

DRAGO
ARSTINJEVIC

VOLUNTARY
HOSTAGES
OF THE S.S.



VOLUNTARY
HOSTAGES
OF THE S.S.



DRAGO ARSENIJEVIC

**VOLUNTARY
HOSTAGES
OF THE S.S.**

FERNI PUBLISHING HOUSE

By the same author
GENÈVE APPELLE MOSCOU
Robert Laffont, Paris 1969

THIS EDITION
IS RESERVED FOR
PLEASANT VALLEY PRESS

© by France-Empire, Paris 1974
© by Ferni Publishing House, Geneva 1979

Preface

Still another book on the Second World War?

Yes, because this one had to be written. If I did not write it, someone else would have had to.

In 1947, Dr. Marcel Junod announced the publication of his "Odyssey of a Red Cross Delegate" entitled *Le Troisième Combattant* (The Third Combatant). He never guessed that a quarter of a century would pass before it could be read. In reporting on his missions inside the Third Reich, Dr. Junod wrote:

"In Germany a tragedy is being enacted such as the world has never known. Thousands of civilians of every race and religion are dying in the exile of concentration camps.

"From a distance, we could see the smoke from the crematory ovens of Mauthausen, but we did not know that thousands of human beings were being reduced to ashes in them. Nevertheless we were suspicious. We knew that something was taking place. The memorandums that Geneva sent to the belligerents remained unanswered.

"Because the 52 nations meeting in Tokyo in 1934 were in no hurry to sign a convention for the protection of civilians, the gates of these camps were hermetically sealed. They remained sealed up until the time when Germany, defeated, was no longer in a position to guard its dreadful secrets.

"How did the first food packages penetrate the death

camps in the summer of 1943, in spite of this? How, in the very last months of the war, was it finally possible to see, forging their way over the roads of a Germany under bombardment and convulsed in the throes of defeat, the white trucks of the International Committee of the Red Cross? Manned by Swiss volunteers, aided by Canadian, French, and American prisoners, they snatched away victims destined for the gas chamber and the crematory ovens. This is an extraordinary history, told by the men who lived it."

This heroic story of a unique form of combat has still to be told. I feel honor-bound to tell it.

The simple fact that the story has never been published would certainly not be sufficient, in itself, to impel me to tell it. Even though they are considered among the most inaccessible in the world, the documents in the archives do not necessarily evoke the desire to reanimate their dead pages.

What I feel so worth telling is not just the story of the remarkable and unequal combat engaged in by a humanitarian organization against a regime that crushed all that was most honorable in the individual, although this certainly constitutes, in itself, an important page in the history of the Second World War. What I want to tell is above all else the story of the determination of a handful of men—and you will see that this is not a metaphor but a simple statement, for there were hardly a dozen of them—to risk their own lives to save the lives of others under unprecedented conditions.

These men left Switzerland which had stayed cozy and peaceful, on the sidelines of the bloody world conflict, and made their way across the roads of Germany, then in the most frenzied state of chaos that can be imagined. And they did not go to care for the wounded or the refugees, the traditional tasks of Red Cross workers. Their task was to try to snatch from death the victims of the concentration camp world: the deportees. This was not 1938 or 1941, when we hadn't known very much about these death camps, but March and April 1945, a time when the horrors of the Nazi exterminations were well known, and when the risks that these men took were not hypothetical, ill-defined, or simply unknown.

It was a superhuman task to try to penetrate the Nazi concentration camps, to try to keep the S.S. from "erasing" the proof of their odious crimes. Nevertheless, with full knowledge of what was awaiting them, and with unconquerable courage, a few men accepted the challenge. They were not always successful, but they were never quitters.

History records the names of the war criminals and torturers. Sinister statistics define the extent of their crimes. And at the same time, history often lets slip into oblivion the exemplary lives of men who fulfilled their duty as men. There are no statistics that reveal how many crimes they frustrated, how many lives they saved. And it is certainly their names which history should remember.

They did not ask for this. They did their duty as men, and then returned to their daily tasks, as doctors, office workers, businessmen. I have sought them out because their testimony has as much importance as the dusty documents. I wish to record the deeds before they disappear with the doers.

It is not to do them justice. It's not to make heroes of them, which they are not, and which they never wanted to be. In this account they will appear as modest as they are in their daily lives. Their history is told here only to remind us, in these pitiless times, that as long as a handful of men fight to save other men—there is still hope.

Drago Arsenijevic

There is absolutely no question of surrendering. The camp must be evacuated immediately. No prisoner must fall into the hands of the enemy alive. At Buchenwald, the prisoners were committed atrocities against the civilian population.

A handwritten order of Himmler given to the commandant of Dachau, April 14, 1945.

