

The Red Cross and the Holocaust

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom
<http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
and Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme,
54 Boulevard Raspail, 75270 Paris Cedex 06, France

Originally published in French as *Une mission impossible?*
by Editions Payot Lausanne 1988
and © Editions Payot Lausanne

First published in English by Cambridge University Press 1999 as
The Red Cross and the Holocaust
English translation © Maison des Sciences de l'Homme and
Cambridge University Press 1999

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Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Plantin 10/12pt [CE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Favez, Jean-Claude.
[Une mission impossible? French]
The Red Cross and the Holocaust / by Jean-Claude Favez; edited and translated
by John and Beryl Fletcher.

p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 41587 X (hb)
1. Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945).
2. World War, 1939-1945 - Jews - Rescue.
3. International Committee of the Red Cross.
I. Title.
D804.6.F38 1999
362.87'81'08992404-dc21 99-11233 CIP

ISBN 0 521 41587 X hardback
ISBN 2 7351 08384 hardback (France only)

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1 The Red Cross, political prisoners and racial persecution before 1939

Introduction

On 30 January 1939 Hitler made a speech in the Reichstag in which he declared: 'if international Jewish finance within Europe or beyond its shores was to be successful in embroiling its populations in a new world war, the outcome would not be the bolshevisation of the world and the resultant triumph of Jewry, but the wholesale destruction of the Jewish race in Europe'.¹ If his contemporary listeners were disturbed by his threat, today we are struck rather by the uncanny accuracy of the Führer's bloodcurdling prophecy concerning the fate of the European Jews. This shift in emphasis shows how far history has moved on and highlights the watershed of Auschwitz. Auschwitz has since 1945 come to encapsulate everything to do with antisemitism. Far from the Holocaust tending to fade, the shadow it casts over historical discussion of World War II has steadily increased. We are much better placed now to grasp that whereas the Allies' strategy tended to play down freeing those suffering racial persecution, the Nazis had for their part made their struggle to the death with the Jews the fundamental and secret aim of their dream of world conquest.

Religious leaders, moral authorities and charitable organisations like the Red Cross have suffered more than national governments from this shift in the collective unconscious. Even before the guns had fallen silent in Europe the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was considering how to deal with the question of what it had known about the fate of those persecuted for their race and what had been done to come to their assistance.² It is significant – and surprising – that after vacillating for years between owning up to its failures on the one hand and emphasising on the other how hard it had tried, it decided in the end, by examining its own archives, to arrive at conclusions about this terrible past, as if history could give definitive answers to satisfy each successive generation's curiosity.

So while this book goes over familiar ground to some extent, it also

seeks to understand why the issues were not viewed then in the same light as we view them now. For this reason it does not deal solely with racial persecution, but also with concentration camps and with civilian internees, because that was the way the Red Cross envisaged things at the time. And since this study of humanitarian endeavour focuses on the ICRC and not on the victims, it is necessary first to introduce the institution briefly, to indicate the resources it had at its disposal, and to outline its chief concerns; but also, and more importantly, to set out the principles at stake, since it is in the light of those principles that one must interpret – and indeed understand – the policy of the international Red Cross. The words of one of its finest servants should always be borne in mind: ‘So long as the eye is denied imagination’s magnifying glass, charity can see nothing clearly.’³

The Red Cross as an institution and an idea

The ICRC, a non-governmental body staffed entirely by Swiss citizens, has been the driving force of the organisation since its foundation in 1863. Since 1919 the national Red Cross societies have been grouped in the League, and in 1928 the statutes of the international Red Cross were adopted, but neither of these events affected the ICRC’s role as moral arbiter, as guardian of the Geneva Conventions, or as neutral and impartial intercessor, especially in time of war, in the domain of help to the sick and wounded of armies in the field, and of protection of prisoners of war.

On the eve of the outbreak of World War II the ICRC was still far from being the institution we are familiar with today, one which is solidly entrenched as a result of the proliferation of various forms of upheaval and armed conflict. The Committee in the narrow sense of the word was then its chief incarnation, consisting in 1939 of twenty-three members, all unpaid, of whom four were women playing an active part. Election to the committee was by cooption from within the circumscribed milieu of the liberal-conservative Protestant middle class in Geneva, and its social and cultural cohesiveness was striking, being largely unaffected either by the presidency from 1928 onwards of Max Huber, a Swiss government legal expert and leading member of Zurich’s industrial bourgeoisie, or by the cooption, in the 1930s, of two serving Swiss federal councillors, Philippe Etter and Guiseppe Motta, both of whom were Catholics.⁴ Opening up the committee in this way did, however, strengthen the national roots of the institution whose neutrality was based not only on the citizenship of its members but also on its non-governmental character.

There is no doubt that the ICRC sought to be independent of the Helvetic Confederation, and the Swiss authorities likewise stressed their wish to respect its complete freedom of action. They were nevertheless happy to provide it with financial, material and diplomatic support which turned out to be vital during World War II. And whilst they stoutly defended the prerogatives of the Confederation as protecting power, they did not in the least mind including the work of the international Red Cross in the list of services rendered by Swiss neutrality. This means that when all was said and done they took a very close interest in the Committee's activities, one of whose members, Edouard de Haller, was put in charge, from 1942 onwards, of the coordination of humanitarian aid in his capacity as delegate of the Federal Council for International Assistance and Cooperation. During the Second World War, the red cross on white ground and the white cross on red ground seemed to have been unfurled in the same cause, an impression held by most foreigners and shared by many Swiss citizens between 1940 and 1945.

The ICRC frequently drew attention to its right under its statutes to take the initiative in humanitarian matters.⁵ Historically and doctrinally this right affected both practical action and international law. In 1929 an international conference met at its suggestion to consider the lessons of World War I; it revised the first Geneva Convention on the protection of sick and wounded combatants and added a second aimed at providing cover for prisoners of war and at defining the role in that regard of the Protecting Powers, without prejudice to the services which the ICRC could furnish by opening an information agency and by visiting those who had been captured.⁶ The very real progress in law represented by these two 1929 Conventions should not disguise the fact that on the other hand enemy alien war victims, together with hostages and internees, were still without protection when hostilities broke out in 1939. For some of these, though, the International Committee of the Red Cross managed, towards the end of autumn 1939, to persuade the belligerents to apply part of the draft convention which the Committee had had adopted by the 1934 Tokyo conference of the Red Cross and which a diplomatic conference, scheduled to take place in 1940, was due to examine and adopt.⁷

In this way enemy aliens interned on a belligerent's territory were able to benefit from treatment similar to that which the second Geneva convention of 1929 stipulated for prisoners of war: they were to be allowed to send and receive letters, to get parcels, to be visited by the Red Cross and by the Protecting Powers, and even to take up employment and to be joined by their families.

No international convention covered political prisoners, and this at a time when social unrest, revolution and civil war were greatly swelling their numbers.⁸ In the shadow of World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution, the ICRC intervened on the ground by trying to visit political prisoners in several countries, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. Its thinking on the subject evolved in parallel, and its Commission for Political Prisoners – created in 1935, it bore witness to the importance the Red Cross would henceforth attach to the problem – unhesitatingly concluded that the Red Cross had both the right and the duty to intervene. As the exercise of this right obviously constituted intervention in the internal affairs of a sovereign state, the interests of the victims required it to be undertaken solely through the national Red Cross society of the state concerned. But if it happened that the national society ducked the issue, or was unable to act, then it fell to the ICRC to do so, even off its own bat and on the basis of queries and rumours. And if it came up against a veto from the national Red Cross or governmental authorities, it ought then to threaten to make public both the reasons for its request to intervene and the refusal it had come up against. In spring 1935, according to a memorandum adopted by the Commission, ‘the Committee’s prestige is not compromised when, having done all it can to defend a humanitarian cause, it suffers a setback. What damages its authority is doing nothing or acting with excessive prudence.’⁹

It is obviously regrettable that this viewpoint – developed, admittedly, in a context different from that of all-out war – did not inspire better thinking in the 1940s. But as early as June 1938 the sixteenth conference of the Red Cross, held in London at the height of the Spanish crisis, marked a step backwards, since the resolution it adopted on political detainees stopped short of real action, merely requesting the Committee and national societies to press ahead with the study of the most appropriate means of ensuring the application of the guiding principles of the Red Cross in conditions of civil war.¹⁰

The situation in the Third Reich

The Commission’s viewpoint on political prisoners in 1935, and the subsequent attitude of the Committee on the issue of political detainees in general, are inseparable from the experiences of concentration camps in the Third Reich between 1933 and 1938. This is particularly interesting for what it reveals of the intentions and *arrière-pensées* of the ICRC’s leaders at a time when the Red Cross’s energies were not absorbed by Convention activities and the fear of Germany had not

reached the extremes of terror which were to paralyse so many courageous initiatives in Switzerland between 1940 and 1943.

From spring 1933 onwards, the International Committee, like other humanitarian organisations, received appeals on behalf of German detainees in the concentration camps.¹¹ It is interesting to note, in the light of what follows, that President Huber considered, as did his colleagues, that as a matter of principle this problem fell within the ICRC's remit, in the name of general humanitarian obligations and in pursuance of the duty to take the initiative which the Committee claimed for all victims of conflict or repression. In fact, however, the requests reaching Geneva went unanswered until the Swedish Red Cross intervened in its turn to prod the German Red Cross Society (DRK) into action to improve the lot of the detainees.¹²

This move embarrassed both the DRK, caught up in the eddies of the *Gleichschaltung*,¹³ and the ICRC, whose moral authority was being called into question, albeit in a fraternal spirit, by this Scandinavian initiative. Max Huber, with the full backing of the vice-president of the DRK, Paul Draudt, who could be trusted as an old friend, finally got the DRK not only discreetly to reassure the Swedes, but also to undertake to pass on to the police authorities in the new regime the names of imprisoned persons whose fate the ICRC, at the request of relatives or of third parties, was seeking information about.

So the president of the ICRC cut the ground from under the feet of the Swedes in the hope of strengthening the position of friends of the Red Cross in Germany, and enabled the ICRC not to appear indifferent or powerless in the face of police repression in the Reich,¹⁴ even if requests for information addressed to Geneva remained few in number right up to the moment when the DRK stopped supplying details about non-Aryans in the summer of 1941.

A year later, in 1934, a fresh request for visits reached Geneva. This time it was the German authorities – at the highest level, it appears – who called upon the ICRC to visit the camps where Austrian Nazis (and even some German sympathisers) arrested after the failure of the coup in Vienna, and the death of the Austrian chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss, had been interned.¹⁵ Caught between the fear of antagonising the Nazi regime, with the risk of jeopardising further the situation of the DRK, and the fear of laying himself open to exploitation by Goebbels' propaganda machine by undertaking an inspection, Huber prevaricated. He tried, unsuccessfully this time, to get either the Austrian Red Cross or the Yugoslav Red Cross to intervene (some of the coup members had fled to Yugoslavia). In the end, during Huber's absence on sick leave, the ICRC decided to send to Vienna Dr Louis Ferrière, brother of

committee member Suzanne Ferrière; he carried out a visit in which the Nazis in the meantime had lost all interest, so that his report could be published without causing any embarrassment.

ICRC members who backed the Vienna visit were looking for a reciprocal gesture on the part of the Reich, that is permission for the ICRC to be allowed to enter German camps.¹⁶ Max Huber was uneasy about this *démarche*, in spite of the firm tone of the Commission for Political Prisoners' memorandum mentioned earlier.

Finally, through the good offices of Paul Draudt, he got permission in the summer to carry out a visit, which at the time was nothing out of the ordinary. In any case it was unclear right up to the last whether the ICRC would be allowed to undertake the kind of thorough inspection it was used to. In the end four camps were chosen: Lichtenburg, Esterwegen, Dachau and Oranienburg. The camp at Oranienburg had not yet opened, so it had to be left out. The visit took place in the last week of October 1935 and was carried out by Carl J. Burckhardt, a member of an old Basel family and professor at the Institute of Advanced International Studies at Geneva. It was backed up by discussions between him and prominent members of the regime such as Reinhard Heydrich, head of the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD), whom Burckhardt wrote about in vivid terms (even if they cannot be corroborated) in his book *My Danzig Mission*, written in the 1960s.

Burckhardt's criticisms focused chiefly on the moral conditions of detention, particularly the fact that political prisoners were not segregated from common criminals and that the length of their sentence was left at the discretion of the Gestapo. The very concise written report he presented to his ICRC colleagues was not however published, in accordance with the undertaking he had given the Germans,¹⁷ and it is impossible to ascertain if his extremely circumspect remarks on the moral state of the detainees were brought to the Führer's attention by the German Red Cross. In any case, as far as fundamentals were concerned, they met with a pretty negative response from Heydrich.¹⁸ All in all, the regime, using every possible opportunity to show its respectable face as it prepared to host the Olympic Games, had no reason to complain of the way it was treated by the ICRC. Burckhardt was therefore invited by the DRK on Hitler's orders to make an official visit in May 1936.¹⁹ From his conversations in Berlin he concluded that the fate of concentration camp detainees had improved – probably true by reason of the *détente* surrounding the Olympic Games, but this had nothing to do with his visit of October 1935 – and he expressed admiration, which may have been sincere or merely diplomatic, for the achievements of the regime in implementing various infrastructure

projects (such as roads and social housing) which he described as 'positively Faustian'.²⁰

A second ICRC visit to Dachau was carried out on 19 August 1938 by a member of the Committee, Colonel Guillaume Favre, a former army instructor, accompanied by a doctor. This visit added nothing new either as far as fundamentals were concerned, since this report too was not published and the two Swiss inspectors were on the whole favourably impressed by the material conditions and the organisation in the barracks: 'Generally speaking – once allowance has been made for the fact that the very idea of a concentration camp, and particularly the lack of segregation of very different categories of prisoner, is an affront to a free citizen's way of thinking – we have in all objectivity to recognise that the camp at D[achau] is a model of its kind in so far as the way it is built and run is concerned.'²¹

But just to get Max Huber to agree to arrange this visit with his German opposite number in behind-the-scenes discussions at the London Red Cross conference in June 1938, members of the Committee who were keeping a close eye on detention in the Third Reich, such as Suzanne Ferrière, had to exert considerable pressure²² and to accept that Colonel Favre's mandate reflected as much President Huber's attitude of weary prudence as the concern to achieve a positive diplomatic breakthrough. The ICRC envoy's mission was in fact to 'be in a position to reassure public opinion about the living conditions of people held in the concentration camps. Public opinion is misled by all sorts of alarming rumours, very probably groundless, about the treatment of people held in these camps. To reassure public opinion, it is necessary to find out what living conditions are like, and it would also be desirable to facilitate as far as possible the emigration abroad of anyone freed seeking to leave Germany whom Germany wishes to expel.'²³

The year 1938 saw a worsening in the situation of the Jews, with the Nazis employing all possible means to force them to emigrate. Hastily convened by President Roosevelt, the Evian Conference could do no more than refer the insoluble problem of the reception of the persecuted to an intergovernmental committee set up in London. Although Suzanne Ferrière was closely involved through her work in the International Migration Service, the ICRC kept a low profile on the question of Jewish emigration, in line with Swiss public opinion, faced with the ever more restrictive measures taken by Switzerland from 1933 onwards to stem the influx of asylum seekers from the Reich.²⁴

Although the introduction of the distinctive sign 'J' in the passports of German Jews, announced by a communiqué of the Federal Council on 4 October 1938, gave rise to little angry reaction, the acts of violence on

Kristallnacht on 9 November following provoked a deep sense of shock. The ICRC was called upon to get involved – and this was a new phenomenon – by a certain number of national Red Cross societies.

This posed a challenge all the greater for the fact that the powerful American Red Cross Society got the League involved as well. The League had in any case moved its secretariat to Geneva after the crisis which led the Western powers to capitulate at Munich.²⁵ Once again Max Huber vacillated between abstention, an attitude which posed a threat to the ICRC's authority, and intervention, which risked alienating the Germans to the possible detriment of those elements in the DRK that had remained sound. It was becoming increasingly doubtful whether it sufficed any longer to forward to the DRK requests for information about people who had disappeared, as had been done regularly since November 1933, since such a letterbox function constituted a pretty derisory response to the violence meted out to the Jews, and it could no longer serve as a figleaf when in November 1938 the Quai d'Orsay, perhaps at the suggestion of the Roosevelt administration, asked the ICRC to study ways in which it might assist in organising in various interested countries the reception of Jewish refugees.²⁶

Whatever the political cost to itself, the ICRC replied in the end to the French in fairly negative terms, referring the question of the organisation of assistance to national Red Cross societies, the coordination of aid to the international Red Cross (that is the League rather than itself), and the question of emigration to the intergovernmental committee and other competent authorities.²⁷ The same line was taken in spring 1939 when the Swedish Red Cross launched a proposal for international action in favour of refugee camps, an idea which in the end came to nothing,²⁸ but here again the ICRC considered that it was up to national societies to act, since the issue principally concerned political victims and detainees. This did not prevent the ICRC intervening off its own bat, as for instance at the end of 1938 when it unsuccessfully took up with the DRK its concern over the material circumstances of the detainees in the camps at the approach of winter and over the alleged ill treatment of prisoners in Buchenwald concentration camp.²⁹

In 1935 the Commission for Political Prisoners had suggested that the ICRC publish the relevant documents in support of démarches which had met with a refusal to cooperate. On this occasion the Bureau in January 1939 merely noted that the acting president of the German Red Cross had declined to collaborate, the minutes of the meeting concluding tersely that 'the Red Cross idea is changing'.³⁰

So, despite the efforts of a few of its members, the ICRC remained extremely cautious, both as far as German political detainees and as far

as imprisoned or exiled Jews were concerned. Personal sympathy for conservative aspects of fascist regimes, and antisemitic elements – insofar as they existed – do not suffice to explain such an attitude. They were widespread in Switzerland – as they were in France and Great Britain – but in Red Cross circles they were, if anything, less marked. And the carefully calculated acts of caution of someone like Burckhardt, for example, were not restricted to the issue of concentration camps: they were fairly generally characteristic of private humanitarian diplomacy in Geneva. Nevertheless, Max Huber's reservations call for particular comment, since the fears of which they were the expression led the president increasingly to highlight the ICRC's political and philosophical neutrality in the name of an overriding concern for the interests of the victims. As he wrote in 1934: 'the Red Cross is action, action based on the self-denial not only of the person who brings succour, but on the part of the institution as well; which is why the Red Cross seeks to work hand in glove with all who are ready to help others, without enquiring into their motives'.³¹

Such noble sentiments did not, however, take account of the tight grip in which national Red Cross societies were held by totalitarian regimes. The ICRC was faced with this in Soviet Russia from 1919 onwards, in Italy from 1922, and in Germany from 1933 onwards. Such totalitarian takeovers not only undermined the very basis of the movement, they threatened to dislocate it on the international level. The risk of this so distressed Max Huber that he could envisage no other response than the strict application of the law and the constant reaffirmation of Red Cross principles, based in his own case on strongly held Christian beliefs. Even before the war, his public statements had become less and less geared to practical action, and in the end served no other purpose than to conceal his impotence by dodging the real issues, as is shown rather pathetically, for instance, by his little book of 1943 entitled *The Good Samaritan*.

So, even before war broke out, we can discern some of the elements which were to prevent the Red Cross dealing adequately with the Holocaust, and to make it very difficult for those involved to think and act in the decisive manner which the extreme gravity of the problem confronting them required.