action. A wave of national poverty could deprive it of its resources, and no sister-society might be able or willing to come to its aid. A general cataclysm might sweep away all the national societies, or render them temporarily powerless to work.

What then? On condition that the neutral status of its members and of the country in which it had its seat remained unchanged the Red Cross in the world could survive through the International Committee. This is its significance within the movement, of which it is the root whilst the national societies are the branches. The Committee is not a public institution; it is non-political; it is independent of the state. Its independence in every respect is such, in fact, that it has no legal status or public identity except as an association of a small number of private citizens. Its charter is an unwritten one; the Geneva Conventions do not even mention it except in the revised accord of 1929, where it is stated that its activities shall not be hampered. It is as independent of the national societies as they are of each other\*, but whereas they are not obliged to contribute towards its support in any way, it is in duty bound to serve all of them that seek its aid, without regard to whether they bear their share of the burden or not. The International Committee is international in the sense that it is at the disposal of the Red Cross in all countries without distinction. Wherever help is needed and not being given

\*It is a notable fact that the International Committee's relations with the Swiss Red Cross Society are neither closer nor less close than with any other national society in the world.

from any other quarter, the Committee is there to step into the breach.

Disasters of nature, or the calamitous epilogues of war are dealt with chiefly by the League of Red Cross Societies, and the Committee then resumes its more advisory and legislative character, which rôle attracts no public notice. It is when war returns, disintegrating the lives of men and peoples, that the Committee comes back perforce into the limelight. In a world war all Red Cross roads lead once more to Geneva, and Geneva is the starting point from which they spread out again across the divided countries. The more spectacular departments of its vast activities—the Prisoners of War Agency and actions such as the relief to Greece, in which it works jointly with other institutions, are visible to all. But this great superstructure of concrete service depends upon the soundness of the base, and the base is the two-fold one of the Geneva Convention and the Red Cross idea, absolute and indivisible. What the public can neither see nor be told about is the work of continual vigilance by which the President and members of the International Red Cross Committee keep the foundation intact. The sins of the national societies are visited upon the International Committee, although they are sovereign and independent, and in no way under its control. It is the intermediary between them as long as they are cut off from direct contact through the war, and whenever trouble arises, as it is sure to do in the circumstances and state of mind created by desperate conflicts the Committee must smooth things out and pacify both sides.

The clauses of a treaty do not look the same to the possible belligerent who signed them and the actual belligerent who has to honour his signature in circumstances not altogether convenient. War has a relaxing effect upon scruples and interpretations, and a stiffening one upon perseverance in a breach once committed. It is no sinecure to be the keeper of the Geneva Convention during any general war; still less during the most widespread and ruthless conflict in the annals of mankind.

Had the Geneva Convention been fused or formally identified with the Red Cross movement, the Committee's task would have been less complex and its responsibility shared by all the national societies. But though collateral, the treaty and the movement are not combined, so that the Committee alone, and not the national societies with it, has to assume the difficult trusteeship of both. Always it has sought to carry out its task in a manner worthy of its founders, and in doing so has had to weather many a storm, especially during the past twenty-five years. Public opinion has often misjudged its efforts, overrating some but underrating others, the error in both cases being mainly due to the fact that few people, within or outside Red Cross circles, make the necessary distinction between the National Red Cross Societies and the International Red Cross Committee. A clearer understanding of their nature and function within the movement may enlighten both friends and critics.

THE END.

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Mentioned in the supplement of the *London Gazette* of August 24th, 1944, in recognition of gallant and distinguished service in Italy, is Corporal L. S. Jobin, of the R.A.S.C. — Congratulations.

## SWISS CLUB, DUNFERMLINE

### 1st August Celebrations.

As in previous years our small colony has come together again on Tuesday evening, the 1st of August, to celebrate our National Day.

We all went to the gathering gay in spirit and full of anticipation. Something was in the air for the last few days, indicating a surprise. Indeed, we have been fully rewarded. One of our compatriots, who has a knack of doing the unexpected, had turned author for the occasion and had provided our dramatic circle with a one-act play suitable for the 1st of August.

The stage was very homely set as a "Wirts-Stube" in a peasant village. It was decorated by the innkeeper's wife with lanterns made by some of our compatriots, showing the various cantonal coat-of-arms. The play itself was well produced by our dramatists, and during the course of the play we saw and heard how Herr Lehrer, Herr Gmeindrat, Herr Hueber the innkeeper, and his wife, and Herr Spengler, a wealthy farmer, celebrated the Swiss National Day in their little village.

The author, although I believe it was his first attempt at a one-act play, is to be congratulated. It was particularly impressive to hear how these simple men felt about the 1st of August. Through Herr Lehrer, the author conveyed to the audience the Swiss people's marvellous and undaunted spirit, their great faith in the destiny of their country and her institutions, and lastly their thankfulness for having so far escaped the worst of this war. If any criticism of the play is to be made, some of the scenes were somewhat lengthy and drawn-out, and consequently a little dull. This particularly, when the worthy members of the village community indulged in a game of cards. However, from the great applause at the end of the performance, the author can be assured that his efforts were much appreciated. He can only be encouraged to further endeavours.

During the remainder of the evening our president gave a short address appropriate to the occasion of our gathering. Naturally our culinary desires were not forgotten by the committee which arranged this evening so splendidly. We were able to enjoy a very tasty supper, which is such an important matter at any Swiss function. With community singing, chatting and music, the evening soon came to a close. We have, indeed, had a real 1st of August gathering, and every one of us felt that night very much nearer our beloved Switzerland.

K.

## SWISS MERCANTILE SOCIETY

Like all other Swiss Societies in London, the S.M.S. had perforce to suspend activities during July-September, but members and friends are invited to a special meeting on Saturday, October 7th, at 2.30 p.m., at Swiss House, when our new Minister will be our guest of honour.

Please, therefore, reserve October 7th; full particulars will be sent to the members in a circular.

It is also hoped to re-start, shortly, the French Circle, the Russian and French Study Classes, and those interested should apply for particulars from the Secretary at Swiss House.

J. B.