

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter XI. Verdun.

In principle the Germans had assented to the proposition that no more cattle were to be requisitioned in Belgium ; but the details had not been agreed upon and the formal document had not been signed. We met them finally there in the yellow *salon* of the Ministry of Industry to reduce it all to writing — the Baron von der Lancken, Dr. Reith, Dr. Brohn of the *Vermittlungsstelle*, the Marquis de Villalobar, M. van Vollenhoven, M. Francqui and I. We met every afternoon for days, and agreed finally on the terms of a letter which the Governor-General was to address to the Protecting Ministers promising to forbid, further requisitions of cattle. But there remained the difficult problem of the *chômeurs* : the Government of Occupation wished to attach the condition, so often proposed, that the lists of *chômeurs* be furnished by the *Comité National*. That question had been smouldering beneath all our discussions ever since the seizure by the Germans of the Belgian Red Cross, the funds of which the Germans had been distributing to the needy, mostly women, on condition that they work for them, sewing those sacks that, filled with earth, were used in the German trenches. We succeeded finally in securing the draft of a letter without conditions, and then, the second day, the

Germans proposed a draft of a second letter, which, to be sent with the letter containing the new guarantees, raised again and almost in the same form the whole question of the *chômeurs*. In our discussion of that day I pointed out that under any enlightened juridical system two letters in negotiations dealing with the same subject, written and signed and delivered at the same time, would be construed together, and that to approve the proposed letter would be to accept the very condition to which we were opposed ; and when I appealed to Dr. Reith, himself a lawyer, reared in Antwerp and educated in Belgian schools, he agreed. We got over this difficulty then, and the second letter was not for the moment insisted upon, and at our third meeting the guarantee was agreed upon in its final form.

Then the Baron von der Lancken formally requested the Marquis to undertake a journey to London for the purpose of delivering the letter of guarantee ; the Marquis bowed and consented, and asked that M. Francqui and the Baron Lambert be permitted to bear him company, and the Baron von der Lancken bowed and consented. And it was so ordered.

The plan to have the three gentlemen bear in person the letter of the Governor-General to London, instead of sending it by the courier as had always been done, had been under discussion for some time ; Baron von der Lancken had mentioned it to me, as had others, and I was glad that they could have the relief of being for a while away from Belgium. Villalobar had not had a

holiday, and he wished, among other things, to visit Madrid. And so, a few days later, they left Brussels.

That Friday, indeed, was a day of general exodus. Gibson had been granted leave and was going to London ; Mr. Heineman was going home to America, and was taking Mr. Hulse with him ; and the motor-cars of all our departing friends trailed out along the road to Antwerp and to Esschen, abandoning us to a dull day of dreary rain.

The Baron Lambert, however, was at the very last almost cheated of his journey. The evening before the *Polizei* made a sudden descent on his bank and began a perquisition in the grand style. It had been reported that he had a telephone-wire that enabled him to talk to Paris, and the thorough going *Polizei* came to unearth it. What they found was only the telephone-booth, relic of old and happier days, which, with its private wire connecting the Baron's establishment with the Rothschild bank in Paris, was plainly marked on the outside with the name of that once gay city. Some Teutonic detective had seen the booth standing there in its place in the orderly row of telephone-booths and reading the word "*Paris*" on its door had made the illuminating deduction, quite in the Sherlock Holmes manner, that the Baron had a secret wire to the French capital, and imagined daily confabulations and dark and mysterious conspirations. The matter was reported to Baron von der Lancken, who quickly put an end to that nonsense, so that the Baron went with his *compagnons de voyage*, and the detective was left to the bitter

reflections of unappreciated genius. And I, in the dreary rain, sauntered down to the Rue de l'Empereur for a chat with a little French antiquarian who collected, and I suppose sometimes sold, though never to me, relics of the Napoleonic wars — old busbies and shakos, the plumes of which had nodded in the reviews of the great Emperor, and postilions' jack-boots that had been spattered with the mud that splashed as he rode from glory to glory.

It was not these things, but the philosophic observations or the witticisms in the Parisian accent — with the r's well *grasseyés* — that I sought in him, though his philosophy was not so profound as that of another friend I had made in Ch. Desamblancx, an old bookbinder in the Rue Ducale, there where it twists down into the Rue de Louvain. Once the apprentice-boy in the long white smock had clattered in his wooden shoes across the pavement in answer to the jangling old bell and let me in, and shut the big door behind, he had shut out the world at war, and Desamblancx himself in a white smock would come down from the atelier where the workmen with patient art were tooling the morocco bindings. They worked on during the war, mostly for the love of their ancient and honourable calling, and the old binder himself tried to teach his art to certain youths whom the war had deprived of work, organizing a class to which he went every afternoon. He always had a volume in his hand, and he caressed and fondled its morocco back lovingly all the while he talked of books. Whenever I found a volume in one of the old stalls I

took it straight to him and waited with some anxiety for that expression in his eyes which told me, before he had spoken a word, whether I had been lucky or merely once again a fool. He knew editions as a racing gentleman knows the pedigrees of horses, or a baseball devotee the batting averages of the stars of the diamond. He could glance through any book and tell you if a single engraving was missing. He knew the history of every rare title-page, and was ever tearing up and sacrificing volumes in order that, by assembling all their oddities, he might produce the perfect copy.

He had that respect for the literary art which demanded that it respect itself, and present itself in a dress worthy of its noble rank. It was only now and then that he found a book worthy of full morocco ; if in all respects, as to contents, printing, paper, all, it was not up to the standard, into half-morocco it went, and when his fingers touched the paper and detected it to be of wood-pulp he flung it aside in disgust, as if it sickened him, and would give it no dress at all. He could not approve of our American way of binding in cloth — *cartonné*. He thought books should be *brochés* and put on probation for a few years ; if they amounted to anything they would make their way in the world, and then it would be time to bind them. He gloried in his own calling and made of it a rare and exquisite art, and worked for the love of it, strange anachronism that he was . . . !

It was only at Desamblancx's, or in the old bookstalls like Nobel's in the Rue de la Tulipe, or in the

studios of the artists, that I could escape the damning thing that let its pall down on the earth the moment I awoke in the morning and remembered. With the departure of the Marquis and the Baron and M. Francqui, and with Gibson and de Leval gone, life seemed to pause for a moment, and there were for a while only little things to occupy one. Even potatoes lost their preoccupying interest, for a supply had been sent in from Holland; we had been expecting them, and one afternoon in the Rue de la Régence, there not far from the old church of the Sablon, the long file of hooded women waiting at the *magasin communal* were chattering gaily, like starlings, and presently they trooped away in the rain, their wooden shoes clattering almost joyously, each carrying a bag filled with potatoes. It was a happy spectacle, for the poor were not so hungry that night.

The suffering, however, was increasing in the city, where extreme and sordid poverty had been almost unknown. There are no slums in Brussels as we know them in New York or Chicago or Boston, or as they are known in London and Liverpool and Glasgow and Edinburgh. Often when American visitors with a taste for sociology came to town and asked to be shown the slums, they could only be directed or conducted to those poorer quarters which, in comparison with what they had seen and studied in other cities, were after all, so clean — without that haggard, woe-begone air of squalid poverty. I cannot explain the phenomenon except by hazarding the theory that it seemed that way

because the Belgians are such a cleanly folk, washing and scrubbing and scouring and polishing all the day long. There was poverty there, alas! as there is everywhere, and as there will continue to be until economists and statesmen and peoples grasp a distinction so simple that it is not, perhaps, after all so strange that it has been so universally overlooked — the distinction, that it between private property and public property. But if the cleanly and frugal Belgians knew how to hide their poverty, the hardship of the war was beginning, nevertheless, to be more and more apparent. School-teachers noticed that the children could no longer give their wonted attention to their lessons, they were so often hungry ; now and then one of them would faint for lack of nourishment. The workingmen were growing thinner. Physicians were noting an increase in tuberculosis and other diseases that flourish where there is malnutrition. There was no butter, not enough milk for the babies, and potatoes had been, and indeed continued to be, scarce, even with quantities in the land rotting because the distribution of them had been almost automatically prevented by the *Kartoffelzentrale*.

The history of potatoes alone, indeed, under the German occupation, would provide a life-work for an economist and a philosopher. The walls bore many *affiches* explaining the reasons for the measures the Governor-General had decreed in regard to them — *affiches* denying that any potatoes had been shipped to Germany, declaring that the potatoes were being reserved exclusively for the use of the working classes,

implored the easier classes to replace potatoes by other foods *, forbidding hotels and restaurants to serve potatoes that had been peeled before cooking **. But all to no purpose : economic laws would move majestically and contemptuously on in their own indifferent way, just as if there were no Hague Conventions or German Governments of occupation in the world ; and the peasants, still clinging to the belief that the Germans only meant to seize them, would not declare their stocks, nor ever did.

There was nothing to be done about it : we had tried, Villalobar and I, by unofficial suggestions, to have the measures of the *Zentralen* relaxed, but the Germans, while realizing that the results of their plan were bad, clung to them with stubborn persistence. It was suggested that the potatoes be turned over to the communal authorities, but no, that could not be done ; they must be distributed according to the German method or be left to rot — and they were left to rot, while the poor went hungry.

The communal authorities, and especially those of the agglomeration of Brussels, were subjected to constant indignities. A burgomaster of one of the communes in the Brussels agglomeration in writing letters always employed a French form that is, I believe, a relic of revolutionary days : "*Salut et respect*". And the Germans objected — said he must employ the consecrated form : "*Veillez, Monsieur, agréer l'expression*" etc.

And yet, latterly, when the German authorities addressed letters to the municipal authorities they did not observe any form of civility whatever. The Germans at that time — the end of February, 1916 — were not in good humour. The great offensive predicted by Mr. Walcott had begun ; it was to be, according to one German officer, the *letzte Schlag*. The weather was very cold, the days were dark. There was snow one day and the boulevards all frostily white by evening. The whole town was restless and excited ; every one was filled with foreboding. What if — after all ?

Then on Saturday, the twenty-sixth of February, the news ran through Brussels that the Germans had won a stupendous victory at Verdun. The next morning there was an affiche. ***

The city was plunged in gloom all that Sunday. And yet, after a few hours the indomitable Belgian spirit arose. In a club in a certain little street in the lower town, where a group of Bruxellois were gathered, all sitting about that evening in sadness, they began almost spontaneously to shrug their shoulders.

"*Ce n'est pas vrai*", said one.

"*C'est de la blague*", said another.

"*Ils mentent*", said a third. "*Ils ont besoin d'argent pour leur nouvel emprunt.*"

Then a man entered and said solemnly :

"*Messieurs, je viens expressément pour vous dire que ce n'est pas vrai. Et même si cela était, ce n'est rien, puisque le fort à Verdun n'est d'aucune importance.*

Cela ! Mais ça a été tout à fait démodé il y a quinze ans. Ce n'est rien."

And so they persuaded themselves. It was Brussels through and through, with its insouciance, its inexhaustible optimism. The next day, when two men met in the lower town and one asked :

"*Quelle nouvelle de la guerre ?*" the response was:

"*Quelle guerre ?*"

There was a rumour in town that a wireless telegram from the Tour Eiffel had been intercepted, saying that the French had retaken the fort ; and yet, no one knew, not even any one at the *Politische Abteilung*. Then on Monday the Germans said, "*It is not finished yet.*" But on Tuesday the story of the Eiffel Tower message was denied, and even the most optimistic felt the general depression.

The snow had turned to rain, the trees in the deserted Bois (de la Cambre) were dripping lonesomely, the air was heavy, the skies leaden. Day and night the cannon rumbled like distant thunder ...

Then I met Hermancito in the avenue Marnix. He always had the latest news. They would take Verdun, he said ... I climbed to the attic where a French painter I knew had his little studio. Out of his garret window one could see Sainte-Gudule and all the tiled roofs to the west. He had on an old sweater and was in slippers, and his pipe was going. We talked a while, and of course, somehow the word Paris was pronounced. He turned

suddenly about, his face had gone white ; he took his pipe from his lips and with a terrible rage he said :

"Paris ! Mais ils nous payeront cela !"

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

Footnotes.

* This is the affiche :

AVIS

Il me revient qu'on a tenté de faire accroire à la population que des stocks considérables de pommes de terre auraient été exportés de Belgique en Allemagne et que, pour cette raison, l'approvisionnement de la population civile rencontre des difficultés. Toutes les insinuations de ce genre sont contraires à la vérité. En tout et seulement à titre provisoire, il n'a été expédié que 150 tonnes de pommes de terre à destination de l'ouest de l'Allemagne ; en outre, 5.500 tonnes ont été envoyées en France. Ce total est insignifiant comparativement aux 1.700.000 tonnes qui représentent la production moyenne du territoire de Gouvernement général. La diminution de stocks de pommes de terre est la conséquence naturelle de l'augmentation de la consommation humaine et des besoins de l'alimentation animale.

Je mets expressément en garde contre la propagation de faux bruits concernant les causes de la disette de pommes de terre et je sévirai avec la plus grande rigueur contre les coupables.

Jusqu'à nouvel ordre et, en particulier, jusqu'à ce que les stocks qui, selon toute probabilité, existent encore et sont tenus cachés, aient été découverts, les provisions indigènes de pommes de terre seront, de préférence et autant que possible, mises à la disposition des classes ouvrières et nécessiteuses dont la subsistance est essentiellement fondée sur cet aliment. Il en sera de même des pommes de terre qui pourront être importées de l'étranger. Quant aux classes plus aisées de la population, j'espère qu'elles auront conscience du devoir social que leur impose la situation présente et que, pour se nourrir, elles recourront, le plus possible, à d'autres aliments, moins à la portée des petites bourses.

J'attends, d'autre part, que les autorités communales belges m'aident consciencieusement et énergiquement à appliquer les mesures que j'ai ordonnées uniquement dans l'intérêt de la population belge, en vue de régler et d'assurer son approvisionnement.

Bruxelles, le 26 février 1916.

Le Gouverneur-Général en Belgique,
Baron von Bissing, Général-Colonel.

(Translation :)

Notice

Word comes to me that there have been attempts to make the population believe that considerable stocks of potatoes have been exported from Belgium to Germany and that, for this reason, the feeding of the population is meeting with difficulties. All insinuations of this nature are contrary to the truth. In all, and only as a temporary measure, there have been exported only 150 tons of potatoes to the west of Germany ; besides this, 5.500 tons have been sent to France. This total is insignificant in comparison with the 1.700.000 tons which represents the average production of the territory of the General Government. The diminution of the stocks of potatoes is the natural consequence of the increase in human consumption and of the needs of live stock.

I give express warning against the propagation of false rumours concerning the causes of the scarcity of potatoes, and I shall be rigorously severe with the guilty.

Until further orders, and particularly until all the stocks that in all probability exist and are hidden have been discovered, the native supply of potatoes will be by preference and as much as possible placed at the disposal of the labouring and needy classes whose subsistence is based essentially on this product. There will even be potatoes imported from abroad. As for the easier classes of the population, I hope that they will be conscious of the duty which the present situation imposes on them, and that for their nourishment they will have recourse as much as possible to other foods less within the reach of small purses.

On the other hand, I expect the Belgian communal authorities conscientiously and energetically to aid me in applying the measures that I have decreed particularly in the interest of the Belgian population with a view to regulating and assuring its food-supply.

Brussels, February 26, 1916.

The Governor General in Belgium,
Baron von Bissing, Colonel-General

AVIS

Par arrêté du 5 décembre 1915 (*Bulletin officiel des lois et arrêtés*, p. 1405), j'avais ordonné de procéder au relevé des stocks de pommes de terre pouvant servir à l'approvisionnement de la population civile.

Il me revient que certains détenteurs de pommes de terre n'ont pas déclaré tous leurs stocks. Parmi ceux-ci, il en est qui ont supposé avoir le droit de ne pas déclarer les quantités réservées à leur consommation personnelle, à

l'alimentation de leurs animaux et à la plantation. Cette opinion est erronée. L'obligation de déclarer porte sur toutes les provisions dont le total dépasse 50 kilogrammes.

Tenant compte de cette erreur, j'ai arrêté ce qui suit, afin d'épargner les peines prévues par l'article 4 de l'arrêté du 5 décembre 1915 (*Bulletin officiel des lois et arrêtés*, p. 1405), à tous les détenteurs de pommes de terre qui compléteront leur déclaration conformément à la vérité.

Bruxelles, le 26 février 1916.

Le Gouverneur-Général en Belgique,
Baron von Bissing, Général-Colonel.

(Translation :)

Notice

By the order of the 5 December, 1915 (Official Bulletin of Laws and Orders, p. 1405), I gave instructions that stocks of potatoes available for the feeding of the civil population be declared.

I am now given to understand that certain holders of potatoes have not declared their entire stocks. Among them are those who have felt that they had the right not to declare the stocks reserved for their personal consumption, for the feeding of their animals, and for planting. This opinion is wrong. The obligation to declare applies to all stocks over and above 50 kilograms.

Taking this error into consideration I have issued the following order, in order to spare those holders of potatoes who complete their declarations in conformity with the truth the penalties provided in Article 4 of the order of the December 5, 1915 (Official Bulletin of Laws and Orders, p. 1405).

Brussels, 26 February, 1916.

The Governor-General in Belgium,
Baron von Bissing, Colonel-General.

Arrêté

La peine prévue par l'article 4 de l'arrêté du 5 décembre 1915 (*Bulletin officiel des lois et arrêtés*, p. 1405) ne sera pas applicable aux personnes qui, le 18 mars, 1916, au plus tard, rectifieront leurs anciennes déclarations, soit inexactes, soit incomplètes, se rapportant aux quantités de pommes de terre détenues par elles. Dans ce cas, les stocks de pommes de terre non encore déclarés ne seront pas confisqués.

La déclaration rectificative doit être remise à l'administration communale sur le territoire de laquelle les pommes de terre se trouvent.

Bruxelles, le 26 février, 1916.

Le Gouverneur-Général en Belgique,
Baron von Bissing, Général-Colonel.

(Translation :)

Order

The penalty provided in Article 4 of the order of the December 5, 1915 (Official Bulletin of Laws and Orders, p. 1405), will not be applicable to persons who not later than the 18 March, 1916, correct their former declarations, whether they are inexact or incomplete, making their report on the quantity of potatoes held by them. In this case the stocks of potatoes not yet declared will not be confiscated.

The corrected declaration must be returned to the communal administration of the territory where the potatoes are held.

Brussels, 26 February, 1916.

The Governor-General in Belgium,
Baron von Bissing, Colonel-General.

Arrêté

concernant le mode d'emploi des pommes de terre dans les hôtels et restaurants

Article premier

Dans les hôtels et restaurants, il est défendu de servir, soit comme plat à part, soit comme mets complémentaires, des pommes de terre épluchées avant la cuisson.

Art. 2

Les infractions à la disposition précédente seront punies d'une peine d'emprisonnement (de police ou correctionnel) de six mois au plus ou d'une amende pouvant atteindre 5.000 marks. Les deux peines pourront aussi être appliquées simultanément.

Art. 3

Ces infractions seront jugées par les tribunaux militaires allemands.

Bruxelles, le 26 février 1916.

Le Gouverneur-Général en Belgique,
Baron von Bissing, Général-Colonel.

(Translation :)

Order
concerning the method of using potatoes in
hotels and restaurants

Article First

In hotels and restaurants it is forbidden to serve, either separately or as a side dish, potatoes peeled before cooking.

Art. 2

Infringements of the preceding order will be punished by the pain of imprisonment (police or corrective) for not more than six months or by a fine of not more than 5.000 marks. The two penalties may also be applied together.

Art. 3

These infringements will be judged by the German military tribunals.

Brussels, 26 February, 1916.

The Governor-General in Belgium,
Baron von Bissing, Colonel-General.

This is the affiche *** :

Nouvelles publiées par le Gouvernement
Général Allemand
Prise du premier fort de Verdun

Berlin, le 26 février (Communiqué du Grand Quartier Général). Le fort blindé de Douaumont, le pilier nord-est de la ligne principale des fortifications permanentes de la place forte de Verdun, a été pris d'assaut hier après-midi par le régiment d'infanterie du Brandebourg N°. 24 ; il est solidement au pouvoir des troupes allemandes.

Le Gouvernement Général en Belgique.

(Translation :)

News Published by the German
General Government

The Taking of the Principal Fort of Verdun

Berlin, February 26 (Communiqué from General Headquarters). The iron-clad fort of Douaumont, the north-east pillar of the principal line of fortifications of the fortified place of Verdun, was taken by assault yesterday afternoon by the 24th Brandenburg regiment of infantry ; it is firmly in the hands of the German troops.

The General Government in Belgium.

French translation : « *Verdun* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre IV (1916) in ***La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles*** ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 304-308.

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

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>