

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1917)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter XLIII. Slavery. Treatment of the deported.

Looking back upon those days I do not know how I could have got through them without the support and sympathy and practical sense of Warren Gregory. I shall be betraying no secret now, I trust, if I say that there were times when he shared my own dark forebodings and was convinced that the men of the C.R.B. might never be allowed to leave Belgium at all so long as the war lasted. And yet he was calm and philosophic, and in his sturdy wholesome way, even classical in his consolations ; he used to say, as Aeneas said in comforting the companions of his hardships : *“Forsam et haec olim meminisse juvabit”*.

I have not as yet come to the place where I can vindicate his prophecy ; I can not think of those days without pain, and as in writing of them I perforce live them over, I feel again their unintermittent depression, so that I wish to hurry on and think of them no more and be done with them forever, retaining only the friendships they brought me and the love they taught me for the charming city and its excellent people.

And yet, all things end and all problems one day are settled, and finally we did agree upon a *route* for the ships. Then there came a telegram saying that the Queen of the Netherlands and the King of Spain had exchanged messages the result of which was an accord by which they would continue the *ravitaillement* ; the Dutch Government had already selected the delegates who were to represent Holland in Belgium ; it only remained for Spain to do the same. Thus all the other schemes received their quietus. There was food enough in Belgium on the first of March to last until May, and if we could secure the consent of the Germans to the shipment of the 85.000 thousand tons in England belonging to the C.R.B. the situation could be saved. The C.R.B. had 100.000 tons on the seas and had just purchased 100.000 more in New York, and when all this arrived there would be food enough for Belgium and Northern France until September — and by that time, of course, the war would be over ! Villalobar said that the Germans would grant the ships in English ports safe conducts— though confidence in their assurances was somewhat weakened just then by the fact that only a few days before they had torpedoed six Dutch ships which they had promised the Netherlands Government to allow to leave Falmouth harbour. I urged that the Spanish and Dutch understudies for the delegates of the C.R.B. be brought immediately into Belgium, and asked

Villalobar to secure the promised assurances in writing from the Germans as to the immunity of our men, and Villalobar said he would procure them. The skies were beginning to clear.

In the midst of our own perplexities and with all diplomatic relations between the Germans and us broken off, we were able to do no more for the deported *chômeurs*. The annex to the Legation, as we called the unoccupied residence of the Countess Liederkerke across the street in the Rue Belliard which we had leased and wherein were installed the corps of clerks who prepared the documents in the cases of the deported, was closed. The subject, however, was ever present, with the suffering, the misery, the despair it connoted, and now the reality of it was brought more directly to all of us by the few returning Belgians who had been repatriated. They were pitiable objects of German brutality ; they were, for the most part, pale, emaciated men whose physical condition made them useless as workers, broken, maimed, helpless, hopeless ; a few weeks in the slave compounds in Germany had so reduced by sickness, exposure and starvation that they were hauled back to Belgium and flung down in their villages to die. Some of the returned *chômeurs* who were brought to Brussels and taken to hospitals, had their feet frozen from exposure, or were in such a state of gangrene from maltreatment that it was necessary to amputate

their legs. Those at Antwerp were returned at night to avoid notice, for their physical condition was so pitiable that the Germans seemed to be afraid or ashamed to exhibit them as examples of their work. Von Huene, the General who lost his men at Mülhausen in October, 1914, and who gave the promise that if the Belgians who had fled before the fall of Antwerp returned they would not be molested, had been removed from the command at Antwerp on twenty-four hours' notice, and had been succeeded by von Zwehl.

The deported men when they got to Germany would not work; they resorted to sabotage, "*ca' canny*" and "*direct action*"; they deliberately ruined machinery, sang their patriotic songs as they had sung them when they went away, and demoralized workshop and factory by shouting the "***Lion of Flanders***" at the top of their voices. And we began to hear the story of this triumph which, when it did not cost them their lives, left them broken, ruined men.

About seventy were returned from the camp of concentration at Soltau, released because they were ill. They were transported in a cattle-car which was attached to a freight train, and in this condition they spent three days and three nights before they arrived at their destination, although express trains cover the distance in from six to eight hours.



At Soltau they had received as food, at six o'clock in the morning, a concoction made of acorns, with nothing else ; at midday, half a litre of soup, principally of water, but with a few turnips, carrots, beets ; there were no potatoes or more substantial foods ; at three o'clock, 250 grams of black bread, often mouldy ; and between seven and eight o'clock, again half a litre of soup like that given at midday, but occasionally with a little bran or grits. With this abominable diet the strongest became ill, and it was not long before those with feeble constitutions died. During the first week five workmen died and two went insane. One, tired of so much misery, tried to escape and was shot down. The sufferings of these unfortunates were such that at night they would steal from the kitchens and devour the potato skins and the

waste from the turnips intended for the German personnel.

Besides the agony of such hunger every possible means was employed to compel them to sign contracts to work. One day forty workmen were taken away ; eight days later they reappeared at the camp. They related to their comrades that they had been taken to the Grand Duchy of Baden, and that there for two days they had been given abundant and excellent food ; they were told that if they would agree to work they would receive even better treatment. They all refused. They were then shut up in a cattle-car where they were confined for thirty-five hours without release and without food.

Another day the deported received a visit from an individual in the uniform of a sergeant of the 8th Belgian Regiment of the Line, who began to harangue them in Flemish and in French, telling them that they were foolish to endure so much suffering while the *bourgeois* in Belgium continued to live well ; that the Belgian Government did not care what became of them and would not intervene to help them ; that the neutral nations would do even less, and that this was only natural because the neutral governments knew very well, as did the Allies, that in accepting peaceful employment in Germany the Belgian workmen were not committing an act that could be considered as contrary to their patriotic sentiments. None of the workmen, however, were seduced by this talk, and

two days later they learned that the orator was a German disguised as a Belgian soldier.

The camp of the deported Belgian civilians was near that of the imprisoned Belgian soldiers, whose diet was a little better. The soldiers had pity on their compatriots. When a Belgian civilian was buried the Belgian soldiers were allowed to follow the coffin ; although they themselves did not receive sufficient nourishment, they profited by the occasion to carry under their clothing boxes of conserve and bread which they gave to the deported. At the camp at Soltau alone there were eleven thousand deported who refused to work for the Germans.

The story of the quarrymen of Lessines, whom the Germans by the most barbarous methods tried to compel to work for them in Belgium itself, had already become well known. Later these quarrymen had been sent to Germany, where they were put on a diet similar to that of the Soltau camp. Besides hunger, other means of duress were employed. One day they were aligned before the *mitrailleuse* and told that if they did not immediately consent to work they would be shot. They replied that they would rather die from bullets than of hunger. The *mitrailleuse* did not fire. Before such splendid resistance even German persistence grew weary ; some of the workmen were released and returned to their homes in such a lamentable condition that some of them died.

It seems indeed to have been the custom in the slave-compounds to menace the workmen with *mitrailleuse*. One returning group, composed of two or three hundred men of all ages, came from the camp near Münster. To force them to work their German taskmasters had almost entirely deprived them of food, had left them exposed for ten hours to cold and rain, and then, thinking that they were sufficiently reduced, they ranged about thirty of them before *mitrailleuse* ; the order to work was again given ; if they refused they were to be shot down. And they all refused. The order was given to fire. They did not flinch and the Germans fired in the air. Before such resolution it was said that some of the authorities present were not able to conceal their emotion, and that they announced to the men that they were free and could return to Belgium.

Another group returned to the Hainaut from the same camp ; one of them was found dead in the train on its arrival at Mons ; about fifty were so enfeebled that they could scarcely walk and were led away from the railway station to their homes on the arms of their relatives. And yet all of the men had been examined by German doctors before they were deported, and all of those who were not physically fit were rejected. In six weeks' time these strong, healthy, vigorous workmen had been turned to skeletons. One of the men was the son of a manufacturer at Ghlin, who had been the

foreman of his father's factory where thirty workmen were employed. After a heroic resistance of thirty-five days he was no longer able to endure the food, became ill, surrendered, and agreed to work. He was set to digging, in spite of the fact that he was not physically fitted for such work, and, far from being a *chômeur*, his factory at Ghlin in the meantime had never ceased to operate.

After the protests made by the President and the King of Spain at Berlin, certain influences were set in motion in an effort to have the slave-drive in Belgium abandoned, and returning from a visit to Berlin undertaken as a result of these efforts, Lancken brought back word that if Cardinal Mercier would appeal to the Emperor, the Emperor would suspend the deportations and order the return of the men. The Cardinal, therefore, prepared and sent an appeal, signed by all the personalities in Belgium. Lancken took the Cardinal's letter to Berlin and came back with the reply. The Emperor had been graciously pleased to grant the request, the deported men were to be returned to Belgium, but — the inevitable, sinister "*but*" in all German negotiations — they must work for the Germans in Belgium.

But in a Lenten pastoral letter which he had written on Sexagesima Sunday and had had read in all the churches, the Cardinal had spoken out once more ; he had publicly exposed the horrors of the deportations.

“Those who are fighting for the liberty of the Belgian flag (said the Cardinal's pastoral) are brave men. Those interned in Holland and Germany, who raised their fettered hands to Heaven on behalf of their country, are brave men. Our exiled compatriots, who bear in silence the weight of their isolation, also serve their Belgian fatherland to the best of their ability, as do also all those souls who, either behind the cloister walls or in the retirement of their own homes, pray, toil and weep, awaiting the return of their absent ones, and our common deliverance.

We have listened to the mighty voices of wives and mothers ; through their tears they have prayed God to sustain the courage and fidelity to honour of their husbands and sons, carried off by force to the enemy's factories. These gallant men have been heard at the hour of departure, rallying their energy to instill courage into their comrades, or, by a supreme effort, to chant the national hymn ; we have seen some of them on their return, pale, haggard, human wrecks ; as our tearful eyes sought their dim eyes we bowed reverently before them, for all unconsciously they were revealing to us a new and unexpected aspect of national heroism.

After this can it be necessary to preach courage to you ?

True, there are some shadows in the picture I have sketched for you ; there have been weaknesses here and there among our people, for which we must blush ; I am not referring, be it clearly understood, to the handful of workmen, exhausted by privation, stiff with cold, or crushed by blows, who at last gave utterance to a word of submission ; there are limits to human energy. I refer, with deep regret, to the few malefactors who lend

themselves to the lucrative parts of informer, courtier, or spy, and to those misguided individuals who are not ashamed to trade upon the poverty of their compatriots. Happily, when future generations look back from the most distant standpoint of history, these stains will be blotted out, and all that will remain for their edification will be the splendid spectacle of a nation of seven millions, which, on the evening of August 2, with one accord, not only refused to allow its honour to be held in question for a moment, but which, throughout over thirty months of ever-increasing moral and physical suffering, on battlefields, in military and civil prisons, in exile, under an iron domination, had remained imperturbable in its self-control, and had never once so far yielded as to cry : "This is too much ! This is enough !"

In our young days our professors of history rightly held up to our admiration Leonidas and the three hundred Spartans, who, instead of seeking safety in easy flight, allowed themselves to be crushed by the Persian army at the Pass of Thermopylae. They filled us with enthusiasm for the six hundred heroes of Franchimont, who, after risking life and liberty by passing through the camp of the armies of Louis XI and Charles the Bold at night, all fell in an assault of almost frenzied valour and desperate resistance. The teachers of the Belgian generation of to-morrow will have yet other instances of military heroism and patriotism to evoke."
(Note)

As a result of this the Germans were once more in a rage and threatened to rescind the promise that the deportations would be discontinued. They contented themselves at last, however, with arresting the secretary of the

Cardinal and some of the priests who had read the pastoral, and on the fourteenth of March the following announcement was made in the journals in Belgium :

“Berlin, March 14

Certain Belgian notables belonging to various parties (Note) have recently addressed H.M. the Emperor urging him to put an end to the forced deportation of Belgian workmen to Germany, and to have returned to their homes those Belgians who have been sent away.

The subscribers to this demand addressed directly to His Majesty have just been informed that the Emperor had decided to submit the petition which they formulated to the careful examination of the Governor-General and of the competent administrations, reserving to himself the privilege of taking a definite decision after this examination.

In the meantime His Majesty has given orders to have returned immediately to Belgium, in so far as this has not already been done, those Belgians sent to Germany by mistake, and to suspend until further order the forced deportation to Germany of unemployed Belgians.”

The condition that they work on their return, which at first was so deeply resented, proved in the end to have only an academic interest, for few ever came back to Belgium except those sent home to die.

Brand WITHLOCK

Footnotes.

French translation : « *Traitement des déportés* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre V (1917) in ***La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles*** ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 430-432.

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

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>

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