

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

**Brand WHITLOCK**

Chapter **XXIV**. The queen's hospital.

As I cast my memory back over that cold and rainy summer of 1916 it seems to have been relatively calm and uneventful for a summer in Belgium under German occupation, and yet in looking over my notes I find repeated references to "*Naturalized Germans*", "*Engrais*", "The Queen's Ambulance", "*La Banque Nationale*", etc., incidents which at the moment incited in us their various emotions of indignation or despair. I do not know why those days should have left an impression of comparative peace ; perhaps it was because the sun had deserted us in June and left us to the monotony of that constant rain which in the picturesque speech of Brussels is known as *la drache nationale* ; perhaps it was because I was recovering from the lameness that had kept me practically immobile for so long. And then there is the mysterious and gracious process of forgiving Time itself, which kindly and considerately obliterates in memory the ugly and the painful, and leaves an impression from which the scars and blotches are all erased, and accounts for the charm that pertains to all that can be classed as *auld lang syne*. There was, too, what I can never

forget, the kindness of my Belgian friends, the memory of whose gracious hospitality shall be one of the consolations to the end of my days. There are recollections of pleasant hours in the old *château* of Baron Janssen at Wolvendael, and in the homes of those dearest of friends, the Josse Allards, de Sinçay, the de Beughems, and others ; they need the jottings in any journal to recall them to mind.

And yet, glancing over the entries for almost any day, I am reminded of much that would like to be recorded ; and as I write I have the uncomfortable sensation that this record is growing much too long, for instance, turning to the first day of that month of July I find, in addition to the usual problems that each day brought, jottings such as, "*the Russians have made another advance*" ; "*le Rotterdamsche*" — which meant the Rotterdam newspapers — "*did not come in to-day*" — always a sign of good news for the Allies ; "*fifty persons arrested and taken to Saint-Gilles*" — which portended new cases of *trahison de guerre*, more women's tears, more futile *démarches* at the *Politische Abteilung* ; and "*no peas to be sold after to-day*", etc.

These were rather commonplace and typical entries ; there are others which as I read them now seem incredible ; I could scarce believe them had I not written them down at the time. For instance, the affair of the naturalized Germans ; that of itself

is a little chapter in the history of those times that would test the credence of any one reared under Anglo-Saxon institutions. I found it, or the problem it raised, awaiting me when I returned to the Legation in the afternoon of that first day of July, after a drive to Ravenstein where my wife and I liked to have our tea on the lawn when the weather was fine, or, when it was not fine, in the dining-room of the *château*, the window of which gave on to a little garden where the bowers bloomed gaily, just as though there were no war anywhere.

A memorial addressed to the Governor-General, signed by all the personages in the capital, protesting against the incorporation in the German army of young men who, born in Belgium of German parents, had opted for Belgian nationality, had been left there with the request that I present it to the German authorities.

There is an almost inexhaustible interest in the contemplation of the power of phrases, which are facts as solid as any, and out of their relation or in the wrong place become irritating foreign bodies like sand in machinery, or pebbles in shoes. I was referred to in the official correspondence with the Germans over the *ravitaillement* as Protecting Minister — *Ministre Protecteur* — which I was, as far as the *ravitaillement* was concerned. But the phrase got abroad and amplified itself, as phrases will, and, in that confusion as to the powers and duties of diplomatic officials that exists everywhere

and causes even editors to use the words Ambassador, Minister, Consul, interchangeably, it transpired in time that I was the *Ministre Protecteur*, not only of the *ravitaillement* but of Belgium, and of every one in it.

One morning I had a caller in the person of a withered little man in black from Verviers, who came to report to me that the young men of German birth in his town, who had become Belgian citizens under the Belgian law, had been ordered by the Germans to report for duty in the German army. The little man was greatly excited and could not understand why I did not interfere at once and put a stop to what he considered an outrage and a flagrant violation of international law, as indeed it was, if such a thing as international law could be said to exist any more in the world.

"*Mais vous êtes notre Ministre Protecteur !*" he would argue again and again.

It had frequently been reported, though as often officially denied by the German authorities, that Belgians were to be incorporated in the German army. But an event had occurred that led people to believe that after all there might be much in the declared intention, and there was not only a new sensation, there was a new terror in town. At Brussels, at Verviers, in the *arrondissement* of Nivelles, and in Luxembourg, many young men born of German parents on Belgian soil had been summoned to the *Meldeamt*, where they were

informed that notwithstanding the fact that they had opted for Belgian nationality, they had not thereby lost their German nationality, but would have to render military service to the German Empire. They had been forced on the spot to submit to a physical examination, and then provisionally allowed their liberty until the military authorities of Aix-la-Chapelle should decide where they were to be sent for duty.

To justify the levy of these troops the Germans cited a new law, of July 22, 1913, which became effective January 1, 1914, defining the method whereby German citizenship could be lost. This law provided, among other things, that German citizens who should become citizens of any foreign nation thereby lost their German citizenship, but the German claim was that all Germans who had been naturalized as citizens of any foreign Power prior to January 1, 1914, when this law went into effect, had not come within its purview — that is, had not been, as it were, authorized to divest themselves of their German citizenship, and so had not lost and would not lose their German quality, but remained German citizens, and were therefore liable to perform military service for the German Empire. The preposterous claim opened immeasurable new possibilities of trouble in the world ; what, for instance, if this was the German attitude, of the thousands and thousands of Germans naturalized

as American citizens before the year 1914 ? Was the hour to come when some German General Staff would summon all of them to duty under the black, white and red flag ?

The memorial that was given to me to present was an able document, which while citing this law and referring to certain German legal opinions that were opposed to the view that the authorities just then took of it, based its argument on the international conventions of 1899 and 1907, signed at The Hague and ratified by Germany and by Belgium. These treaties required the occupying Power to respect the laws in force in an occupied country, and it was contended that thereby the right of option for nationality, prescribed by the Belgian code, was protected. The memorial protested against the declared intention of the Germans to incorporate in the German army all male persons of military age born in Belgium of German parentage, who, according to the Belgian law, on attaining their majority, had opted for the land of their birth, and so become Belgian citizens. According to international law such a practice was recognized as conferring complete citizenship, but the German view was different ; it held that such men were German citizens because their fathers had been German citizens, and hence were called upon to bear arms for the German Empire. There were hundreds of young men whom this rule affected, young men whose parents had come

from Germany to Belgium, there to be welcomed by the hospitality of a kindly, generous people, to found their homes, to make their fortunes and to rear their families. The sons of these folk had never known Germany, most of them had never seen it ; their interests, their associations, their friends, their sympathies, were all Belgian ; on coming of age they had opted for the Belgian nationality ; many of them had served in the Belgian army, and when the war came on they had been loyal to Belgium. Now they suddenly found themselves confronted with impressment in the German army, after which they would be marched to the Front and forced to fight against those with whom their hearts and hopes were united.

The memorial presented in its formal and legal aspect, the problem that was presented to me some days later in its human aspect. One morning a young man sat before me in my room, and with feelings he could scarcely control begged me to do something for him. He sat there fixing his dark eyes upon me and nervously clasping and unclasping his hands as he talked. He was a young lawyer, already well known at the Brussels bar, and he had felt before the war that he had a career before him. And now ...

"*Now*", he said, "*this !*" And he spread his hands wide in a gesture of despair. "*I was born in Belgium*", he went on, "*I grew up in Belgium ; I went to school and college in Belgium ; my friends,*

*my associations, my sympathies are all Belgian ; I took the oath of allegiance to Belgium ; I am a Belgian citizen ; I am a Belgian."*

He paused a moment, mastering an emotion.

*"I served in the Garde Civique ; I pursued my law studies here ; I was admitted to the Bar. For awhile I occupied a public position in the Belgian judicial service. And now, to say that I must serve in the German army, and fight against Belgium !"*

It was of course officially no affair of mine, as a representative of a neutral Power, and the fact that the relations of my own country with Germany were very much strained only made my position all the more delicate. There was always, too, the *ravitaillement*, which meant food for the people, the very life of the Belgian nation, that must be preserved at all costs until the rupture with Germany, which every one must have known to be inevitable — the von Tirpitzes were even then shouting "*Out with the submarines !*" There was no ground on which I could protest against the action that the German Government proposed to take. I was constantly confronted by that embarrassment so familiar to persons of public responsibility ; each caller beholds his own trouble, is preoccupied by his own personal problem, considers it quite naturally the only and the most important problem in the world, and can not understand why the public person can not instantly isolate it as the one difficulty outstanding in the world ; he can not



understand, and it is impossible to make him understand, that in relation to other problems which it may affect it is not important.

However, after many conferences with the Belgians and with such delicacy as I could employ, I chatted informally with Baron von der Lancken about it and persuaded him without much difficulty, I must admit, to receive the protest. The only condition he imposed was that the Belgians present their own memorial, and this they ultimately did. I believe that the Germans did not insist on the matter in the end ; one of them told me that after all they intended only to take a census of young men who were thus situated, and I believe my lawyer with the German name and the Belgian citizenship was permitted to remain in Belgium. \*

The question of the *engrais* was one that gave us endless difficulty. It was not causing the comment just then in Brussels that other and more dramatic questions were, as, for instance, the offensive of the English and French, which had its reaction as far in the rear as Brussels, where extra sentinels were posted everywhere, or as the Russian advance, or the Austrian retreat, or the question of the young naturalized Germans, or the story of an aeroplane that had flown over the city in the night, or the fantastic tale that the German Emperor had come to Brussels and had had a meeting in the Palais d'Arenberg with Villalobar,

and that the Marquis had thereupon gone forth to arrange peace. *Engrais* was not so sensational, but it had possibilities — of ammonia, for instance ; taking *engrais* to Germany, the scientists there could extract the ammonia and with it make munitions of war. We discovered this one day by chance, and thereafter had long consultations to bring the *engrais* within the guaranties protecting Belgian products.

There was always some such problem in the *ravitaillement*. Coffee was scarce ; and just then burned wheat was being sold as a substitute, and wheat was needed for bread. The Germans, when we approached them on this matter, delighted to have a new subject for the exercise of their talent of organization, said that they would at once create a new *Zentrale* to control the burned wheat, and in the despair that such methods produced I told them that if they continued they would undoubtedly have a superb organization for *ravitaillement*, but nothing to eat.

The question of the *Banque Nationale* was intrinsically more interesting, since it concerned that product at once the most necessary and the most contemptible known to man — money. At the outbreak of the war, as I have said, the *Banque Nationale* transferred all its funds to London, because several of the branch establishments of the bank in various villages of Belgium had been entered by German soldiers and their funds seized

at the point of guns. When the German authorities asked the *Banque Nationale* to reopen its doors and to resume the transaction of business, the directors cited these instances of *brigandage* as reasons for not complying with the request, and von der Goltz Pacha gave the *Banque* a written promise to the effect that if the doors were reopened the institution would not be molested. On the strength of this assurance, then, the *Banque Nationale* threw open its doors, but it threw them open to trouble, which promptly entered in the form of the representatives of the *Bank Abteilung*. The difficulties that were harassing the directors that summer were primarily connected with the contribution of war imposed on Belgium. This contribution had been fixed in 1914 at 40.000.000 francs a month, and the sum was augmented each year until for 1917 it had attained 60.000.000 francs a month. The nine provinces of Belgium had been ordered to issue bonds to pay this contribution, and this the provincial councils had refused to do ; then the Germans removed the Belgian provincial governors ; installed German governors (*Präsidenten für Zivilverwaltungen*) in their place, and issued the bonds themselves in the name of the provinces and had the *Präsidenten* sign them. These bonds having thus been issued, the private banks of Brussels were ordered to buy them, and when they refused, they were informed that the *Bank Abteilung* would sequester and

liquidate their property, and apply the assets to the purchase of the bonds. Placed thus between the alternative of buying the bonds or of being wrecked, the banks bought the bonds. The Germans ordered them to pay for the bonds in marks, and these marks were thereupon deposited by the officials of the *Bank Abteilung* in the *Banque Nationale*, which was ordered to issue against them an equivalent amount of Belgian banknotes. This was done — under the usual menaces — and then the *Banque Nationale* was ordered not to pay out these marks, but to keep them in its vaults. Thus, in the course of time, millions of paper marks were accumulated in the vaults of the old buildings there in the Rue de Ligne behind Sainte-Gudule, several millions of marks that represented deposits. Then, early in July, 1916, the chief of the *Bank Abteilung*, von Lumm, whose *ante bellum* visit to Brussels and to the *Banque Nationale* has already been referred to, ordered the *Banque Nationale* to transfer, against a receipt from his department, all those millions of marks to the *ReichsBank* at Berlin. The directors of the *Banque Nationale*, as patriots, refused. Von Lumm became more and more insistent, and, persuasion having failed, began to menace the directors with various punishments if they did not yield.

It was a troubled group of financiers that assembled day after day about the council table in the directors' chamber of the bank and discussed

the problem that confronted them. They had prepared solemn protests and had made representations. The financial situation of the country, already so seriously compromised, was more and more threatened ; there were rumours ; other banks were fearing like measures and already there had been small runs on them ; frightened depositors were beginning to withdraw their accounts ; and in the midst of all this the *Bank Abteilung* demanded of every bank in Brussels a list of its depositors, with the amounts to the credit of each, and especially of foreign depositors.

Then one day came a demand from von Lumm that 500.000.000 marks be immediately transferred to Berlin. The directors of the *Banque Nationale* formally refused ; if the *Bank Abteilung* wished that amount of funds it would have to take it at the point of a gun.

Von Lumm hesitated, and there, for the time being, the matter stood. It was, of course, no official concern of mine, though from youth I had had the uncomfortable habit of being stirred to indignation and, too often perhaps, to protestation by the numerous spectacles of injustice that this life presents, I could turn to other things.

As, for instance, the incident of the Queen's Ambulance. Anything connected with the Queen of the Belgians acquires something of the interest, something of the delicate charm of Her Majesty's personality, and thus one morning in July — the

10th, as my notes record it — when certain gentlemen came to tell me that the Germans were about to take over the Queen's Ambulance, and to ask my assistance, I was at once not only interested, but moved.

When I speak of the Queen's Ambulance I mean, of course, the hospital that Her Majesty had installed in the Royal Palace at the outbreak of the war. It would be more correct to say that the Palace had been transformed into a hospital, and a very large hospital, for the whole of it, save the private apartments of the royal family, had been made over into wards, with long rows of white beds and numerous operating theatres, all fitted out with the latest appliances of modern surgery. Her Majesty had done me the honour to show me through it herself only a few days before she left for that noble exile in the bleak, yellow dunes where the first of her royal spouse's dynasty had set foot on Belgian soil. Through all those stately halls she had passed, down the rows of cots, their white coverlets thrown back for the occupants who were at that moment in full health, awaiting the fate that was about to send them there to suffer and to die ; there was a little Belgian flag on each cot.

"*The children put them there*", Her Majesty had said, with that faint, exquisite smile.

I never passed the Palace without thinking of that day, without thinking of those little Belgian flags on the white cots, and of "*the children*". The

flags were not there when I went to visit some British wounded prisoners ; nor would the Belgian flag that used to float over the Palace greet my eyes when I passed, almost daily. I used to wonder when I should see it there again, whipping out the edges of its brightly coloured bars in the wind ; sometimes I would invent a hope, or at least a pleasure, in imagining the brilliant scene — the wide, vacant Place, the grill, and the broad *façade* of the Palace, the Guides again, and the Lancers, the *Carabiniers*, *le Neuvième de Ligne*, and all the other gallant regiments, and the King, tall and broad, with his simple manner, and the Queen, and the children, and the vast crowd, and the wild huzzas and the tears, and men falling down dead for very joy, as once more that standard of the honour of nations, the flag of black and yellow and red, was run up the royal staff to announce to mankind that justice had returned once more to the earth. Then we would take up life where we left it off on that hideous day, and be happy ...

Happy ? But things never come to pass in this life as we plan them ; and the scene of my impressions could not be as I imagined it. The flag will go back there some day, or else there is no meaning or order in the universe, but we shall not take up life where we left it off ; that was only a fond, persistent dream that sustained many through years of the horrors of the Occupation. Life is change, and what it once was it can never be

again ; it will be other, and let us hope better, than the old ; but it will be for the children of a generation that will not know war, and not for us, any more than for those *mutilés* who hobbled on canes or swung on crutches up and down behind the high gilded grills on sunny afternoons. We, too, shall be among the *mutilés* even we of the rear, hobbling on, with broken illusions and frustrated hopes, to the end of our short days ...

The flag was no longer there over the Palace; instead there floated the white flag with the red cross ; and all the Palace windows, once so mysterious, stared blank with whitened panes on which the red cross of Geneva was painted ; and at the entrance there were those ugly sentry boxes of the Germans, striped black, white and red, incongruous blotches of colour all foreign to the scene, and German sentinels in that dirty field grey, sullen, morose, with ugly glances, far other than those *Grenadiers* in their tall bearskins, who used to present arms when we drove in ...

And now, on that morning in July, my callers told me that the Germans had ordered the hospital to be closed. It should be said, to the credit of the Germans, that they had always respected the Royal Palace ; their flag never floated from its roof. But the order to dismantle might be, so it was feared, but the precursor of the entrance that had been so long dreaded. There had been innumerable Red Cross hospitals in Brussels at the



outbreak of the war ; many a handsome house was thus transformed. The Red Cross flag flew everywhere ; there were those so determined either to extend to others its privileges, or to avail themselves of its protection, that they had it painted on their roofs. The Germans in time had ordered all these red crosses down, and in place of the hundreds of ambulances which they denote they established four large hospitals, one in the Palais des Académies, one in the Avenue de la Couronne, one in the Place Dailly at the Caserne Baudouin, and another, if I remember well, in the Hôpital de Schaerbeek.

I broached the subject of the Queen's Ambulance to von der Lancken that day there in the Louis XVI *salon*, after we had disposed of other matters. He was in full uniform, I remember, and wore his decorations, for the Governor-General was lunching with him that day. I asked him if it were true that they were about to dismantle the Queen's Ambulance.

"*Mais oui*". And he went on to give me the varied reasons why it should be done ; the four large hospitals were ample for the needs of all the wounded brought to Brussels ; in the hospital at the Palace for a long time there had been only a small group of Belgian wounded who could as well be cared for in one of the other hospitals. There was no argument to oppose to his logic ; he was surreptitiously glancing at the little watch on his

wrist ; it was near the hour for luncheon and the Governor-General might arrive at any moment. And yet I detained him long enough to say that it was to be regretted ; I told him about the children and the flags on the cots ; and then — it was the Queen's hospital, and after all one had a certain feeling about those things that appertained to a Queen ; there was the question of taste ; *ça ne serait pas chic* ; but, of course, nothing to be done.

At the word *chic* von der Lancken looked up and reflecting a moment, said :

"*Vous avez raison.*"

And he made a note on a piece of paper.

As I went out into the courtyard the Governor-General was entering ; I had a glimpse, like an impressionistic painting, of the grizzled old General, his collar of white broadcloth and the red facings, the decorations dangling at his throat, his great clanking *sabre*, his staff officers trailing along behind.

And when three days later Lancken told me that the order had been revoked, and that the Queen's hospital would not be dismantled, I was glad to thank him, and to congratulate him on having been *chic*.

**Brand WITHLOCK**

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

### **Footnotes.**

\* I have since been informed that a certain number of naturalized Belgian subjects of German birth,

some young, some old, were by force incorporated in the German army. While the German occupants seemed in the year 1916, the time of which I write, to have renounced all intention to apply their theory, it was in the following year resumed. In the months of September and October 1917, *placards* were posted in nearly all the Belgian cities ordering persons "*without nationality, but of German extraction, and those of German birth who had acquired Belgian nationality*", to present themselves at the *Meldeamt* of their vicinity to be incorporated in the German army. The Belgian Government solicited the intervention of the Pope and of the King of Spain, both of whom made representations to the German Government. The German authorities, while maintaining their right to treat Germans who had become naturalized subjects or citizens of other lands as liable to service under the German flag, abandoned, at least temporarily, the project.

— B. W.

French translation : « *L'hôpital de la reine* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre XVII (1916) in *La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles* ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 345-353.

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>