

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter **XXXIV**. The slavers draw near.

There was always a mystery about that dark region of which we spoke as the *Etape* ; the word had come to have an evil connotation far removed from its ordinary significance. We heard of what was going on behind that tragic veil only from the gossip and the rumours the delegates of the C.R.B. brought to town on their weekly visits to headquarters in the Rue des Colonies. My own impression of the slave drive going on there was vague ; all I knew was that workmen, intelligent, alive, full of wit and humour, and hope and ambition, precisely like the men in those crowds at home to whom I had so often made political speeches, were being seized, herded together like animals, imprisoned in vile corrals, pawed and picked over and man-handled like beasts in the market-place, and that then they disappeared in swiftly passing trains, in the darkness and cold of the night, singing "*la Brabançonne*" and the "*Lion of Flanders*", dropping letters now and then for some chance compatriot to pick up by the wayside.

Now and then men who had somehow crossed the line between *Etape* and *Occupationsgebiet* would bring in the rumours that were whispered in all that region where the hideous terror spread. At **Lauase**, and in the country round, it was said that Belgians had been seen working in the trenches ; at Mons-ville and at Roisin even the station-masters were taken. In the communes of the canton of Frasné the men to be deported had been selected at random. At Jemappes the entire male population was summoned to appear by means of affiches and the Germans took indiscriminately clerks, workmen, students and merchants. The men from Flanders and the district of Tournai were sent toward France, the men from Renaix were sent to Mortagne, in France ; those from Wiers to Le Quesnoy. Boatmen taking macadam to the north of France said that they had seen Belgians there employed in discharging the macadam. In order to obtain the signatures of these men to contracts the Germans had told them that they would be sent away immediately if they refused to sign, but that if they accepted the conditions they would be given several days' respite.

Then, we felt the hideous thing draw nearer ; the slavers had crossed the line, they were plying

their trade in the *Occupationsgebiet*. Early in November they were operating in the Hainaut. On the sixth of that month they were seizing men at Lessines. There was no longer any pretense of confining the seizures to *chômeurs* ; the Germans took not only boys, if they were big and strong, but men over sixty years of age. The greater number of the men were workers from the quarries, but even the clerks in banks and counting-rooms were seized. The chief clerk at the station, and his brother, both railway workmen, were deported. The town was first surrounded by troops, and the business of choosing the men for deportation took place in the school. From the school they were taken directly to the trains which were to bear them away. The number of men taken from Lessines, not including those taken from the near-by communes, was over two thousand. The *affiche*, of which the following is the text, was posted on the walls of the town and every man, including priests and civil authorities, had to present himself :

ORDRE

Par ordre de Monsieur le Gouverneur Général tous les habitants mâles de la Commune de Lessines ayant passé la 17^{ème} année devront se présenter le 6

novembre 1916 à 8 heures du matin à l'école du camp Milon.

Se munir des certificats d'identité et des cartes de contrôle. Les personnes qui ne donneront pas suite à cet ordre devront s'attendre à une punition sévère.

Mons, le 24 octobre 1916,

(Suivent les signatures.)

Translation :

ORDER

By order of the Governor-General all the male inhabitants of the commune of Lessines who have passed the age of seventeen must present themselves on November 6, at eight o'clock in the morning, at the school of Camp Milon.

Each must be supplied with a card of identity and a card of control. Those who do not obey this decree are liable to severe punishment.

Mons, October 24, 1916.

(Signatures.)

Mr. Gregory, the director of the C.R.B., had at once organized a service by which the men sent away were given what comforts were possible under the circumstances ; the Americans distributed blankets, clothing, caps and mittens,

and enough food to last for several days. The delegates were instructed to be present and to render any service they could, and Mr. Tuck and Mr. Gade, delegates of the C.R.B. in the province of Hainaut, went over to the commune of Saint-Ghislain on the morning of October twenty-ninth to witness the selections, to prevent the seizure of the employees of the C.N. and the C.R.B., and to distribute food to those who were deported. They came back sick with horror and full of rage at the medieval barbarities they had witnessed, so much so that after what he saw Mr. Tuck resigned from the Commission, left Belgium, and entered the British Army to fight against such cruelty and oppression.

About two thousand men summoned from all the neighboring communes had been assembled at Saint-Ghislain. The women had followed them in tears, and at the point where the selections were made lines of soldiers kept the women back by their bayonets. No effort was made to distinguish *chômeurs* ; indeed, the Germans did quite the reverse, showing a decided preference for men then employed as carpenters and blacksmiths. The men chosen were not allowed even to speak to their wives or waiting families, only a despairing

glance of farewell, a wave of the hand to the women sobbing and wringing their hands there in the cold, while the indifferent soldiers in grey kept them back with their bayonets. Then through lines of soldiers the men were marched off to the long line of freight cars waiting on the siding.

The following day, the seventh of November, it was the turn of the men of Jurbise ; the selections were made by employing that formula which was so much like the cruel chance of a blind fate : "*rechts, links*" the officer cried, and the men passed either to the right or to the left, to freedom or to bondage. No account was taken of their condition or of the condition of their families or dependents ; no effort was made to ascertain whether or not the men were *chômeurs* ; they were asked no questions. Farmers were seized even when they had no one to take their places in the fields, and some of the men left young children or wives alone at home.

At Quiévrain, on the twenty-sixth of October, the men were convoked with those of the communes of Thulin, Elouges, Baisieux, Hensies and Montroeuil-sur-Haine. All male persons above the age of seventeen had been ordered to present

themselves. Those who obeyed were huddled in the inner courtyard of the boys' middle school and kept waiting there for hours in a cold rain and wind, and most of them had brought no extra clothing. Priests, school teachers and instructors, employees of the communes, policemen, postmen, customs officials and the employees of the C.N. and the C.R.B. were called first and liberated without difficulty, as were a number of the sick and aged, though old men were hustled about with the usual brutality. The witness who described it was unable to determine by what factor the choice was made ; it had no relation to *chômage*, for many were then and always had been employed ; farmers, students, the manager of a factory, and others whom he knew, were seized. All day long a train had been waiting at the station, and during the afternoon, in their separate groups, the men thus impressed were marched off to the cattle cars.

The press-gang operated at Ninove on the eighth of November, and I had the story from a man who lived there. Those who had not presented themselves in response to the summons were dragged out of their beds at night ; even the sick were not spared. A man, the father of three children, who was ill, had to get up, go down into

the street and go off with the soldiers. They were all taken to Alost, crowded in a shed used to dry hops ; there were four hundred and sixty-seven of them. Each of them had a couch of straw 2 inches thick and a space 2 meters long by 55 centimeters wide — that would be about 7 feet by 7 feet. In this space they had to eat and to sleep and to receive anybody who came by chance to see them. Each of these beds, said the man, "*gave the spectacle of a drama impossible to describe*". There was a young man who had been lying there ill for two days in a violent crisis of asthma ; he had been cared for by a charitable woman of the town, but now he had no medical care. For two days he had been imploring air — asthma, with four hundred and sixty-seven men crowded in a hop-drier ! The man saw him lying there gasping horribly, and went out to see the German Kommandant. The Kommandant merely remarked that the military doctor was doing his duty. At five o'clock that evening the man went back to see the sick man and found that he had not yet received the visit of any doctor. A few days later the man with the asthma died.

While he was talking with the Kommandant during the morning visit, the Kommandant asked

my informant to taste the soup. The first kettle that was shown him contained a soup made of rice, which he tasted and found very good, "*fort bonne*". The second kettle contained a soup made of turnip-cabbages (*choux-raves*). The Kommandant said that the first soup was for the Belgians, and that the second was for the German soldiers, who called it *delikatesse*. When he went back in the evening the Belgians told him, however, that the *delikatesse* was given to them, and the rice soup to the Germans. The Belgians asked him to make no further efforts to have them set free ; they said that it was useless and they preferred instead that he ask that authorization be given immediately for them to go to their destination, for if they were compelled to stay three days longer crouching in that hop-drier they would all die of sickness and of privation.

The mayors of the provinces of Namur and of Limbourg received from the German authorities a circular letter of the following text :

Mr. Mayor,

You are requested to submit before October 24, three accurate lists of unemployed and men out of work

to the German Kommandant having jurisdiction over your commune.

In these lists should be given all men receiving any kind of relief, payment from the commune, the province, the Belgian Government, etc., or from the Comité National — Committee of Relief.

The most rigorous measures will be taken against you personally in the event that the lists are not transmitted to the German Kommandant on time, or are submitted incompletely prepared, either through carelessness or ill intention.

The Mayor of Maeseyck (Maaseik), in the province of Limbourg, was ordered by the German authorities to give a list of the unemployed registered at the *Meldeamt*. He replied that he had no such list, and referred the Germans to the president of the local relief committee, one of the branches of the Comité National, who answered that the committee could not furnish such lists until after consultation with the Patron Ministers of the Comité National. The representatives of the German authorities replied that if the lists were not immediately handed over he would proceed to make arrests, and in the presence of this threat the lists of unemployed inscribed at the *Meldeamt* were delivered.

In the communes of Quevaucamps, Grandglise, Blaton, Beloeil and Ath, in the Hainaut, the Germans demanded of the mayors the lists of unemployed of their localities, ordering that they be grouped in four categories, according to their trades. The mayors applied to the local committees of the Comité National to secure these lists, but these committees uniformly refused to give them. The same thing was going on in the district of Courtrai (Kortrijk). There the German authorities had asked the burgomasters to furnish the lists of unemployed; the burgomasters in general refused to give any information whatsoever. In some cases the German authorities took the lists by force, in others the committees were not molested. A thousand men, some already employed and others unemployed, were seized and deported. The men were ordered to take with them clothing and effects amounting to the value of two hundred francs, and were promised a wage of thirty pfennings a day.

Brand WITHLOCK

Footnotes.

French translation : « *Les marchands d'esclaves approchent* » in WITHLOCK, Brand ; chapitre XXV (1916) in *La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles* ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 391-392.

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>

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>