

CHAPTER V

THE MURDER OF DR. VISCHER

By September all the Americans who had been prisoners of war in Japan were repatriated.

Our delegation in Tokio now had different tasks. We began to assist, feed and clothe the thousands of foreigners who had been caught in Japan at the beginning of the war and who had lived there throughout the war, often in very miserable circumstances. Amongst them were many priests, French and Italian missionaries, and nuns who had lived behind their convent walls for three years, cut off from the outside world. There were also hundreds of Jews, many of them Germans who had been expelled from the Nazi colony and sometimes imprisoned and tortured by the Japanese.

Fortunately the foodstuffs and the clothing handed over to us by the Americans represented quite a considerable stock. From all the 103 camps into which they had parachuted supplies we obtained something like 400,000 dollars worth.

We also co-operated, wherever our assistance and our mediation was of some service, in that vast movement of withdrawal which during the course of about a year brought back 9 million Japanese to their own narrow territory, the already greatly over-populated Japanese mainland.

In addition to those 9 million returned Japanese there were 9 million others who had lost their homes as a result of the bombings. Extreme privation prevailed in most Japanese homes, in all the devastated towns, and in all the idle factories, but the Japanese suffered in disciplined silence. Their obedience to the behests of their Emperor was as absolute in defeat as it had been fourteen years before when they had set out to conquer the Asiatic continent. On board the Liberty ships which the Americans had handed over to them they returned home from China, Malaya and Burma until soon the only Japanese prisoners left were in Russian hands, the men of the Manchurian army.

The delegates of the International Committee of the Red Cross, some of whom had not been heard of for two or three years, now began to get into touch with Geneva again from Batavia, Singapore, Manilla and Hong-Kong or Shanghai. One only did not re-appear. That was Dr. Vischer, who had been stationed at Bandjermasin in Dutch Borneo at the time of the Japanese invasion.

And yet a month before when I had given the Gaimucho a list of our delegates in the Far East and asked that my instructions should be forwarded to them the name of Vischer had aroused no comment.

'We will do so,' was all the head of the Prisoner-of-War Department had said.

Vischer had not acknowledged the receipt of my instructions.

I began to press Tokio to find out the reason for his silence, and in the end the same official informed me laconically:

'Dr. Vischer is dead.'

'When did he die?'

'In December 1943.'

'Why wasn't I told before?'

'Our Navy Department will be able to give you an explanation.'

But when I pursued my inquiries at the Japanese Navy Department I was met with evasions.

'All the documents in the case were burnt during the fire at the ministry.'

'What documents in what case?'

'Dr. Vischer and his wife were tried and convicted by a Japanese naval court.'

I sprang to my feet indignantly.

'Why were they tried? If the documents are missing then I want to have the witnesses and the members of the court found.'

The officer hesitated and then promised that inquiries would be made. Three weeks later I found myself face to face with the Naval prosecutor of Bandjermasin, a young and more than usually stolid lieutenant.

'I conducted the investigations in the case,' he observed tonelessly.

I kept my anger under control; I wanted to learn all the details.

'What offence were they charged with?' I asked.

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'Dr. Vischer was in possession of a revolver.'

'What of it? Everyone goes armed in Borneo, if only for protection against jackals.'

'We also think that he tried to get into touch by wireless with enemy submarines.'

'Did he have a wireless broadcasting station in his hospital then?'

'No, it was kept in the hut of a native.'

'So I suppose the native was tried as well?'

'No, only Dr. Vischer.'

'What information had he been transmitting?'

'Information concerning prisoners of war and interned Dutch civilians.'

'If the Japanese Government had applied the provisions of the Geneva Convention as it promised to do it would have transmitted such information, not prevented it.'

'He was in receipt of money from abroad.'

'Of course he was: the money came from the Swiss Legation through the medium of your government to help carry on his work.'

'He was also accused of more serious things.'

'What, for instance?'

'He tried to get into touch with the internees themselves.'

'Of course he did; that was his duty.'

I tried to master the poignant emotion I felt at the tragic deaths of a brave man and his wife.

The Japanese did not understand in the slightest degree what I felt or what I was thinking. He was quite sure that he had brought home to me the guilt of the man whose head he had demanded, and obtained, and he added as though to clinch the matter:

'Dr. Vischer and his wife admitted everything and they confessed to having taken part in a great anti-Japanese plot.'

I wanted to hear no more and I asked for a written report.

'The records of the court have been destroyed,' the fellow replied.

'Then use your memory to reconstruct the case,' I demanded.

Four days later I had the original text of the indictment in my

hands. I had only to read between the lines to realize the sufferings Vischer and his wife must have endured. I could see their crushed fingers as they were 'examined'. I could see the sordid prison in which the 'Kempetei' examiners manhandled and flogged them in order to extort the 'confession'. At the trial itself Japanese was the only language allowed. There was no interpreter and no defending counsel. Any defence was impossible. Dr. Vischer and his wife were probably unaware that sentence of death had been passed on them when they were taken out to the place of execution and beheaded together with the twenty-six hostages whose lives they had tried to save.

And the man who had demanded and obtained the slaughter stood before me, without remorse, impassive. Perhaps he was right from his standpoint. I knew as well as he did that Vischer had been guilty of doing his duty to the last; guilty of having tried to learn the names of the hostages; guilty of having informed them — by what acts of complicity and with what dangers to himself, his wife and his friends! — that he would do his best to plead their cause with the Japanese authorities; and guilty of having tried to assist them, and perhaps of having succeeded in assisting them; guilty of having smuggled news to them, or simply that food more precious than bread, that water more precious than the clearest spring — hope.

There was no need for me to read the record of the trial. I could only tell the impassive faced man who had decided that they had committed a crime what Vischer's instructions as a delegate of the Red Cross had been.

I knew that Vischer was guilty of having done everything in his power for the prisoners — out of 700 allied internees in Borneo only six were still alive on the day of liberation.

I knew that Vischer was guilty of having done everything in his power to make known their fate, even to the extent of using a clandestine broadcasting station. If he had actually sent messages in this way I knew who it was he was trying to reach in his efforts to secure help: Geneva.

I knew that Vischer and his wife were guilty of a plot — not an

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anti-Japanese plot, but a world-wide plot — to bring aid to suffering humanity under a white flag bearing a red cross.

And I knew that Vischer would have seen that flag flying in his mind's eye even when the sabre whistled through the air to end his life.

Four months had passed since my plane had touched down on Hanayo air field and my mission in Japan was approaching its end.

Before returning to Europe I was to go to China and Malaya to get into touch with our delegates in the Far East. Separated from each other by thousands of miles, fifteen or sixteen Swiss, doctors, missionaries, merchants and business men, went about the affairs of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Asia. With Egli and Jost in Shanghai I should meet Senn from Chunking, Zindel from Hong-Kong and Bessmer from Manilla. With Schweizer at Singapore I should meet Hurlimann of Saigon, Lüthy of Sumatra, Helbling of Batavia and Salzmann of Bangkok.

Each of them would tell me his story, and I could only hope that one day those stories might appear in print to show the world the battle these men had fought — often in the face of wounds and humiliations — to defend the defenceless and to save even a little of their threatened existence.

A few days before I left Tokio, on the morning of Thanksgiving Day, Brigadier-General Baker, one of the American officers in charge of foreign relations, informed me that General MacArthur wished to receive the delegation of the International Red Cross.

I went to the reception together with Margherita Strahler and our comrades Angst and Pestalozzi, who had spent the whole of the war in Japan, standing up to the bombings and doing everything they could to alleviate the lot of the allied prisoners.

General MacArthur received us in his light and airy office on the top floor of the Daiichi building. He was wearing the ordinary service uniform of the U.S. Army and the only indication of his high rank were five stars on each shoulder strap. Leaving his desk he came towards us, a very upright man with a slim, pale face in which two piercing eyes glowed under thick brows.

He invited us all to sit down near the window, which gave on to the grounds of the Imperial Palace, and sitting down with us and smoking his traditional corn-cob pipe he talked to us freely.

He thanked us for the work we had done on behalf of the imprisoned Americans, but we could feel that his thoughts went even further than the fate of his own men. He was thinking of everyone who had been assisted and protected by the Red Cross, of all those who in their exile and humiliation had no other hope of assistance.

'The supreme value of human life and human blood has been forgotten,' he said, 'and human dignity too.'

In a firm voice, emphasizing each word, he went on:

'Force is not a solution for man's problems. Force on its own is nothing. It never has the last word. Perhaps you find it strange that I, a professional soldier, should say that to you.'

The chief architect of victory in the Pacific did not conceal his opinion that peace still lay far ahead in the future. When his glance turned towards the south could he still see the monstrous column of smoke which marked the final hecatomb of five years of war?

'Even with our present weapons,' he went on, 'not including those still to be developed, a new war would leave nothing behind worthy of mention.'

And in even more precise terms he sketched the danger of death and destruction which still hung over the world.

'Too much has been destroyed in this war, and the physical exhaustion is too great, for there to be another war during the next twenty or twenty-five years. But what will happen after that? What will happen unless between now and then we do everything possible to save mankind from itself?'

His voice took on an aggressive tone when he spoke of the 'crackpots' who disturbed and misled public opinion whilst that terrible question, the only real question, still remained unanswered.

'What disinterested voices are there today?' he asked. 'The Churches can no longer make themselves heard. They raise their voices only once a week whilst the crackpots pour out their insane propaganda on the wireless every day.'

And suddenly he turned to us:

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'Who can unite sufficient voices everywhere to speak clearly, no longer in the name of force, but in the name of the spirit?'

There was a moment's silence.

'Perhaps the Red Cross could do it,' he added.

He had already twice sent away an officer who had come in to remind him that urgent matters awaited his attention. He had been speaking for twenty minutes and now his voice became more urgent:

'The Red Cross is too modest,' he insisted. 'It has hidden its light under a bushel. It should not confine its activities to succouring the physically wounded and organizing material assistance. Its aims are too limited. It should go further.

'It holds a unique position in the world. It enjoys universal confidence. Its flag is respected by all peoples and by all nations. And now its value should be utilized to the full. It should be concentrated on the very heart of the problem. . . .'

And his sense of realism dictated his final words:

'It is only a question of finding out if you can mobilize sufficient means to defend those ideas and propagate that faith. Have you the money? Have you the men?'