

HISTORY WAS MADE IN PARIS

(Written for "The Listener" by GORDON MIRAMS)
(Special From Paris)

BY the time this is published in New Zealand, the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the General Assembly of the United Nations will be fairly old news. It is in fact beginning to be old here too; but I hope it is more than mere sentimentality that I still retain a certain sense of having attended at one of the historic moments of mankind. Old news or fresh news, it is surely big news that, for the first time in history, the nations of the world have underwritten an unequivocal statement of fundamental rights and freedoms embodying the aspirations and achievements of peoples in all parts of the globe. Disillusionment may set in later; already one begins to remind oneself that the Declaration as yet has no binding legal character and that, before it can hope to reach that goal, a long and difficult road must still be travelled. Yet even so I feel it will be worth remembering in years to come that one was there on the occasion when the nations reached this present milestone.

The general outlines of the Declaration itself should be fairly well known by now; New Zealand's part in its adoption perhaps not so well known:

but before I start to talk about this aspect, something about the setting and the circumstances. I remember that Magna Carta was signed at Runnymede and that Abraham Lincoln delivered his great address at Gettysburg, but for the life of me I cannot recall offhand exactly where the American Declaration of Independence was first proclaimed or what was the birthplace of the Marxian Manifesto. The statements and documents which have profoundly affected human affairs have seldom depended for their validity or their explosive force on their immediate setting and environment. All the same I could not help feeling that the French, who seem to have a natural genius for displaying almost anything to the best advantage, whether it is a dress in a shop-window, a work of art in a museum, or a public building at the end of an avenue, had done well by the United Nations in converting the huge Palais de Chaillot to their use and in thus providing such an impressive locale for launching the Declaration of Human Rights.

Whatever may be the faults and grave deficiencies of UN on the political level, as measured by results achieved, what-

ever complaints may be legitimately levelled at its time-wasting methods and the futile wrangling of so many of its debates, the organisation does appear to function pretty efficiently on the administrative level; in the provision of such facilities as secretarial assistance, simultaneous translation of speeches, production and circulation of documents, attendance by the public at meetings, and so on. To organise a gathering of the magnitude and the duration of that which has just finished in Paris must clearly have been a task of infinite complexity; but at least to this observer, so far as he could see it demonstrated at several meetings of the General Assembly, the Security Council, and various committees, the staff work appeared excellent.

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Probably the aspect of UN meetings which strikes the general public as most remarkable and exciting—apart, that is, from the verbal fireworks which certain star performers can usually be relied on to produce at the rostrum—is the sys-

tem of simultaneous translation by means of which, with a slight twist of a dial, you can listen in to a report of what is being said, almost as it is being said, in either English, French, Russian, Spanish, or Chinese. Before attending these meetings I had been under the impression that you had to plug yourself into some sort of complicated system of wiring attached to your seat, somewhat in the manner of a telephone exchange or at any rate of hearing-aids in a cinema. But you simply hang a small receiving-set around your neck by means of a strap, clamp the earphones on your head; and then you can, if you like, wander all round the hall while listening-in to a version—in any of the five official languages—of a speech almost as it is being delivered.

Towards those who do this work of simultaneous translation I have a feeling of admiration amounting almost to awe, since not only do they appear themselves to be able to understand almost immediately what a speaker is trying to say in his own language, but they are also able to make his utterances comprehensible in a choice of five other tongues.

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