

Tribute to Erich Geiringer (1917-1995)

By George Salmond (August 1995)
(IPPNW (NZ) member and former Director General of Health)

I speak today on behalf of the Wellington group of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) the members of which stand with me. Erich was a leading member of our group.

On Friday 14 May 1993 the Forty-sixth World Health Assembly at its final plenary session passed, by secret ballot, a resolution on the health and environmental effects of nuclear weapons. In keeping with the Charter of the United Nations and its own constitution the World Health Organization resolved to request the International Court of Justice to give an advisory opinion on the following question. "In view of the health and environmental effects, would the use of nuclear weapons by a State in war, or other armed conflict, be a breach of its obligations under international law?"

The World Court resolution was not passed without an enormous struggle. The nuclear weapon states and their supporters opposed the resolution every step of the way. But, largely due to the efforts of a few heroic individuals from non-governmental organisations and the smaller nation states the resolution was passed and the question transmitted to the Court. Now the resolution has the support of the General Assembly of the United Nations.

Erich saw the WHA resolution as his most important antinuclear achievement. It marked the high-point of more than a decade of antinuclear campaigning, which started in 1985 with publication of Erich's antinuclear primer 'Malice in Blunderland'.

For ten years Erich devoted his enormous intellectual talent and campaigning skills to the antinuclear cause. It occupied most of his waking hours and made huge demands on himself, on Carol and on members of the family. Despite increasing debility in the last year, he did not relent. He pursued the cause to within a few days of his death.

Without Erich there would not have been a World Court resolution at the WHA. It was his initiative at the Stockholm conference in 1991 that launched the World Court Project within IPPNW. It was his strategy, his guiding hand, his dogged persistence that saw the successful outcome in Geneva in 1993.

For Erich this largely unrecognised crowning achievement came after more than thirty years in New Zealand as a publicist and campaigner on health and social issues. It all began in 1959 when Erich was appointed to a research post in the Department of Medicine at the Otago Medical School. When he took up that appointment he already had behind him a wide ranging and impressive research record in academic medicine.

Erich proved more than a match for the authorities at the Otago Medical School. As a student in Dunedin at the time I remember Erich as a colourful larger than life character who challenged in almost every way the social conventions of the conservative Dunedin establishment. His ideas about medicine, about life in general were radical. His appearance on public occasions in his black cloak and his open topped, black Armstrong Sidley car caused great excitement for students and faculty alike. He brought entertainment and colour to our lives, he challenged social conventions and the established order. He made everybody think. He was an intellectual gadfly, a catalyst for change, a sort of academic pied piper.

For reasons, which should be obvious, Erich's stay in Dunedin was short. After time in the Shetlands he returned to New Zealand in 1963 to general practice in Wellington. Soon he brought his reforming zeal to bear once again upon the medical establishment. This time it was the New Zealand Branch of the British Medical Association. Almost single handedly in the beginning he enlivened medical politics in this country. Again he provoked and challenge the established order. He founded a rival association and called it the New Zealand Medical Association. The name was a political masterstroke. By running surveys, arranging meetings, producing newsletters and engaging in public debate on a whole variety of topics Erich, as he liked to put it, "dragged the New Zealand medical establishment into the nineteenth century".

Since my student days I have been one of Erich's probably many private admirers. It was only in recent times that I had the privilege to know and to work with him closely. I have not always agreed with the things Erich did, but I have come to greatly admire his enormous intellect, the clarity of his vision, his energy, his confidence and his willingness to take on all comers on the things that he believed in. his intellectual strength, his robust personal style and his general disregard of social conventions made him an intimidating figure for many people. Perhaps this is why so many myths developed around him over the years, many of them outrageous and untrue. At times this must have been very hurtful to Erich and to the family.

In my opinion Erich Geiringer has been one of the most significant public health figures in New Zealand in the last half century. He has helped and at times has driven us to confront issues which have been and continue to be important for our growth and development as a unique and independent Pacific nation. As New Zealanders we have much to thank Erich for.

Erich was also held in high regard, even in awe, internationally. In the last few days many tributes have been received from IPPNW affiliates overseas. In an official IPPNW "In Memoriam" Erich is described as "...an uncompromising activist who waged an unrelenting fight for the complete abolition of nuclear weapons. Forthright to a fault, he was never one to whisper in the presence of wrong."

I must say that it saddens me to think that, in his life time, Erich did not receive the public recognition he deserved – perhaps he would have done so had he lived a year or two longer. He himself did not expect or seek public recognition – he may indeed have rejected it. But, had it been offered, I suspect he would have enjoyed some public acknowledgment of his many achievements and of his unique contribution.

To Carol, to Claudia, to Carl and to Felix may we say thank you for the parts you have played in Erich's drama. As a family I am sure that you must have had your highs and lows. Living with Erich will at times not have been easy, especially over the last few months. But, without the stable base you provided Erich could not have made his contribution. His achievement is your achievement.

So Erich, colleague, uncompromising antinuclear warrior, and friend, to you we say thank you, and farewell. And in farewellling you we renew our commitment to continue the struggle, your struggle, for a safer world free from the threat of nuclear weapons.