

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter **XXXIII**. The press-gangs : **Termonde**.

There lies before me as I write, a letter written in Flemish by the sister of the cook in a certain home in Brussels. The woman who penned this letter sent it, as its contents reveal, by stealth from her village in Flanders, and the master of the house where its recipient cooked gave it me. I can not read it in the original, but it was translated for me, literally, word for word, out of its poor faulty Flemish into French, and from the French I have tried to put it into English, as literally as may be, so that it might retain some flavour of its original. To me it has all the pathos that is part of the fate of the poor in all lands. It gives an impression, however vague, of the sorrow and despair that were in all those little cots with the red tiles scattered over Belgium. This is the letter :

Dear Sister :

*I write you these few lines to let you know that we are all in good health and hope you are the same. I have lots of news for you, but it is not very good. Without doubt you have already heard that the young men who were on the Committee (**Note:** literally, as in English, i. e., living on the Committee) have had to go away to work but*

*without knowing where. They say they must go to work in Germany. Saturday Albert received his letter and Frans of your brother Alois (**Note** : nephew of the recipient) also. You can imagine that it was not very agreeable to us to see them all go away like that. Just think, 465 boys from Hamme alone, and Monday they all had to go to Termonde, and there they locked them up with 2.800 others in the barracks until now, Thursday. This morning they went away on the train, we think for Germany, but we don't know yet. Sunday we sewed all day to prepare their clothes, which they must take with them, two comforters to cover them, two working suits, two shirts, two pairs of socks, two vests, a towel, a bowl to eat out of, a fork, a spoon, a knife, two pairs of socks and lots of little things, and enough to eat for two days. They had to have all that.*

So you may see what sad days we passed this week. Last Sunday we ran from one shop to another, to buy clothes, and everything is so terribly dear. If we had known all that in advance we could have asked the Committee. They have not taken all the workers, whether they have to go or not we don't know. The saddest of all is that at Termonde they received so little to eat. Alice and her father went to Termonde for two days with a little bread, but they could not even get it to the boys. Everybody was there with food. They sat all day long before the barracks, but they could not

get their packages in because of the Germans, and Wednesday morning very early they went back to Termonde and then they gave their packages from Hamme to the game keeper and he was able to get them in, but Alice and her father were not able to get very near, but all the same he got his package. Just think what it was down there at Termonde with all those people who could not see their boys. There are some who gave up their last mouthful of bread and all the money they had to give it to their children. So, dear Sister, it is the same thing with our Albert and I had to buy it all without anybody giving me a penny, but I could not let him go without a penny in his pocket. It is already so little that one can give to them. The Overstraetens, they gave him a comforter, without that I would have had to buy it myself.

So you can see what it was. All these boys had to run with that sort of pack on their back. They say that they will be able to write. I don't know whether it is true. As soon as I know where they are I shall let you know. Now I am going to close and I shall wait for a reply by D — G — who will give this letter to you, and I hope that Madame received my other letter that I sent her a fortnight ago.

Now my compliments to Monsieur and Madame and to the children of Alice and of us all.

Your sister, Leontine.

This letter was written in the first days, when the seizures were all in Flanders — remote, inaccessible, *incommunicado* governed by the whim of *Obersts* and *Feldwebels* and *Kreischefs*. It began there, as I have said ; Hellfrisch had just made his declaration on forced labour in the occupied territories in the Reichstag, where it was received with docile acquiescence. I remember how at the time I imagined what would happen if Mr. Lloyd George should arise in the House of Commons, or Mr. Kitchin in the House of Congress, and casually announce that the Government had decided to seize men in their homes, deport them to another land, and set them to work in mines and quarries and factories ! ...

The declaration in the Reichstag was hardly made before the *affiches* were posted all over Flanders ordering the men to report. The very next day the men were sent away — "*God knows where*", said the man who brought in the news.

Brand WITHLOCK

Footnotes.

Belgium under the German Occupation : A Personal Narrative ; London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919, 2 volumes. See chapter (« The Press-gangs», sometimes with title « *Documents in evidence* » in other editions), volume 2, pages 268-344 (**76** pages). About Termonde (Dendermonde) : pages 272-274. (**Very partial**) French translation (it has **NOT** been translated) : «*Les enlèvements*» in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre XXVI (1916) in ***La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles*** ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 383-391.

It would be interesting compare with what **Paul MAX** (cousin of the *bourgmestre Adolphe MAX*) told about the same day in his *Journal de guerre* (*Notes d'un Bruxellois pendant l'Occupation 1914-1918*) :

[http://www.museedelavilledebruxelles.be/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/Fichier_PDF/Fonte/Journal de%20guerre de Paul Max bdef.pdf](http://www.museedelavilledebruxelles.be/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/Fichier_PDF/Fonte/Journal_de%20guerre_de_Paul_Max_bdef.pdf)

It would also be interesting compare with what [Louis GILLE](#), [Alphonse OOMS](#) et [Paul DELANDSHEERE](#) told about the same days in *50 mois d'occupation allemande* (Volume 2 : 1916) :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/?p=ides&mod=iea&smod=ieaFictions&part=belgique100>

It would also be interesting compare with what Charles TYTGAT told about the same days in *Journal d'un journaliste. Bruxelles sous la botte allemande* :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/?p=ides&mod=iea&smod=ieaFictions&part=belgique100>

See, above all :

PASSELECQ, Fernand ; ***Les déportations belges à la lumière des documents allemands*** (avec de nombreux fac-similés et la reproduction de tous les documents belges) ; Paris-Nancy, Berger-Levrault ; 1917, XV-435 pages.

<http://www.bibliotheca-andana.be/wp-content/uploads/large/Deportations.pdf>