

HENRY FORD'S PEACE SHIP



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Industrialist Henry Ford's peace-making activities began in earnest in November 1915, when a company car pulled up at the Ten Eyck house, his temporary home on Dearborn's Fair Lane estate, bringing two guests. One was Hungarian Rosika Schwimmer, a pacifist and feminist who had campaigned for such causes as woman suffrage, birth control, and trade unionism. Her colleague, Louis P. Lochner, a political activist, journalist, and author, had recently acted as secretary of the International Federation of Students. Both were now working assiduously for world peace.

From the beginning of the "The Great War" in April 1915, Rosika Schwimmer had helped persuade the International Congress of Women at The Hague to support a policy of mediation by neutral parties to broker peace. She assisted Jane Addams, one of the most prominent social reformers of the Progressive Era, and others to gather evidence that both neutral and belligerent parties were receptive to such mediation. In August 1915, when Henry Ford denounced the war in Europe and pledged his fortune and his life to achieving peace, Schwimmer wrote to him, and through Edwin G. Pipp of the *Detroit News*, procured an interview with the motor-car mogul. After seeing Schwimmer's documents, Ford remarked: "Well, let's start. What do you want me to do?"

Around this time, Lochner also came to Detroit seeking an interview with Ford. He had just attended a conference that he and David Starr Jordan, president of Stanford University and chairman of the Fifth International Peace Congress, had convened in Washington with President Woodrow Wilson. Lochner felt that if he could demonstrate to Wilson that the public was in support of pursuing peace, the president might call a conference at Washington, where representatives of neutral nations would appoint a commission to work toward that end.

After the two had arrived at the Ten Eyck house, Ford left Madame Schwimmer with his wife, Clara, "to talk things over," and hustled Lochner off to his experimental tractor shop, where he took him aside and demanded: "What do you think of Madame Schwimmer's proposal? Is it practical? How much will it cost to maintain a neutral commission in Europe?"

Lochner told Ford that both he and Schwimmer enthusiastically

supported the idea of continuous mediation and suggested that Ford speak with President Wilson to offer to fund an official commission abroad until Congress made an appropriation. If that were not possible, he could support an unofficial coalition that would pursue peace independently. Ford listened closely and seemed to approve. When they returned to the Ten Eyck house, they found that Schwimmer had won Clara Ford over to the cause of "continuous mediation." Appealing to her as a mother, Schwimmer had proposed that Clara Ford finance a campaign to inundate the White House with telegrams in support of that policy. Ford's efforts would augment a personal appeal Schwimmer and Ethel Snowden of England planned to make to Wilson on November 26. Henry Ford agreed to commit \$10,000 to the excursion. Schwimmer then left for New York, with Ford and Lochner agreeing to follow her the next afternoon.

As the two men headed east the next day, Ford was giddy with excitement. "Whatever we decide to do," the manufacturer declared, "New York is the place for starting it." He came up with a number of pithy catchphrases, such as: "Men sitting around a table, not men dying in a trench, will finally settle the differences." If Lochner reacted favorably, Ford would say: "Make a note of that; we'll give that to the boys when we get to New York."

He settled in at the Biltmore Hotel, and the following day, November 21, lunched with a group at the McAlpin Hotel that included reformist Jane Addams, who had co-founded Hull House, a settlement for European immigrants in Chicago; Dean George W. Kirchwey of Columbia University; Paul Kellogg, author of the *Philadelphia Survey*, an in-depth study of industrial life in Pittsburgh; and, of course, Lochner and Schwimmer. All were in favor of sending an official mediation commission to Europe; if that was not possible, they would send a private group. Ford and Lochner would go to Washington to enlist Wilson's cooperation, which would give the project official status.

As they talked, Lochner jokingly suggested: "Why not a special ship to take the delegates over?" Ford was enthralled with the idea. Jane Addams objected, saying that the plan was flamboyant; Ford liked it for that same reason: A ship would be highly

visible and would stimulate interest in the peace plan. He immediately contacted steamship companies, and posing as "Mr. Henry," asked how much it would cost to charter a vessel. The agents didn't know whether to take him seriously, but when they learned his true identity, they quickly began calculating their costs. Once negotiations had begun, Ford sent them to Rosika Schwimmer, and by the end of the day, she had chartered the Scandinavian-American liner *Oscar II*.

Through Colonel Edward M. House, Wilson's chief advisor on European politics and diplomacy during World War I, Ford procured an appointment with the president for the following day. Promising a group of reporters that he would see them Wednesday, he and Lochner left for Washington.

The meeting with Wilson began pleasantly. "Mr. Ford slipped unceremoniously into an armchair, and during most of the interview had his left leg hanging over the arm of the chair and swinging back and forth," Lochner observed.

Ford complimented the president on his appearance and asked him how he kept in such good shape. Wilson replied that he tried to leave his work at the office and to enjoy a good joke. "Some of them Ford jokes, I hope?" Lochner suggested. (At the time, Ford jokes were wildly popular, conceived by the public at large, but some fabricated by Ford himself.) Ford offered one of his own for the president's amusement.

One day, he said, driving by a cemetery, he had noticed a gravedigger digging a huge hole and asked him if he was going to bury a whole family in one grave. The man said no, that the grave was for one person. Why was it so enormous then? queried Ford. The gravedigger explained that the deceased had stipulated in his will that he be buried in his Ford, because the Ford had pulled him out of every hole to date, and he was sure it would pull him out of this one.

Wilson chuckled and responded with a joke of his own. Turning serious, Ford explained his mission. He wanted Wilson to appoint a neutral commission, he said, one that he would be happy to finance. The president replied that while he liked the idea of continuing mediation, he did not want to commit to any one project.