

The magic of the white flag gives hope

Preserving Swiss neutrality

by Ursula Felber*

Max Dätwyler travelled the world with a white flag for peace – ridiculed, misunderstood, but unwavering. His courage reminds us that those who remain silent in times of war are complicit.

Peace concerns everyone, and everyone can sow the seeds of peace. Very few people approve of violence, but those who stand up for peace in times of war have a difficult position. They are quickly suspected of being out of touch with reality or of taking the wrong side.

In view of the current world situation, it is appropriate to remember the Swiss Max Dätwyler (1886–1976). Throughout his life, he wanted to persuade the powerful of the world to make peace. With total commitment, a great deal of humour, unconventional ideas and perseverance, he was dedicated to world peace. In his long black coat, hat on his head, briefcase under his arm and white flag in his hand, he marched from city to city, from country to country. Every Swiss child knew him in the 1950s and 1960s.

He was rather disparagingly called the peace apostle. Dätwyler appeared in East and West Berlin, stood on Red Square in Moscow, demonstrated in Paris against the Algerian War, wanted to meet *John F. Kennedy* in the Capitol in Washington, campaigned for a neutral Cuba, and appeared in London, Cairo and Jerusalem. He was not welcomed anywhere. However, this did not prevent him from continuing to stand up for world peace. Driven by this conviction, he always found ways to draw attention to himself.

When mobilisation began in 1914, Max Dätwyler refused to take the oath of allegiance in protest of the war. As a result, he was committed to a psychiatric hospital and expelled from the army. After his release, he founded the *Peace Army Association* in Bern in 1915, an army for public education.

In 1932, he marched from Zurich to Geneva. He wanted to attend the disarmament confer-



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ence of the League of Nations but was denied entry. From the Second World War onwards, the white flag was his constant companion. In 1962, he founded a new Geneva Convention and called for nuclear disarmament. Max Dätwyler travelled to the world's centres of power and trouble spots, advocating for world peace and disarmament. As an apostle of peace with his white flag, he became a world-famous symbol of pacifism.

Most of his contemporaries considered him an unworldly eccentric and weirdo. He was ostracized, committed to a psychiatric hospital and arrested. Several times, the authorities tried to have him declared legally incapable. However, thanks to his refusal and a positive assessment from Zumikon, his place of origine, this never happened.

Max Dätwyler was a devout Christian and Swiss citizen. He wanted to spread the Swiss model of government throughout the world as a basis for peaceful coexistence. Switzerland, the country with the founder of the Red Cross, the country with the longest tradition of neutrality.

Currently, Europe is arming itself and the world has not become a better place. Human rights, international humanitarian law and the UN prohibition of violence are being disregarded. All

* Ursula Felber is a member of the "Bewegung für Neutralität bene.swiss" (movement for neutrality). <https://bene.swiss/>

achievements in establishing the rule of law over violence are being trampled on.

Today, Switzerland stands at a crossroads, and the country must choose between neutrality and NATO; the two are incompatible. The initiative "Preserving Swiss Neutrality"¹ creates the conditions for independence and for gaining the trust of the world.

Although direct influence on those in power is limited, everyone can draw attention to the horrors of war, stand up for dialogue and thus provide food for thought. Max Dätwyler was ridiculed. With his courage and straightforwardness, he is a role model for us. And the question remains: would I, would you, would the world not be poorer if no one carried the white flag anymore?

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")

¹ <https://neutralitaet-ja.ch/>



Max Dätwyler in 1964 on Red Square in Moscow. (Picture from the book)