

Personal

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NOUVELLE SOCIÉTÉ HELVÉTIQUE. The Battle of Solferino and Henri Dunant.

Address given by M. F. ANSERMOZ.

Over a hundred years ago, on 24th June 1859, one of the most murderous battles of the last centuries was fought at Solferino, between 170,000 Austrians, under the command of the young Emperor Franz Joseph, and 150,000 Frenchmen, Piemontese and Sardinians, led by Napoleon III and King Victor Emmanuel.

It was to recall this battle and to commemorate this historical event as the background which led to the foundation of the "International Committee of the Red Cross" that Mr. Félix Ansermoz, of the Swiss Embassy, presented a dense audience of the New Helvetic Society, on 23rd June 1959, at the Swiss Hostel for Girls, with a clear, concise and fascinating lecture, demonstrating how fate decided to choose Henri Dunant as an instrument of one of the greatest humanitarian thoughts. The open meeting of the N.S.H. was presided over by Mr. W. Renz and honoured by the presence of the Swiss Ambassador and Madame Daeniker, Mr. and Mrs. J. J. de Tribolet, and other personalities of the Swiss Colony. The reception, as usual, was perfectly organized.

Henri Dunant, a rich and respectable banker, of Geneva, was — to recall some parts of the lecture in its very words — then 31 years old. Born and raised in Geneva, in the "grande tradition calviniste", deeply influenced as so often is the case by a remarkable mother, he was a complex dual personality. There was Dunant, l'homme de cœur, who since he was a child had never lost a chance to do a good deed. M. Dunant, the philanthropist, had been brought to Solferino, in all probability, by his other ego, M. Dunant "le brasseur d'affaires", who had founded, with the help of a few financiers from Geneva, the "Société anonyme des Moulins de Mons-Djémila", in North Africa, with a capital of a million francs. M. Dunant, the businessman, was desperately in need of land on which to install more mills. According to some historians, Dunant was travelling in Northern Italy mostly with the idea of meeting the French Emperor Napoleon III and soliciting his assistance for his private affairs. Receiving a negative answer to his requests from the French General Mac Mahon, Mr. Dunant returned to the little church of Castiglione, near Solferino, with its 500 severely wounded men, helping without distinction the vanquished as well as the victor, "as if moved by a solemn premonition of what the great principle of the Red Cross was later to be". Mr. Ansermoz gave, very adequately, some extracts of the book "Souvenirs de Solferino" published in 1862, as well as of the letters in which the founder of the International Red Cross Movement laid down the basic principles for the Convention of the Red Cross signed later in Geneva.

In fact, as Mr. Ansermoz recalled, the idea of doing something about the fate of wounded soldiers had been "in the air" for some time. Five years before Solferino, Florence Nightingale had left for Constantinople, with a group of English ladies, for the battlefield of Crimea, where she found the Grande Duchesse Hélène Paulowna of Russia doing exactly the same with her group of aristocratic nurses. Earlier still, during the siege of Messina, in 1848, a surgeon of the Neapolitan Army had dared to disobey orders in giving assistance to the wounded from the enemy ranks. But the general idea of Dunant, helped by his keen diplomatic sense, power of persuasion in front of kings and emperors, and his talent for organisation, can be found in the following extract from his book:

"N'y aurait-il pas moyen, pendant une époque de paix et de tranquillité, de constituer des sociétés de secours dont le but serait de faire donner des soins aux blessés, en temps de guerre, par des volontaires zélés, dévoués et bien qualifiés pour une pareille œuvre?"

What was new in Dunant's mind was the idea of permanency, i.e., that these voluntary charitable committees, which his book advocated, would not necessarily remain inactive between open conflicts, but could be used as well in times of epidemics, floods or other national catastrophes. More than anything else, what was new was the vision of some kind of an international congress or organisation which would formulate the universal and sacred

principles on which these "comités de secours" would be set to operate.

Dunant's work culminated in the conference which took place in the Palais de l'Athénée in 1863 and led to the signing, one year later, under the chairmanship of General Dufour, of the "Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Conditions of the Wounded in Armies in the Field". A number of other conventions followed at various intervals, and the Federal Counsellor Max Petitpierre took the initiative to convene in Geneva, in 1949, the representatives of 75 nations to a new and important congress whose task was to add to this monument of the human mind a convention for the protection of civil populations in time of war. Acting on neutral soil, the Swiss Government has been entrusted with the administration of the international conventions and, consequently, the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva is exclusively composed of Swiss citizens.

But, according to the saying "nul n'est prophète dans son pays" — as Mr. Ansermoz rightly mentioned — the very personal worries which had brought M. Dunant to Italy followed him back to Geneva, obliging him in 1867 to leave the city for good. In 1872, he lectured in London on the treatment of prisoners of war under the patronage of the Association for the Development of Social Services. After three years, his health was poor and he was earning very little as secretary of the Peace Society which had its seat at No. 41 Pall Mall. Dunant left and came back to London six years later, in a state of complete destitution. After years of endless difficulties and wanderings, Dunant finally returned to his native country, finding a refuge in Heiden, canton of Appenzell. It would take too long to recall here all the very interesting details of this great man's relations with other famous personalities of his time such as General Dufour, Dr. Louis Appia, Docteur Théodor Maunoir, and the lawyer, Gustave Moynier.

In conclusion, Mr. Ansermoz recalled that on 27th June of this year there would take place at Solferino the official celebrations which mark the centenary of the battle and the idea of the Red Cross, and that a memorial, made of blocks of stone donated by all the seventy national Red Cross Societies, would be unveiled on that occasion. As has already been published in the "Swiss Observer", a Committee has been set up in Switzerland under the sponsorship of the President of the Swiss Confederation with a view to erecting two monuments to Henri Dunant, one in Geneva and the other in the village of Heiden in Appenzell.

A.C.

PERSONAL.

We deeply regret to announce the passing away in Sierre — after a long and courageously borne illness — of Mrs. Lily-Clara Hahn-Meyrat, the wife of Pastor Carl Th. Hahn, at one time Pastor of the "Schweizerkirche" in London.

We extend our deep sympathy to Mr. and Mrs. O. Boehringer, of 55 Woodstock Road, N.W.11, on the passing away, on Sunday, 14th June, of Mrs. Caterina Meschini, mother of Mrs. I. Boehringer, and widow of Mr. Arturo Meschini.

It is with deep regret that we announce the death of Captain A. Gyce (when on holiday in Switzerland), husband of Miss Sophie Wyss, the Swiss soprano, of 19 The Mall, Surbiton, Surrey. The departed was a director of the publishing firm of William Heinemann Ltd., a soldier and author.

We extend heartiest congratulations to Monsieur le Pasteur C. Reverdin, and Madame Reverdin, of 7 Park View Road, N.3, on the arrival, on 1st June, of a daughter, Carole Philippa.

We deeply regret to report the passing away on 12th July of Mrs. Madeleine May, mother of two children, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Ch. Fer, "The White House", Wallington Road, Harlow, Essex.

We announce with sincere regrets the death, on 3rd August — after a long illness — of Mrs. Mariette Weber, the wife of Mr. Eugen Weber of 14 Totternhoe Close, Kenton, Harrow, Middlesex, at the age of 59.

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