

## After the death of Georges Olivet

### Delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross <sup>1</sup>

Georges Olivet died in the service of the Red Cross in December 1961 near Elisabethville, Katanga. The last message from him was received on December 13, in which he reported that he had several times tried to reach United Nations headquarters, but without success since the troops on guard had refused to allow him to pass. He had wanted to negotiate a truce for the evacuation of civilians in the battle areas.

On December 14, rumours started to circulate according to which Mr. Olivet had disappeared ; the ICRC at once requested that searches be made by the United Nations Forces in Katanga. Being still without news on the following day, the ICRC instructed its delegate at Leopoldville to proceed immediately to Elisabethville to take part in the investigations.

Subsequently telegrams were exchanged between Elisabethville, New York and Geneva, and it was confirmed that Mr. Olivet was in fact seen for the last time in an ambulance heading towards the headquarters of the United Nations, accompanied by M<sup>me</sup> Nicole Vroonen and Mr. Styts Smeding, both of whom were volunteers of the Katanga Red Cross. The ICRC delegates, Messrs. Senn and de Preux, as well as Mr. Melcher, correspondent, remained continuously in touch with those at the United Nations upon which the enquiry depended. Not having succeeded in obtaining sufficient reliable information, they then warned military patrols to search for traces of the three missing persons.

In view, however, of the persistent silence surrounding this matter, the International Committee decided on December 22 to send out an independent personality from Geneva to Elisabethville with the task of enquiring about Mr. Olivet's fate: it informed the

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<sup>1</sup> *Plate.*

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United Nations Secretary-General of this, who replied by assuring the ICRC " that UNOC will spare no effort to find Mr. Olivet, for whose work," he said, " which has been accomplished in Katanga we have the highest regard ".

However, on the next day a telegram from the correspondent of the ICRC at Elisabethville reached Geneva which read as follows:

" Bodies Olivet and Madame Vroonen of Belgian nationality and Smeding of Dutch nationality found this morning. Bodies were found buried about 20 yards from the ambulance. Ambulance had been hit by machine-gun and bazooka or other fire. Ambulance was in full battle area on December 13, enquiry being undertaken by State Public Prosecutor, will keep you informed result as soon as possible. Have brought body Madame Vroonen to Reine Elisabeth hospital. The two other bodies will be exhumed this afternoon."

The drama had thus been played out to the end and the International Committee learned this news with the deepest affliction, which it had the sad task of informing Mr. Olivet's family. However, the circumstances themselves of this tragic event had not been cleared up, consequently on December 24 the ICRC, which had not in the meantime received sufficient details, informed Mr. Thant and Mr. Tshombe of the departure of one of its Vice-Presidents, Mr. F. Siordet, for Elisabethville. We will return subsequently to the results of this mission.

Finally, on December 25, the ICRC received a further telegram from its correspondent at Elisabethville, tragic in its briefness and in which it was stated that Georges Olivet and his companions had been buried that very morning in the grounds of the Reine Elisabeth hospital in the presence of the delegates of the ICRC, representatives of the Katanga Government, the consular corps, and representatives of the Katanga Red Cross and of the medical services.

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As soon as confirmation was received in Geneva of the tragic news of the death of its representative in Katanga, the International Committee of the Red Cross published the following press release on December 24, 1961:

The International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva has received from its delegation in the Congo confirmation of the death of its representative, Georges Olivet, mortally struck, with two members of the Katanga Red Cross, whilst carrying aid to the victims of the fighting at Elisabethville.

The ICRC wishes to pay public tribute to this faithful servant of the Red Cross, who did not cease, since the beginning of the hostilities in the Congo, from risking himself with exemplary courage in order to mitigate suffering and save many human lives, for his devotion to the Red Cross ideal he paid with his life. Mr. Frédéric Siordet will be proceeding to the Congo to take part in the enquiry opened by the authorities.

Mr. Boissier, President of the institution, then paid tribute to Mr. Olivet in the press and on the wireless as follows:

*One recalls the famous statement " I only believe in causes for which men get themselves killed ". For the Red Cross, or rather for those whom it aids, people are giving their lives, and the International Committee of the Red Cross now numbers one more martyr.*

*For eighteen months the delegates of the ICRC have travelled throughout the Congo by car, on dangerous roads at the mercy of ambushes, in planes which landed somehow or other on airstrips which were often blocked. Everywhere, they have tried to release prisoners, exchange hostages and protect populations threatened by massacre and famine. Only recently, Georges Olivet was sparing no effort, with a love, a faith and a courage which everybody, white and black, admired, because this man was destined to accomplish such a mission.*

*Speaking several native languages, which he had learned whilst in business, he knew how to approach the local inhabitants, to speak to them, to understand them and, above all, to make himself loved.*

*He was confided in and his help was sought. For him, only one thing mattered, to devote himself entirely to a cause to which he had dedicated his life.*

*Thus in Elisabethville, in the middle of the fighting, he made several attempts to cross the enemy lines to save the victims of heavy firing. He did not succeed. He tried once more and that was the end. The end of an earthly existence but the beginning of greater things, to be followed as an example.*

In 1960, when the grave events started which were to tear the Congo apart, Georges Olivet with spontaneous enthusiasm placed himself at the disposal of the ICRC. All those who were then to become his companions at the ICRC delegation at Leopoldville paid tribute to his courage and to his generosity. Always willing to help and loving the Congo which he knew well, since he had already been established there for more than six years, he showed in all the missions which he undertook with his colleagues a wonderful spirit of friendship and demonstrated at all times his devotion to that ideal which he served with deep conviction, and for which he died.

On December 29, 1961, a moving ceremony took place in one of the churches in Geneva, which was attended by family mourners, by representatives of the cantonal and municipal authorities, of the League and also of numerous international institutions and by the diplomatic representatives of various countries. A large Red Cross flag was displayed in front of the choir and the congregation included the President and large numbers of members and staff of the ICRC.

Mr. Léopold Boissier, in the name of the International Committee, recalled in the following terms one who had paid with his life for his devotion to the cause of the Red Cross :

*At the beginning of July 1960, the Belgian Congo, which had obtained its independence, was seething with agitation. Chaos reigned and the sole representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Mr. Ammann, who had only just arrived, found himself facing a superhuman task.*

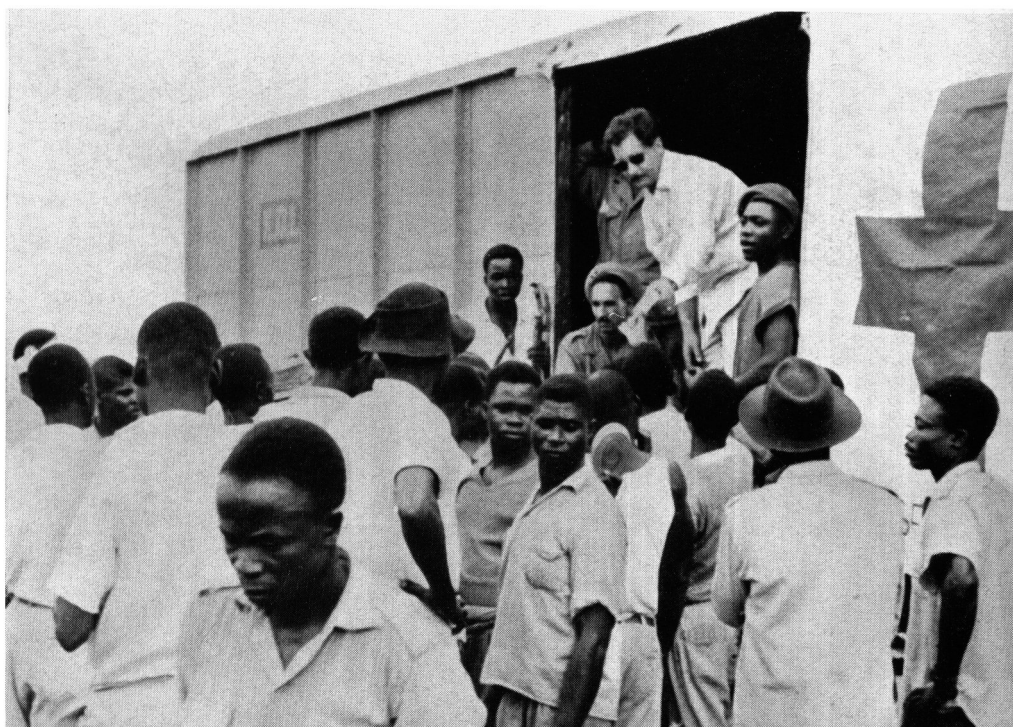
*Fortunately, a young Genevese businessman introduced himself to him and offered his services on a voluntary basis. These services first of all included a typewriter, a car, much good-will and as much time as was needed. He also knew the country, its dialects, customs, tribes and the local chiefs. Furthermore, he was greatly interested in the natives whom he understood and loved, and who repayed him a hundred times for all his understanding and affection.*

*But, above all, Georges Olivet offered his whole being, even his life, of which he was to make the supreme sacrifice in the break in the path on which his destiny as a Christian was to lead him.*

**Georges Olivet,**  
*died in the service of the  
Red Cross (1961).*



*Here he is distributing relief at Luena in the Congo in 1960.*



*For some people the first encounter with the Red Cross is a decisive moment in their lives. They are called upon by a large undertaking to give of their best to exalted work amidst the evils which strike humanity, but which is also in proportion to the devotion which it arouses.*

*In his own family and in his home town Georges Olivet had found many opportunities of helping those nearest to him and now, in the vast expanse of the Congo, the International Committee of the Red Cross was to enable him still further to realise his need for service, devotion and fulfilment.*

*All those who worked with him and, above all, his friends can testify through my words. Thanks to him the delegates of the International Committee were able to accomplish their task by having had beside them a counsellor, someone who worked out a plan and who was always available.*

*Always calm and cheerful, and free from the nervousness from which nearly all white people seem to suffer in the debilitating climate of Central Africa, Georges Olivet was ready to undertake anything, even the humblest of tasks: he it was who booked air tickets and obtained all that his colleagues required, but, thanks to his popularity, he also arranged meetings with the Head of the State and his ministers. He knew what had to be said and what had to be done. He was welcome everywhere and doors opened to him, enabling the beneficent action of the Red Cross to pass through behind him.*

*Then, this autumn, came the last, the most difficult mission of all in which he gave everything, the International Committee's intervention during the United Nations action in Katanga. This consisted in the heat of the battle in collecting victims lying hurt in the streets, ensuring the hospitalisation of the wounded, organising the evacuation of civilians, negotiating truces which were essential, in a word, to enable the red cross on a white ground to give its protection once again.*

*This battle is blind, striking haphazard. Under conditions which an enquiry will no doubt establish, Georges Olivet, tried in vain to cross the lines several times. During a last attempt he and his companions were struck down.*

*At all events, the sacrifice has been made and he fell in action in full completion of his duty.*

*When, on Christmas Eve, I told my colleagues of the International Committee of my anguish over the still uncertain fate of our delegate*

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*in Katanga, I added that whatever happened, there was reason for us to believe and to hope, since Georges Olivet had strengthened us in the usefulness and the importance of our task. . .*

After the organ had been played, the funeral service was celebrated and the officiating clergyman recalled the personality of the deceased who, by accomplishing his task as far as the supreme sacrifice, illustrated the verse in St. John's Gospel: "Greater love hath no man than this that he lay down his life for his friend."

Georges Olivet's brutal death and the circumstances surrounding it, and the fact also that the sign of the red cross no longer protects those who legitimately seek its protection, shook the conscience of the world as can be seen by the messages of condolence which reached Geneva after December 23, 1961.

The League, as well as numerous National Red Cross Societies, expressed their sympathy to the ICRC. The following are some examples<sup>1</sup>:

shocked at sad news deepest sympathy self and irish red cross = barry chairman.

britredcross deeply shocked tragic death monsieur olivet offer our heartfelt sympathy to family and icrc = limerick british red cross.

belgian red cross profoundly moved associates itself with sorrow international committee of red cross and salutes the memory of g olivet who has well deserved of the entire red cross by giving his life in the service of humanity = prince albert of belgium.

learn through press death olivet and colleagues stop requesting you transmit deep condolences bereaved families express admiration for representatives fallen field of honour with feelings of horror for this new attack priviledges red cross = baron zeeland general treasurer league of red cross societies.

surprised to hear news through press and profoundly regret tragic death of monsieur georges olivet icrc delegate on customary mission near elisabethville stop please accept our sincere condolences and trans-

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<sup>1</sup> Some of which have been translated by us.

mit our cordial sympathy to family of deceased = shimadzu president  
japanese red cross.

grievously moved by death monsieur olivet and his companions  
killed in the service of the red cross stop french red cross sends expression  
its deeply saddened sympathy to icrc = françois poncet president french  
red cross.

moved to learn of tragic fate monsieur georges olivet and his col-  
leagues request accept our deepest condolences = ferri general pre-  
sident italian red cross.

we are deeply grieved reported death georges olivet nicole vroomen  
styts smeeding due unexplained shooting and treasure the memory of  
another sacrifice beyond call of duty characteristic of redcross workers  
exemplifying devotion to service humanity = philippine national red  
cross.

Many institutions also associated themselves with this loss.  
Amongst them, the United Nations, whose Secretary-General,  
Mr. Thant, expressed himself as follows:

have the honour to acknowledge receipt of your message of 24  
december relative to the announcement of the discovery of the bodies of  
monsieur olivet, madame vroomen and monsieur smeding para wish to  
express to you the profound sorrow which the death on service of these  
men and of this woman who, in accordance with the noblest red cross  
traditions, advanced in the midst of the fighting to accomplish their  
humanitarian mission stop the representatives of unoc have on numerous  
occasions appreciated the exceptional quality of the work carried out  
by monsieur olivet and also his contribution in a spirit of total devotion  
and personal sacrifice to bring aid to human suffering during recent  
hostilities at elisabethville.

Finally, we would point out that the President of Katanga,  
Mr. Tshombe, as well as the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the  
Congo, Mr. Bomboko, sent telegrams to the ICRC of which these  
were the main points :

government of katanga presents sincere condolences to you and  
wishes to thank you for all red cross has done in katanga since beginning  
cruel events which our country has known wishes to assure you of its  
entire cooperation with an organisation which never ceases attracting  
the respect of all = president of katanga moise tschombe.



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government and congolese people learnt with sorrow tragic disappearance delegate international committee red cross in congo and of his companions stop request you receive sincere condolences congolese government to families of deceased stop feel responsibility and impartiality with which monsieur olivet accomplished his mission in the congo can only do honour to the international committee = bomboko minister foreign affairs.

One can see by the above quotations what deep feelings were aroused by the death of the ICRC delegate, killed whilst accomplishing the highest duty which man can give in the world, that of serving others. But Georges Olivet did not sacrifice himself in vain. He went unarmed in an ambulance and the war killed him, believing that with him and his companions was also killed the spirit of peace and good-will which they represented. This spirit, however, cannot be destroyed : it remains today one of the only hopes in a world torn apart.

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