

Initiatives of Change International website

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## A Passion for the Human Family

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Retirement hasn't slowed the pace of Cornelio Sommaruga, former President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Andrew Stallybrass discovers.

'Grüss Gott' is the hearty greeting that you hear as Cornelio Sommaruga, former President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), hurries in. Tall and broad, the physical presence is imposing, but what strikes you most is the energy. He has just arrived back in Geneva from a meeting in Budapest, and he hasn't got long. He's got a talk to give in Zürich tonight.

The greeting, typical in Austria, Bavaria and the Eastern part of Switzerland, he explains, invokes the third presence in every encounter. 'We're not alone in this world,' he says.



If this is retirement, then what was working life like? Twice in the last two years he has taken part in commissions set up by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, who is a personal friend. The first focused on improving the UN's effectiveness in conflict prevention, the second on mapping a way through the political minefield of 'humanitarian intervention' - as the journalists wanted to call it. 'The responsibility to protect', the commission insisted, since 'intervention' is only a last resort, and they feared that the word 'humanitarian' might be deformed to serve political or government interests. How many miles of travel and days of meetings? He has lost count.

This warm-hearted Latin - he comes from the Tessin, the Italian-speaking Swiss canton in the sunny south of the Alps - has friends on every continent. His wife complains that in the last year, he's travelled even more than in his days working with the Red Cross: meetings in Maputo, Managua, New Delhi, Cairo, St Petersburg, Ottawa (twice), Paris (twice), Malta, Rome, Richmond, Virginia, Washington, Hong Kong, then three times each to Budapest, New York and London. He knows the world - and the world knows him!

Sommaruga was born in 1932, the first of six children in a Swiss diplomatic family posted to Rome. He feels that the two strongest formative influences on his convictions were his parents' Christian faith, and the Scout movement. His family was Catholic and his first humanitarian commitment was volunteering to help the infirm on pilgrimages to Lourdes.

He held dual Swiss and Italian nationality until he was 20. Growing up in fascist Italy, he only later understood why his father sent him to a private school - so that he did not have to join the fascist youth movement. For two years, the family was separated by the war: Sommaruga senior stayed on in Rome, while his wife and children lived in Lugano, just across the border in Switzerland. Both parents helped Jews to escape persecution - father filling the children's beds in Rome with fugitives, and mother

helping refugees to settle in Switzerland. Later Sommaruga was surprised to discover that his future wife, an Italian, had a similar story to tell, of helping refugees across the lake to safety. These experiences gave him 'a special attention' for the Holocaust and the Jewish people.

After studies in Zürich, Paris and Rome, Cornelio Sommaruga graduated as a doctor of law, and followed his father's footsteps into the Swiss Foreign Service. In the 1960s, diplomatic postings took him and his growing family to The Hague, Bonn, Rome and Geneva. A specialist in economic and trade questions, in 1984 he became State Secretary for External Economic Affairs in Bern.

In 1986, out of the blue, he received a phone call that changed the course of his life. An acquaintance rang to say that the ICRC was looking for a new president, and that his name had come up. 'You're mad,' was his first reaction. He insisted on time to reflect, and, stretching the secrecy he was requested to respect, asked his wife to rally their six children from their different universities for a family council. Having grown up partly in Geneva, they seemed to know more about the Red Cross and its work than he did, and they were all in favour of him accepting.

The ICRC - a quintessentially Genevese body, with strong Calvinist roots - had only once before had a Catholic president. Sommaruga held the post for over 12 years, criss-crossing a suffering planet, tirelessly working to help reduce suffering.

As a Geneva resident, the first place where I take visitors is usually the Red Cross Museum. As you walk through the massive handwritten card file index of 13 million prisoners, wounded, killed and missing in the First World War, you realize that this institution is not serving 'humanity' in the abstract, but individuals, with names, families and histories.

The ICRC's brief (see below) is to protect the victims of war and internal conflict. Sommaruga's tenure covered the period of the Bosnian war and the Rwandan genocide, of crises in Afghanistan, Angola, Chechnya, Salvador and Timor, and of the Gulf War. He saw at first hand conflicts on every continent. 'I've come close to discouragement at times,' he confesses, especially in the face of the political blockages that hinder humanitarian efforts. He recalls too the delegates of the ICRC who lost their lives during his mandate - six were murdered in cold blood on one terrible night in Chechnya. He remembers with emotion visiting prisoners in their cells, the victims of landmines in hospitals, the internally displaced people who have no real legal protection.

The weeks before our interview have been especially hard. In April he accepted yet another appeal from Kofi Annan, to be one of a trio of internationally respected figures to head a fact-finding mission to Jenin in the Palestinian territories. 'I am convinced that we could have worked in an independent and impartial way,' says Sommaruga. 'World public opinion had great expectations of our work.' Finally the team had to be disbanded because of opposition from the Israeli Government.

Sommaruga is particularly saddened by the personal attacks on himself which accompanied the controversy over the UN mission. The attacks - based on a two-year-old *Washington Post* article - related to a complex question which had come to a head during his presidency of the ICRC: the application of the Israeli humanitarian association, the Magen David Adom, to join the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

The problem stemmed from the fact that if the Magen David Adom joined, all the states

who had signed the Geneva Conventions would need to recognize another symbol along with the Red Cross and the Red Crescent. The symbol of the Magen David Adom was the Star of David.

In 1999 the new head of the American Red Cross demanded the immediate recognition of the Israeli society. In an attempt to explain the complexities of the issue, Sommaruga stressed that because it involved amending the Geneva Conventions, the decision didn't depend on the Red Cross, but rather on governments. He went on to say, as an example, that the Ceylonese Red Cross had asked for the reversed swastika - a Hindu religious symbol - to be recognized as their symbol. The American Red Cross head stormed out of the meeting.

Negotiations continued, and before the current round of conflict in the Middle East, the way seemed to be clear for an agreement on a new, neutral international symbol - a red diamond, with the red cross, crescent or star in one corner for those who wished it.

Jewish friends who rallied to Sommaruga's defence say that they've not heard an anti-semitic remark from him in 30 years. The ICRC broke new ground during his presidency by releasing a history of the movement through the terrible years of the Second World War. Sommaruga followed this up with public apologies for the failures of the Red Cross during the Holocaust. Among the many honours and signs of recognition that Sommaruga has received for his work, he is proud of the Presidential Award from the University of Tel Aviv.

What rubs salt in the wounds of this most accessible of men is that journalists have repeated this one unfounded attack without once coming back to him to ask for his comments or confirmation. *The Washington Post* didn't publish his letter of protest until this current round of attacks two years after the original article.

On his retirement from the Red Cross, Sommaruga accepted to become the President of the Foundation for Moral Re-Armament in Switzerland, now known as Caux - Initiatives of Change. He also became the President of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining - the Red Cross, under his presidency, was at the heart of the international treaty to ban anti-personnel landmines. He is also Chairman of the Karl Popper Foundation, Chairman of the Board of a bank (JP Morgan, Switzerland), and a member of the Board of the Open Society Institute set up by financier George Soros.

His latest responsibility is as President of the newly created International Association of Initiatives of Change - a federation of MRA/IC's different national legal bodies. He speaks of 'the wonderful international network of motivated people', but sees the need for more transparency between national groups. It's vital to know where we are coming from as a movement, to build on the best of the past and to deepen personal change, he believes.

With all these activities, it's never easy to find enough time to spend with the family that he loves so dearly. All six children are married, and there are now 13 grandchildren, and a 14th expected any day now. Fortunately, he is an adept user of the telephone and now e-mail, and for 30 years he has posted a card to each of the children from every foreign country he visits. 'They always know where I am,' he insists. It has become a quasi-religious tradition to gather all the family together over Whitsun, taking over the best part of a small hotel.

'Globalizing responsibility' has been the theme for the last two seasons of conferences in the Initiatives of Change centre in Caux, Switzerland. This year it carries the sub-title 'for human security'. Looking to the future, he worries that too little attention is being

given to the root causes of violence: 'the vast economic and social disparities between and within states; the legal and illegal transfers of weapons and particularly small arms'.

Civil society must try to counteract these forces, he believes. It is everyone's responsibility to work for a better future for human society. 'It needs a multilateral, intercultural and inter-religious approach,' he stresses. He fears that the 'only world superpower doesn't seem willing to work for genuine multilateral cooperation to solve these problems'.

But 'we are never alone', he repeats. 'The power that gave us free will can inspire those of good will to work for a better future. There are more people than you think inspired by God or conscience working for true and lasting peace.' The challenge is to all of us: each of us has 'an ethical responsibility to work for reconciliation through forgiveness and justice', starting with ourselves.

#### RED CROSS FACTFILE

History: Founded, as the International Committee for the Relief of the Wounded, in 1863, on the initiative of Swiss humanitarian Henri Dunant. The Geneva Convention of 1864 committed signatory states to care for the war wounded, whether friend or foe, and fixed the Red Cross as an internationally recognized emblem. Further conventions protected victims of sea battles (1907) prisoners of war (1929) and civilians in time of war (1949). In 1977, two further protocols enhancing the protection of civilian populations were adopted. Some 190 countries have now ratified the conventions.

Structure: The Red Cross Red Crescent Movement is made up of three independent components: The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and 178 national societies, whose work is focused on disaster relief, health and social programmes in their own countries.

A specifically neutral, impartial and independent institution, the ICRC is governed by a committee of 25 co-opted Swiss citizens. Its mission is to protect and assist the victims of war and internal violence. It directs and co-ordinates the Movement's international activities in conflict areas and works to promote and strengthen humanitarian law. It is fully independent of the Swiss Government.

The Federation co-ordinates the Movement's international assistance to victims of disasters, refugees and in health emergencies. It represents national societies in the international field, promotes cooperation between them and works to strengthen their capacity.

The three components of the Movement meet every two years in the Council of Delegates and every four years in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Conference with the governments of states who are parties to the Geneva Conventions.

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