BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE **2**

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter **XVII**. Summer time.

The population was again suffering for the lack of potatoes, a staple article of diet among the poor. The supplies sent in from Holland were wholly insufficient, and the peasants, with bucolic stubbornness, still refused to declare their stocks ; they hid them away, and when the soldiers went to hunt for them either remained silent in a wily pretense at ignorance or gave the soldiers to drink, and so much that they were soon incapable of recognizing potatoes even if they saw them. On Sundays crowds of the poor went into the country about Brussels and brought back clandestinely as many potatoes as they could conceal on their persons. The Germans were not long in learning of this, and thereafter late on Sunday afternoons the trams entering the town were stopped at Quatre-Bras and all the occupants searched. It was forbidden, for some inscrutable reason inherent in the mysterious organization of the *Kartoffelzentrale*, to transport potatoes from one commune to another, and as a natural consequence there was much smuggling ; men skulked through the Forêt (de Soignes) and the Bois (de La Cambre) in the night, bearing small

bags of potatoes. One day at Tervueren a man stealing across the fields with a little supply was shot down dead by the soldiers in pursuit. Any day at Quatre-Bras German sentinels could be seen leading off groups of peasant-women who had potatoes hidden under their skirts and had been seized from the trams. Finally Villalobar and I suggested at the *Politische Abteilung* that an armistice be declared for awhile in the hope that the peasants would consent to bring out their potatoes.

The almost universal discussion of potatoes, however, gave way on May Day to a new preoccupation ; the Germans had posted an affiche commanding every one to adopt thenceforth summer-time (*l'heure d'été*). The penalty for failure to comply with the order was a fine of 3.000 marks and from six weeks to six months' imprisonment. The Herr professors had discovered that an extraordinary natural phenomenon occurs every summer — namely, that the sun rises earlier than in winter, and therefore that if one will get up with the lark
and go to bed with the chickens, one can thus contrive to get in a full day's work without burning gas or electricity, and the authorities seized this opportunity to lay down a new rule and invent a new crime. Thus one more complication was added to the slavery of existence. We had already had German time for a year and a half, and the

Belgians had ignored it and stubbornly continued to lie down and rise up by Greenwich time, or "*l'heure des alliés*" as they called it. German time was already an hour earlier than Belgian, and under the new rule it would be two hours earlier, and it was apparent that those who, like the Legations, had relations with both camps, would have between the two little time left to doze in the morning and happily forget the madness of the world.

But I could never remember whether German time was earlier or later than Belgian time. Now I would start up frantically an hour earlier in order to keep an appointment with von der Lancken, and on reaching the corner of the Rue Lambermont and the Rue Ducale find that no one but the boy scout had reported for duty ; now I would loiter leisurely in the conviction that I had another hour before me, and when I got there find them all at luncheon. The prospect of two hours' difference was appalling. Besides this original and constitutional difficulty one had to remember in speaking to a German that *l'heure allemande* was intended, and in speaking to a Belgian to member that *l'heure belge* was implied.

The Belgians had not the slightest intention of adopting *l'heure boche*, as they unfeelingly called it, but they found a *modus vivendi* when the news reached Brussels that the French Government had established *l'heure d'été* and advanced, or

retarded — whichever it is — their clocks one hour. Thus ultimately there seemed to be but one hour's difference between their time and German time, for they had been tardy by a year and more in yielding to the horological reform. The Belgian Government at Havre would no doubt follow the French example ; hence, in Brussels the patriotic adopted "*l'heure du Havre*". Then we were where we were before. It was dark at eight o'clock by the sun, but that was nine o'clock by Belgian time, and ten o'clock according to the Teutonic Joshua.

The German order was enforced on the communal authorities, of course, and suddenly a surprising irregularity on the part of all the public clocks in Brussels was to be noted. Many of them developed the most startling eccentricities ; they ran fast or ran slow, indifferently gained or lost time, seemed indeed to have abandoned all moral principle and to have lost their senses quite. From the most staid, reliable and reputable clocks in the world, with the regular exemplary habits of an honest *bourgeois*, they became all at once light and frivolous in conduct, dissipated and wasted time, were no more to be depended on, and, when the Germans passed, almost put their hands up to their noses in the most mocking of *pieds de nez*.

The clock on the Hôtel de Ville, however, with a somewhat sorrowful mien, marked the hour according to the German principle or the German prejudice, whichever it was, and Villalobar adopted

a method of designating the time that could offend no one ; he referred to l’heure de l’Hôtel de Ville : the Germans could not object because it was their time, and the Belgians could not object because it was their clock.

And Brussels wit had its usual revenge. Up from the lower town, recalling the old French proverb to the effect that it is useless to look for noon at fourteen o'clock, came the latest *zwanze* :

"*Les Allemands ont trouvé midi à quatorze heures*".

But even the mockery of Brussels could not divert us long from the anxiety caused by the tension in the relations between Germany and America ; it was that which was on every one's heart and on every one's tongue. The Belgians, as ever, were torn between the desire to have America enter the war and the dread of the effect on the *ravitaillement* if she did so. And then one Saturday evening, April 29, Hermancito came up from the Rue des Colonies to tell us that Mr. Poland, who was then Director of the C.R.B., accompanied by all the delegates from the north of France, had left for Charleville, where the *Grand Quartier Général* was pitched. Mr. Gerard, our Ambassador at Berlin, had gone down there for an audience of the Kaiser at which the submarine question was to be discussed. Mr. Poland had left on a summons by telegraph and the Germans had put a special train at his disposal ; he and the

C.R.B. men were to arrive there at six o'clock and dine with the Ambassador and the officers of the General Staff.

We awaited anxiously Mr. Poland's return in the hope of some news of the situation. He came back two days later ; Mr. Gerard had had his audience of the Kaiser and was still hopeful, but the situation was very grave. So we knew little more than before.

However, Mr. Poland told us of an incident that was not without its interest and importance. The men of the C.R.B. had dined with the General Staff ; Mr. Gerard was present, and the higher officers were evidently anxious to please and to impress the Ambassador.

"*You see*", said General Z , with a liberal gesture to the men at the table, "*the ravitaillement goes on splendidly ; in fact everything goes on well, as Mr. Poland will tell you — "nicht wahr, Mr. Poland ?*"

And he deferred to the Director of the C.R.B. for confirmation and affirmation.

"*Well*", said Mr. Poland, who was not an ambassador and felt no need of Talleyrand's adage to guide him in his utterance, "*the ravitaillement goes on, yes. But things are not going on well at Lille ; what you are doing there is not right — in fact it is horrible*."

"*Why, what is that ?*" demanded the General.

"*You are deporting women and young girls*."

It was like a bomb in the middle of the board which the General Staff would have so harmonious, and when General Z recovered from his shock he said that he had not known of such goings on, demanded information of his officers, threatened to break some one — in short, would take severe German measures.

I tell the story as I had it from the men of the C.R.B. The General, all the Generals in fact, were not pleased that their impression on the American Ambassador had been thus so rudely compromised. What they did about it I do not know ; the deportations at Lille were not wholly stopped, at any rate, though I believe General Z said that they would be.

Mr. Poland's *boutade*, which did such credit to his feelings as a man, was wholly justified by the fact if not by the occasion. The Germans had instituted at Lille the abominable practice of impressing women for labour in the fields. The military authorities had ordered them to be seized, and thousands of them, many of them girls, were torn away from their homes without any notice, huddled indiscriminately together in trains and sent away in the charge of common soldiers to work in the harvest fields. Many a Frenchman in Lille, his day's work done, returned to his home to find his wife or daughter gone, he knew not whither, and had no way of knowing, or when or whether she would ever come back again.

I was told that 50.000 were ordered to be thus seized, and while I can not say that the figure is accurate, it is a fact that thousands were thus taken from their homes and set to labour like so many female slaves in the fields that summer, and doomed to what other dark fate one may easily imagine ...

Strange, the contrasts in this complex life, even life so sad as we knew it in Brussels ! How such horrors could exist on the earth and people speak lightly of common things ! That very evening, while those girls and young wives of Lille were enduring such anguish of heart as no means can portray, I was sitting in a conservatory after dinner, in the home of a friend.

Then, in the light, inconsequential drift of conversation, some one mentioned denicotinized cigarettes, detestable things, of German invention, or more likely adaptation. And an old gentleman, turning toward a beautiful woman whose round arm, its golden bracelet far above the elbow gleaming through the thin tissue of her gown, hung over the back of her chair, said:

"*Il faut un peu d'alcool dans le vin, un peu de nicotine dans le tabac, un peu de caféine dans le café, et un peu de coquetterie dans la femme.*"

The pretty woman removed her arm from the back of the chair, delicately raised her cigarette to her lips, and said :

"*Et dans l'homme un peu de rosserie*."

Of what antitheses is life composed ! One might have expected, in the presence of that monstrous Lille injustice, an angry bolt from the skies to smite those Generals to the ground — unless, indeed, it smite us, who could hear of such horrors and a few moments later fall to talking lightly of other things.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

Footnotes.

French translation : « *L'heure d'été* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre X (1916) in ***La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles*** ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 322-325.

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