

# MEMOIRS OF A PEACE HISTORIAN

Irwin Abrams  
Antioch University

Paper presented at the meeting of  
The American Historical Association  
Washington, D.C., January 10, 2004  
For the Panel: Peace Research in History

Copyright ©2004 by Irwin Abrams

---

## INTRODUCTION

This paper will tell the personal story of how I came to write about the peace movement and then something about my work on this subject during my year in Europe 1936-37 as a Harvard Sheldon Traveling Fellow. Due to time and space restrictions, I will concentrate mainly on my time in Geneva at the International Peace Bureau and the Library of the League of Nations.

In the journal I started on 18 January 1936, I wrote, "I do not know how long I can keep this up, but if I am able to, how much pleasure I shall have when I, as a bearded and bent octogenarian, I can read over this record." I did keep it up through those years, and though I'm not bearded and not too bent, but still an octogenarian for another month, I've indeed been reading with much enjoyment my pages about how this rather naïve twenty-two year old encountered Europe for the first time.

## A DISSERTATION ON THE HISTORY OF PEACE SOCIETIES

When I was an undergraduate History student at Stanford University in the early nineteen-thirties, the dominant subject of seminar study was the origins of World War I. The History thesis I wrote in my Junior year was entitled, "The Vienna Cabinet in the Austro-Serb Crisis of July 1914." It began with the deathless pronouncement, "In 1914 Europe was hurtling toward catastrophe." I no longer believe in this deterministic explanation of how the twentieth century began, but it was this concern with pre-1914 diplomatic documents which led me to the seminar of Professor William L. Langer when I began graduate studies at Harvard in the fall of 1934. I was to have the experience of studying under a great historian.

He was then completing *The Diplomacy of Imperialism* (1935), continuing his brilliant study of European diplomacy after Bismarck, and the subjects in the seminar were naturally closely related to his own work. In the first semester I studied "The Austrian Question at the Turn of the Century," the diplomatic discussions about the possible disruption of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This later became my first published historical article.

For the second semester I chose from Langer's list "Ideas of War in the 1890s." When it came time to select a subject for my doctoral dissertation, I considered Austria-Hungary, but even though I was beginning to study Russian, I realized that I did not have the linguistic competence to work on that polyglot empire. On the other hand, in looking into the ideas of war in the writings of Captain Alfred T. Mahan and the neo-Darwinists, I had become interested in their opponents in the peace movement. I found that historians had given little attention to the European peace societies in the nineteenth century and that there were materials in the Harvard Law Library which presented a good

opportunity to begin such research. When Professor Langer approved my proposal, neither of us could have anticipated its consequences.

## THE SHELDON TRAVELING FELLOWSHIP

My roommate in Morris Hall of the Harvard Business School was Theodore Ropp, who had decided to do his own dissertation on the French Navy, He was later to be the author of a great book on *War in the Modern World* (last edition, 2000).

We both were chosen to receive fellowships for traveling abroad during 1936-37. In the *New York Times* of 23 March 1936, it was reported that “nine graduate students and younger faculty members of Harvard University had been awarded Sheldon Traveling Fellowships at \$1,500 each for study in Europe next year.” Next to this article was an AP dispatch from Germany, telling of the awarding of Iron Crosses to “1,164 equine veterans of the World War” which were to get “little white disks with an iron cross on them and the word :’*kriegskamerad*’. Those horses owned by poor persons get daily rations of oats paid for by the government.” The Sheldon Fellows were compensated in the newspaper for being given such dinner partners in the adjoining column by having it noted in their article that “The fellowships are among the highest academic honors at the university.”

After we told Professor Langer the news, I wrote that “he was mightily pleased. ... He seemed almost as glad about it as we did.” Our mentor was a hard-driven scholar. We had been accustomed to wait outside his office door rather tremulously, before interrupting the important work he was doing. A few days after the Sheldon announcement he was to offer Ted a seat. “This was news,” I wrote, “remembering that once he had offered me a seat. Now he told us not to bother too much about work when we were in Europe, but to get around, see people and things. This was the advice Professor C.H.Haskins had given him,” he said. “Rather unexpected sentiment coming from the hardest-working historian hereabouts,” I noted, “but certainly advice to act upon.”

Our year in Europe was to be a year of war and rumors of war. We received the notices of the Sheldons on 11 March 1936, four days after Germany reoccupied the Rhineland. On 5 May Italy completed the conquest of Ethiopia, and on 18 July the civil war began in Spain, I wrote in my journal on 11 March, “Now we must keep our fingers crossed and pray for no war in Europe.” The war did not come until two years later, but the period August 1936 through July 1937 was to be an eventful if unlikely time for me to be researching the history of the peace movement in Europe.

I did get around to see people and things. I visited 14 countries in all, including the Soviet Union, and my journal is full of descriptions about what I saw in all the art galleries and museums I conscientiously visited, but I also interviewed peace activists who remembered the past, I hunted for documents, and I did research in archives and libraries.

Before I left Harvard, I had a most helpful visit with Merle Curti, then teaching at Smith. College. I had not realized how in studying the American peace movement, he had also become familiar with so many relevant sources in western Europe. He equipped me with letters of introduction, with suggestions of where to look for materials, and with provocative ideas about how to interpret my findings.

I will mention only some of my more memorable interviews. In Geneva I met with Christian Lange (Nobel Peace Prize, 1921) and Ludwig Quidde (Nobel Peace Prize, 1927) and in Brussels with Henri La Fontaine, (Nobel Peace Prize , 1913), having no idea that one day I would be writing a book about the Nobel Peace Prize and that they would be the earliest of the 26 laureates I would

eventually meet. In my history of the prize I could refer to these interviews. A reviewer of the centennial edition of my book in 2001 was impressed that I had interviewed E.G. Smith, the secretary of Randal Cremer, who won the third prize in 1903. The reviewer wrote that a further asset of the author was his age. I can report that age also has its limitations.

In Geneva I also met with Hans Wehberg, international lawyer and publicist, who had an unrivalled knowledge of the history of the peace movement, and Theodore Ruysen, a veteran of the peace movement in France, then the secretary-general of the International Union of League of Nations Associations. In Paris I interviewed Frédéric Passy's son Paul, shortly before he died. He gave me some letters of his father, which I turned over to Jacob ter Meulen at the Peace Palace Library and later arranged for copies to be sent to the Swarthmore College Peace Collection. I also interviewed Frédéric Passy's longtime secretary, Mlle. Amelot, who told me that Passy's papers were still intact at the time of his death in 1912, but then they had disappeared. She remembered the pile of letters from Henry Richard, the leading English peace activist of his time. "This high" she said raising her hands, making me feel even worse.

When I met with the veteran peace activist Michel Revon, he told me that the archives of the *Ligue Internationale de la Paix et de la Liberté* had been preserved and were in his possession, but they were still confidential. I followed a number of other false leads in Paris, looking for source materials, but I also had several sessions with Jules Puech, who had some papers of Charles Lemonnier and shared many helpful memories with me. Puech had once been very active in the peace movement but now was more of a skeptic,

Ted Ropp lived in Paris with Russian émigrés, the Efremoffs, and I stayed there during the times I was in Paris. I remember how on Saturday nights we could not use the bathroom, because it seemed that all the Russians émigrés in Paris without bathrooms came there to take a bath. Jean Efremoff was a member of a leading Cossack family, who had been a liberal deputy in the Duma and an active participant in the Interparliamentary Union, for which he had been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. He was working at the Carnegie Center, where d'Estournelles de Constant had found him a job.

In London I met with Caroline Playne, G.P. Gooch, A.J. Hobson and A.C.F. Beales, who had written the first history of the organized peace movement, a work unfortunately with many errors. Also Mundy Schwab, secretary of Alfred H. Fried, from 1911 until his death in 1921. She gave me a different picture of the convivial music-loving Fried than I had received from his writings. In The Hague Jacob ter Meulen became a good friend. Working with the peace materials under his tutelage proved even more productive than my times at the British Museum and the Bibliothèque Nationale. I wrote in my journal about Jacob ter Meulen, "His smile is the most kindly I have ever received. His whole face seems to glow with warmth, good humor and a pinch of playfulness."

In Copenhagen I met the son of Fredrik Bajer and used the valuable papers of his father at the Royal Library, among which I found 400 letters from the British Quaker pacifist, Priscilla Peckover.

In Oslo I met with Dr. R. Moe, Director of the at the Norwegian Nobel Institute and Secretary of the Norwegian Nobel Committee. He informed me that the Committee archives were "absolutely confidential." He showed me the room where the Committee deliberated, with the pictures of the laureates on its walls. In the understatement of the day, Moe said, "It is rather difficult to correspond with Ossietzky" He was the German anti-militarist who had been transferred from a concentration camp to a Berlin hospital. He had been granted the Nobel Peace Prize only four months earlier in the ceremony in Oslo, but the Nazi government had not allowed him to go there to receive it. He was still under surveillance by the Gestapo, which no doubt intercepted his mail. In

the future I was to spend more time researching and writing about this historic prize than about any other.

A great help to me was Konrad Reisner, the last survivor of the group of German émigrés who organized the successful campaign for Ossietzky's prize, whom I discovered living in nearby Dayton, Ohio. He died recently in Portland, Oregon, at the age of 95. Reisner and Willy Brandt, who had been the Oslo connection of the campaigners, were the two participants in the Ossietzky affair whom I was able to interview.

A third might have been Halvdan Koht, had I been working on Ossietzky at that time. Koht was then Foreign Minister and had been a member of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, but Berlin was bringing strong pressure on the Norwegian government opposing the Ossietzky prize, and Koht had absented himself from the Committee's discussions because of his governmental position. He could have told me about that and perhaps also why the King of Norway did not attend the award ceremony, which I have never been able to find out. But it was because Koht was an authority on the Norwegian peace movement that I had wanted to see him. I did meet his daughter, who tried to get me an appointment with her father, but he was said to be too busy "with the question of the whales in the northern waters."

From Oslo to Stockholm, where Dr. Moe had told me I would find nothing among Alfred Nobel's papers at the Nobel Foundation, but I did find there the valuable letters to him from Bertha von Suttner.

In Vienna Gustav Schuster of the *Oesterreichische Friedensgesellschaft* told me about the marital problems between Bertha von Suttner and her husband, which are not mentioned in her autobiography and have only been revealed in recent biographies of the baroness. Schuster showed me a vase on his mantelpiece containing her cremated ashes. I was very impressed that he had this relic of Bertha von Suttner, but later I learned that following a custom of the time, after her cremation many such vials with her ashes had been sent to friends and colleagues.

## ARCHIVES OF THE PERMANENT INTERNATIONAL PEACE BUREAU

I started my researches in Geneva in September 1936, going first to the office of the Permanent International Peace Bureau, founded in 1891, its title promising an enduring existence. Henri Golay, who had been secretary-general since 1911, was on holiday, but Mlle. F. Montaudon, who had worked there for years, received me and we had a pleasant talk. "A well-preserved old lady," I wrote, "with a well preserved sense of humor. She is vastly amused when I ask her questions which betray a deep knowledge about all the details of the peace movement ...and a mere stripling asks her about things she has forgotten years ago."

When M. Golay returned to the office, at first I did not find him very forthcoming. He kept telling me that he would look through the old files for me, but nothing happened, and I kept busy with the Bureau's publications. Eventually I wrote, "Golay finally opened the forbidden door yesterday ... but the archives ante 1912 were not there. So one of these days we will search the basement again."

Several days later: "In the afternoon took place the search in the basement. And *enfin* the missing records have been found. Of course in no order at all --- they are as they were left years ago when the IPB moved from Berne to Geneva." As M. Golay explained, '*Je ne suis pas un homme pour la bibliothèque!*' I noted, "Some of the documents I uncovered in my preliminary investigation are invaluable, and the lot of them belong in a library, where scholars can have access to them. It's shameful."

It turned out that the records from my chief period of interest, when Élie Ducommun was secretary-general, were actually in apple-pie order, and I was able to make good use of them. And some of the old books I found in the basement M. Golay kindly permitted me to take to my pension, to use when the office was closed.

The day when we found the old records was the day when M. Golay told me the sad story about the unhappy plight of the IPB: “Money is owed the bank, the societies contribute little, and not one cent comes from America.” Since Jacob ter Meulen had asked me to represent the Peace Palace library and to collect whatever books and materials I could find as I went about Europe, I cautiously suggested that Golay sell the library. He was indignant: “What, sell the library to keep alive! “ Eventually, however, he did let me put together a packet of duplicate books to send to the Peace Palace.

I came more and more to like the old gentleman, as I thought of him then. Actually, he was only 69, but I was 23. I wrote. “He is really most *gentil* and holds the most liberal convictions, always willing to expose them to self-criticism.” As for his reluctance to sell the library, I wrote, “His is a hard lot, and I completely understand how he feels. The IPB is on its last legs, and it finds support nowhere, and particularly none from the large institutions which control millions. Consequently he is anxious not to lose treasures which the IPB might hold.”

Once, saying that he knew I was possessed of discretion, he told me of certain personal problems among the English societies. I was glad that M. Golay had such confidence in me. He said, half to himself, so I knew he meant it, ‘*Vous êtes gentil, eh bien, vous êtes gentil.*’”

Toward the end of my time at IPB, I wrote, “Meanwhile, I continue to hear M. Golay’s tale of woe. Poor man, he is fighting a losing battle .... He is really a very noble spirit, so were they all, those pre-war pacifists, and he is one of them.” I once mentioned Edmond Thiaudière, who had died in 1930. “Golay remarked, ‘But he is a man of the past.’ And I thought to myself, ‘You too are a man of the past.’”

Henri Golay had inherited a Peace Bureau which was unprepared to face the divisions among member societies during the First World War. After the war it was further weakened when peace societies proliferated largely outside the framework of the IPB. While Golay was devoted and thoroughly conscientious and went on organizing international conferences for those societies still belonging to the IPB, he was not able to coordinate the popular peace movement of the inter-war period as his predecessors of the pre-war period, Ducommun and Gobat, had done. The outbreak of World War II brought a suspension of the IPB’s activities.

Golay wrote to me in 1941, “I have taken advantage of my leisure ... to put a bit of order into the archives.” So he became “*un homme pour la bibliothèque*” at the last. But it was not a happy occupation. “It is a work,” he wrote, “which evokes overwhelmingly melancholy memories. ... One has the feeling of having made such useless efforts.”

M. Golay’s death in 1950 marked the end of the original organization. The Swiss Federal Court then decided that the Permanent International Peace Bureau was no longer permanent and had ceased to exist. Its assets were given to the International Liaison Committee of Organisations for Peace (ILCOP) which had been founded with aims similar to the former Bureau and with some of the same members,. The archives and the book collection were given to the Library of the United Nations. So my hopes of 1936 were finally realized. The ILCOP renamed itself The International Peace Bureau, which began a second life under more favorable auspices. It is currently making an important contribution to work for peace under the capable direction of Colin Archer, but when it calls itself “the earliest international peace organization,” I have some reservations.

## THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS LIBRARY

From the quiet and poorly lighted office of the BIP “on its last legs,” my other port of call in Geneva in September 1936, the Library of the League of Nations, presented quite a contrast. After my first visit, I wrote, “I found the new buildings of the League of Nations at the Palais des Nations, gleaming white in the sunshine, straight, solid, substantial, giving one renewed hope in the League. Surrounded by luxuriant park with view of the lake and the mountains. Very impressive.”

Unfortunately, appearances were deceiving. The League of Nations was to be no more permanent than the old International Peace Bureau. When they called the roll of member nations at the opening of the Assembly, there was an ominous silence when the name of Italy was reached. Italy had withdrawn and would not return so long as Ethiopian delegates might be present. The Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie himself had come to town, “lacking diplomatic sense,” said a French newspaper, and wanting to give another speech, which many diplomats felt would embarrass the League.

The buildings were not quite finished, and to find my way to the library, as I wrote, “I had to crawl in through the back, walking on boards and dodging buckets of paint.” The secretariat had already moved into its new quarters in the spring, and in September the new Council chamber was ready for meetings, The hall for the Assembly meetings, however, would not be ready until the following year, and I was to interview Christian Lange at Geneva’s *Batiment Electoral* shortly before the 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly held its last session there.

The library was still “in process of *demanagement*,” as I wrote. “and all is confusion. The loan desk is three floors away from the catalogue, the geographical institute [where a place had been found for me to work] was five floors distant from the map collection, and I am several miles away from the Fried-Suttner collection [which was still in the old library]. These documents must be kept in the safe; and the safe is not yet installed. Meanwhile, they have been good enough to bring over some of the documents and let me have them through Dr. Breycha, who gives them to me in sections.”

It was Dr. Breycha-Vautier, the Assistant Librarian, who had negotiated the purchase from Frau Fried some years before. He was “a young fellow,” I wrote, “an Austrian baron, very clever chap.” He was later to become Head Librarian, succeeding Dr. Sevensma, then occupying this post.

Dr. Breycha told me that Baroness von Suttner had left her papers to Fried, and that there had been a contract between her heirs with Fried stating that that none of the materials would be made public. Dr. Breycha told me that he did not recognize the contract. Moreover, Frau Fried had tried to withhold the diaries, claiming that they did not exist. He had told her, “No diaries, no sale,” and they were soon forthcoming. Later, after the legal decease of the BIP, Breycha was responsible for its archives and books coming to the library of the United Nations, where they are today.

One day during my time there, he drove me down to the old library and showed me the whole collection. “*C’est formidable*,” I wrote. But only a part of the Suttner papers had been put in some kind of order by Fried, and there was much to do before it could be effectively examined. When I returned to Geneva in May 1937, this had still not been done, although by then I had read Suttner’s letters to Alfred Nobel in Stockholm. It was only twenty years later that I was able to read through all the Suttner papers in order to see Nobel’s letters to her and to publish what was something of a landmark article on their correspondence.

My 1936 journal is studded with expressions of my frustration trying to research the Fried-Suttner collection in its unorganized state as well as the state of the library at that time. “Yesterday morning

another time of troubles at the library. 'Nobody knows the trouble I've seen.' The morning wasted in waiting and running about." And when I finally gave up: "Afterwards to the library to say my goodbyes. Had I waited until the paint dried, it would then have been that somebody was sick or something else. ... Goodbyes to Breycha, who gives a powerful handshake, and who was probably very relieved to hear my decision." And with good reason. These good people were dealing with all the problems of moving a library and trying to carry on business as usual, and here they were confronted with an eager young researcher who wanted to use materials that were not yet in order or even in place.

When I said goodbye to Dr. Sevensma, he hoped that the collection would be in order when I planned to return in 1937. It had still not been put in order by then, but Sevensma was hoping to receive Rockefeller money for a research fellowship to get the job done. I told him I would be interested in applying, but, as with Golay, money from America, at least for this purpose, apparently never came.

I returned to Harvard in August 1937 to spend the next months writing my dissertation, "A History of European Peace Societies 1867-1899." It was submitted in 1938 and shared Harvard's Sumner Prize, which according to Peter van den Dungen was one of the earliest peace prizes established. Merle Curti read it and told me he liked it, especially my vignettes of the peace activists. In 1939 World War II began, however, and this was not the time to publish a history of the European peace movement. Since then excellent works covering the subject have been published by Sandi Cooper and Verdiana Grossi.

The epilogue to the Sheldon year came the next year of 1938, which was the most important year of my life. I finished my dissertation, concluding about the peace activists that they wanted a revolution (in international relations), but refused to be revolutionists. As Tolstoy pointed out, what was needed was not a political revolution, but a moral revolution. While my dissertation started me on the path to pacifism and to Quakerism, others of Professor Langer's graduate students followed him into work during the war with the Research and Analysis Branch of the Office of Strategic Service.

In June 1938 I received my Harvard Ph.D., and a few months later when the New England hurricane occurred, instead of helping with the clean-up, I was playing baseball. With a mighty heave I tried to throw out the batter who had hit the ball over my head and was now making for the home plate, with such a mighty heave that it broke the humerus bone of my right arm. The doctors at the Harvard infirmary found it hard to believe that I could do this, but I explained that in California, where I came from, we played hard.

Very soon afterward a telegram arrived from Stanford University, my alma mater, offering me an appointment to teach Western Civilization. So I began my first teaching job writing on the blackboard with my left hand about Egyptian History, about which I knew practically nothing. My appointment was only for one year, so in December 1938, with an insurance payment for my broken arm, I bought a ticket to Chicago for the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, looking for a job. I did not find one, but my Stanford appointment was later renewed. On the train back from Chicago on New Year's Eve at a party in the club car put together by an organizer from the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, I met a beautiful young woman returning to Mills College in Oakland, California, from a holiday stay with her parents in Cincinnati for her last semester before graduating. We got on so well together on the train and later that in February 1939 we were engaged and in June married, a happy marriage that lasted until her death almost sixty years later.

So you can see why 1938 was the most important year of my life: finishing the dissertation with its portending conclusion, beginning my teaching career, and meeting the love of my life. I don't like

to think what might not have happened if that batter in the baseball game had struck out, or if that young woman had not decided to return to college early, breaking her New Year's Eve date. So I will lay responsibility for what did happen on my guardian angel.

Further chapters of my memoirs will include teaching at Stanford; war-time service as a conscientious objector with the American Friends Service Committee; my Antioch years, developing an experiential way to teach history and helping the college pioneer in education abroad; and my continuing occupation in the last twenty years with the Nobel Peace Prize and the laureates. Age does have its assets.

\* \* \*