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## CONFERENCE OF THE INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE OF WOMEN

—GENEVA, JULY, 1957

*MRS. J. POWER, who attended this Conference as an observer for the Black Sash, has written the following informal, but nonetheless inspiring report on her experiences.*

**WHEN** I flew out of London airport early one morning in July to attend a conference of the International Alliance of Women as an observer for the Black Sash, I was a little apprehensive of what lay before me. I would have been glad of the comforting presence of a fellow Black Sasher at my side. I was not to know that I would return four days later the unworthy hero of the occasion, having provided, so I was told, by the story of the Black Sash, the "highlight" and the "inspiration" of the conference!

But let me tell you the story of how it all happened. After a perfect, smooth flight 21,500 feet above clouds and weather, we arrived in Geneva at 3.30 a.m., but after customs formalities and other unavoidable delays, it was 4.30 and already getting light when I arrived at my hotel. I had not been to bed before leaving, so, although I was longing to get

out and see Geneva, I went to bed and tried to sleep—but with little success. By nine o'clock I was up and out and exploring Geneva on foot. I found it a beautiful city and so reminiscent of home.

The conference was due to start at 2 p.m. I had been asked to lunch with Mrs. Margaret Mathieson, a member of the executive council of the International Alliance of Women, whom I had previously met in London, in order to meet some of the other delegates before the start of the conference.

### **Principal Speaker at Reception**

When I arrived for the lunch, I was told it had been decided at a board meeting that morning that I should be the principal speaker at a reception to be given that evening in honour of the delegates by the Association Suisse pour le Suffrage Féminin. As you know, the Swiss are the only women in Europe still without a vote. It was hoped that the story of the Black Sash might spur them on and encourage them to fight more determinedly for their rights. I was, of course, prepared to speak at the conference, but only to the delegates, not to a big reception, and

certainly not before I had time to collect my thoughts or get some sleep!

Anyhow, I had to make the best of it and say "yes" as gracefully and cheerfully as I could.

After the official opening of the conference and the presidential address of welcome, we went on a tour of the Palais de Nations, the headquarters of the European branch of the United Nations Organization. This was followed by a lecture on the role of the United Nations in the struggle for world peace and progress by the head of the United Nations Department of Information, which was most interesting. The International Alliance of Women has been granted consultative status by the United Nations Organization and thus is able to send delegates to all meetings of U.N.E.S.C.O., E.C.O.S.O.C., I.L.O. and other United Nations committees who are consulted on all matters concerning the interests of women.

### **Black Sash Story Inspires**

It was after 7 p.m. when I got back to my hotel, and I had to work on my speech as well as eat and change before the reception at nine—no time to sleep. It was a magnificent reception, but I was in no mood to enjoy it: I was much too nervous. All the prominent women of Geneva were there, many with their husbands, and among the guests were the president of the Republic of Geneva and the Minister of Education. A most able Swiss woman, educated in England, interpreted my speech and her translation in French was a great improvement on my original English. I used the excellent address you sent me, but, sensing the atmosphere of the gathering, I elaborated on the actual story of the Black Sash, putting in all the human interest and picturesque bits about the march, the forty-eight hours at the Union Buildings, and so on. Then, in view of the fact that I was supposed to be speaking particularly to the Swiss women, I stressed that the Black Sash was an example of what women could do if they stood together and organised themselves to fight for what they believed to be right. I did not exaggerate or dramatise in any way, but the story, which perhaps because it is so familiar seems ordinary to us, somehow lit a spark in the hearts of those women. There was tremendous applause and a chorus of acclamation and approbation for the brave women of South Africa. Such courage, such determination, such intelligence! Said in French, as it mostly was, it sounded even more enthusiastic than it does in English. I felt a terrible fraud being made a hero in this way, and only wished that all of you who deserve such praise could have been there to receive it.

Madame Chaise-Necker, head of the Association Suisse pour le Suffrage Féminin, said that her women had been inspired by the example of the women of South Africa and when they did get the vote, this example would be a factor in their success.

### **Distorted View of South Africa**

But to me, far more important than helping the Swiss women to get the vote, was the reaction of the delegates, particularly those from Asian and African countries such as Pakistan, Nigeria, Ceylon, British Guiana, who said that they had no idea that there was any opposition in South Africa to the "dis-

crimatory legislation" and "Fascist tendencies" (the expressions are their's) of the government). They had understood that all white South Africans calmly accepted the situation. It was a surprise and a relief to learn that there were groups brave enough to oppose the government's policy. During the next few days, these women came to discuss the situation with me, one after the other, and each one said she was going back to tell her fellow countrymen of the true state of affairs. It has worried me ever since I arrived in England that little recognition is given in the Press, on radio and television, to the fact that there is opposition to the discriminatory and repressive legislation in South Africa. It is generally assumed that South Africans are quite happy about the situation, and the general impression is that South Africa is so far advanced on the road to totalitarianism as not to be worth worrying about. If the news of the existence of the Black Sash can help to dispel this impression then a great service will have been rendered to the good name of South Africa.

I distributed all the propaganda you gave me and could have used a lot more. My copy of "The Black Sash" was read by several delegates and I eventually presented it to Mrs. Ester Graaf, president of the International Alliance of Women, who particularly wanted a copy. She also asked for a copy of the address, which I gave her. She intends to speak on the Black Sash in her country, Denmark.

For the rest of the week I went round in a haze of reflected glory, introduced everywhere as the woman of courage from South Africa. At a reception given by the City of Geneva, I again met the President, M. Boret, who said he admired the courage of those who stood up for what they believed to be right. (A fair interpretation of his actual words in French.)

### **Importance of the I.A.W.**

I have enclosed the official programme so you may see what our activities were. The talks and discussions at U.N.O. were of outstanding interest. We were given tickets to all the sessions of E.C.O.S.O.C. which was then sitting.

I was interested in the conference debates and discussions and am sure the International Alliance of Women does a wonderful work for women, particularly in underdeveloped countries. I lunched one day with Mrs. Ester Graaf, the president, and we discussed the possibility of a closer alliance between the Black Sash and the International Alliance of Women.

At the last session of the conference it was decided to send a message of support and congratulation to the Black Sash. This will come through official channels. Coming as it does from an international organization representing the women of 36 countries, it has great significance.

At the farewell dinner each delegate spoke for two minutes on the work of her society. I spoke of the convoy to the Cape. Saying goodbye, Mrs. Elizabeth Halsey from New York, general secretary of the Alliance, said in her attractive drawl, "Having the Black Sash here sure put the sparkle into this conference."

Once again, my thanks for giving me this wonderful experience. I was proud to be your ambassador.