

International Committee of the Red Cross

OBITUARY

MAX PETITPIERRE

It is with very great sadness that the ICRC has learnt of the death on 25 March 1994 of Mr. Max Petitpierre, former Federal Councillor, former President of the Swiss Confederation and honorary member of the ICRC. He died at the age of 95.

Born in the Swiss town of Neuchâtel in 1899, Mr. Petitpierre, a doctor of laws, professor of law and barrister, played a prominent role in Swiss politics after the Second World War. In December 1944, at a time when Switzerland was surrounded by danger, he was elected Federal Councillor and subsequently became head of the Federal Political Department from February 1945 to June 1961.

Mr. Petitpierre's great merit is to have broadened the concept of Swiss neutrality by conferring a humanitarian dimension upon it. With the words "neutrality and solidarity", he first created a new state of mind and then initiated a dynamic diplomatic policy to that effect.

He also played a crucial part in the development of humanitarian law. At the end of the Second World War humanitarian law had proved tragically inadequate and it was clear that the Geneva Conventions needed to be revised and extended by a Diplomatic Conference. Mr. Petitpierre convened that Conference in April 1949 and presided with authority and competence over its meetings, which led soon after to the adoption of the Four Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949. A profoundly humane but realistic person, he never stopped working to develop the law. In his writings he expressed his conviction that "war itself, and not only its effects, should be made more humane, since unfortunately the contradiction between war and humanity has not been overcome by the elimination of war".¹

¹ "A Contemporary Look at the International Committee of the Red Cross", *IRRC*, No. 119, February 1971, p. 77.

After holding office as President of the Confederation in 1950, 1955 and 1960 Mr. Petitpierre, prompted by his desire to help the work of the ICRC, resigned as Federal Councillor in 1961 and agreed to be coopted as a member of the ICRC in 1961. Until 1974 he gave the institution the benefit of his vast legal knowledge, paving the way for a new diplomatic conference on the development of humanitarian law. He also placed his wide-ranging experience in international relations at its disposal and carried out various high-level missions to resolve humanitarian problems, especially in Egypt, during the Israeli-Arab conflict and in Nigeria during the civil war. His clear-sighted analysis of situations with which the ICRC was faced and his astute assessment of how to react in tricky political contexts have helped establish policy guidelines which the ICRC continues to refer to in determining its standpoint and course of action.

The ICRC pays grateful tribute to the memory of Max Petitpierre, who has rendered great service to Switzerland and the Red Cross, and presents its heartfelt condolences to his family and his numerous friends.
