

WITH RUSSIANS IN CAPTIVITY

Raymond Thomas Ayres, private of the 14th Battalion became a POW in April 1917 at Bullecourt along with hundreds of his countrymen. During many months in captivity Ayres worked and lived next to the Russian POWs. He became friends with many of them and left interesting memoirs about this period of his life...

BELGIUM - WEZ

Besides the British prisoners about 100 Russians were also quartered here. They were the most dejected looking humans I had ever seen. They looked as if their spirit had been absolutely broken and all hope seemed to have died within them. They would sit for hours in the yard gazing on the ground, neither moving or speaking to each other.

The rations here were the same as at other camps. Coffee substitute of a morning, soup at midday, and bread at night with an extra of jam, sausage etc. At midday the Russians were given the soup before the English. By this method the Russians received the worst of the deal as the thickest part of the soup was at the bottom of the copper.

GERMANY - SCHACKENHOFF

Arriving here we were met by 60 Russians, and on the guard retiring we were bombarded with questions. The Russians were a fine stamp of man physically, not one of the number being under 5'10" in height. They were also in good condition and had now been prisoners for 3 years. How long had we been prisoners? Where did we come from? All manner of questions were asked and answered. One of their number could speak English, but they preferred to ask questions direct, rather than use an interpreter.

Noticing our haggard appearance they asked if we were hungry. When told we were practically starving, there was a rush in all directions. In a few minutes we were looking down on a huge pile of potatoes. They started to peel them and when a bucket was filled they lit a fire. There was a fireplace in the center of the shed, and tables and stool stood in front of the fireplace. It was not long before the potatoes were cooked and eaten. They told us to let them know as soon as our potatoes were finished and they would get us a further supply. We had many occasions to thank these Russians for the help given us.

Later in the afternoon we were issued with our bread rations. There was one loaf issued to each ten men. The Russians would cut the loaf into ten portions. One of the number would walk to the end of the room with back turned to the table. One of them would then ask "Whose". He would then name one of the men, and thus was the bread issued to each man. These men all seemed to be of the one religion - Greek Catholics, and before partaking of any food they would chant a prayer, crossing themselves many times in the meantime. Before retiring each night they would all line up and sing many hymns.

Working and living with them, we had time to study our companions - the Russians. Physically they were a fine stamp of man averaging 5'10" to 6" in height and weighing between 12 and 15 stone. All were bearded. Mentally their standard would approximately be that of a 7 or 8 year old child. Only a small percentage could read or write. Figuratively speaking, they would be 4'6" across the shoulders and 1/2" across the forehead. Though ignorant in many respects they were kind hearted and ever willing to lend a helping hand. Every Russian we came in contact with suffered from an inferiority complex. They would look up at all human beings as their superior, no matter their nationality.

We often discussed the war from our respective angles. It appears, when they were taken prisoners about 9 months after hostilities began, the Russian supply of arms and ammunition were very limited. Often the man in the front line were without rifles, and it was only on rare occasions that the men being relieved had not had to hand over their arms to the men relieving them. Ah! But they had the big guns. They were less than a kilometer apart. When told our artillery at Poziers, Moquet Farm and Bullecourt were practically wheel to wheel we were ridiculed and we could hear ourselves being referred to as madmen. Rasputin was often spoken of when conversing among themselves.

We had many and varied occupations whilst here. The country looked a picture in spring. Everywhere the fields were green. There were acres of potatoes, rye, rape, red cabbage and grazing grounds for the cattle. One of our jobs was the gathering of the potato harvest. And didn't those potatoes suffer! The Russians always wore an overcoat when going to work. The coat was always buttoned at the neck, but they never put their arms in the sleeves. When returning each night they invariably carried a bag of potatoes under their arms and the overcoat acted as a good smother for them. They all wore the prisoners uniform which was navy blue. The trousers had 2" brown seam down each side, whilst the coat and overcoat had a brown band on each arm. The cap also had a brown band. These clothes were of a substitute material made from paper. Even the boots supplied had wooden soles, whilst the upper was also a substitute made of paper.

Apart from the corporal we had 2 other guards, one of whom was a particularly vicious individual. He would rush in of a morning at whatever hour we had to be ready to commence our days work and swinging his rifle would hurry us outdoors. I must have been dreaming well one morning as the first thing I remember was being hit by the butt of the rifle on the side of the head, splitting my ear. I still carry that scar.

We were only in Schackenhoff a couple of days when a very heavy fall of snow occurred. During the night a very heavy fall of snow had fallen and now winter was on us with vengeance. We were dreaming this bitterly cold weather as we were not prepared for it in respect to warm clothing and solid foods. The Russians, as usual, were the good Samaritans supplying us with gloves and scarves.

Our work during the winter months was practically confined to forest work, felling trees or working at the saw mill. The forest was about 7 kilometers from our barracks and we would be driven out in sleds drawn by horses. We felt the cold very much and would sit shivering in the sled. At times we would become numb and the cold didn't seem to penetrate through us. The Russians noticing our condition would make us get off and walk. Presently our blood would circulate and once again we would feel the intense cold. Arriving at the forest our job was felling the trees and loading them or loading the sled with firewood for the requirements of the village. The temperature in the woods would be 10 or 20 degrees warmer than outside.

The forest work was particularly heavy to us and it was not long before Jim devised means to lighten our labor. He must have made a great study of psychology as he could read any man no matter what his nationality after a short association with them. The Germans as well as the Russians were a very serious race and had a particularly heavy sense of humor. Jim and I would gather twigs and plant them in the snow. He would stand and give instructions until satisfied they were in a straight line. We would then reverse positions. The Germans would carry on and help the Russians, the while referring to us as the mad "Englishers". Even the Russians spoke of us among themselves as madmen. All the timber in this forest was planted and each tree felled was replaced in the warm weather by a young plant.

An amusing episode happened in this forest one day. The Russians had been using the axe cutting down some trees and were moved some distance further on leaving the axe behind them. When the axe was missed the German asked one of the Russians: "Bring me the axe, understand?" - "Yes, I understand". The Russian walked off apparently to get the axe. After an absence of half an hour and no sign of the Russian returning, the German began to get very worried. It was not until 4 hours later that the Russian made his appearance with a rope over his shoulder and an ox trailing behind him. The Russian had walked back to camp and taken one of the oxen from the stalls. The German could not see the humor of the situation. I must mention that "axe" and "ox" are somewhat similar words in German as in English and a foreigner could be excused for mistaking one for the other.

The days were very short in the winter and at 4 o'clock it was dark, so by the time we drove to work and returned it was not such a long day for us. On one occasion we were split into 2 parties, the guard remaining with the other group. Deer was bred in this forest and a forest ranger looked after the interests of the estate. He would always be riding a horse and we noted he always wore dark glasses, probably as a protection against the glare of the snow.

Whilst working our attention was attracted by a deer which had evidently been badly frightened. It was losing no time putting as much space as possible between itself and the cause of its fright. Presently we heard a cry which could be heard in the stillness or miles away. One of the Russians running towards the cry noticed that the deer had become tightly wedged between 2 saplings. He cried out for someone to bring him a knife and quickly. We had visions of venison for dinner that night but before we arrived at the spot, the ranger had appeared from nowhere and asked us what was the trouble. We explained the position and were trying to release the animal. After waiting until the deer was freed, he rode off.

Nevertheless had he been 5 minutes later arriving at the spot our dreams would have been fulfilled.

Often of a morning after a snowstorm we were called upon to clear the snow away from the railway line at the station. All hands were requisitioned and we had to clear a track 200 yards long to allow the train to be started after stopping at the station. On occasions some of us were kept there to unload whatever goods happened to be in the trucks. Nearby was a condensed milk factory. After the cream had been sent to the butter factory, the buttermilk was trucked from the creamery to the milk factory to be sweetened and tinned. We never missed returning from this job without a bag of sugar or case of milk between us. One day whilst unloading sugar we noticed a truck in the siding with three padlocks and 5 red seals across the door. The Russians explained it was a truck of wheat being sent to the flour mill and thence dispatched to the soldiers at the front.

In the top right hand corner was an opening about 1"6"x1", which we pointed out to the Russians. The guard had gone off for a walk, as he often did when we were working at the station. They said that as they were such big men it would be impossible for them to get through such a small opening. Either Jim or I would have it "make the trip" if we wanted any wheat. Jim asked: "What about it?" Where there was a sign of food no chance was too great to take to secure the coveted "eats". So asking Jim to give us a leg up and throw the scrounge bags in after me. Soon I was hoisted through the opening and filling our bags from the sacks of wheat. After lowering them to those below, they were stowed away to be picked up later on. When only 3 bags remained to be filled Jimmy called out: "Stop where you are. The guard is back. I'll give you the office when everything is clear." Every few minutes Jim's voice could be heard "Keep down" or "Still here". It seemed an eternity before I got the "All clear" signal. I lost no time in handing the bags down and clambering out. Jimmy told me I had been 3 hours in the truck. It was the longest 3 hours I had put in for a long while.

Thereafter for several weeks wheat with sugar and condensed milk (previously confiscated) provided our main meal. Potatoes were now discarded for time being. ..

Each Sunday being a day of rest the Russians entertained us with their concertina and folk dancing. Every one of them was an artist when it came to dancing. We thoroughly enjoyed the entertainment provided and never tired of watching their tap or folk dancing. Occasionally they would provide a wrestling exhibition, and they were no mean amateurs when it came to this for of entertainment. Such was the standard of these impromptu concerts that it also attracted the civilians and we looked forward to each Sunday afternoon for a renewal.

On one occasion Jim and I were riding in a wagon which was drawn by an ox and being led by a Russian when the "Rittmaster" appeared. He looked at us for a few seconds then barked: "Get down off that wagon you swine. Do you think I feed oxen to draw you prisoners round the estate?" he spoke perfect English, otherwise we may have answered him in a manner which would have subsequently led us into a deal of trouble. The Russian was a bad case of nerves for a long while afterwards. Although he had not been riding in the wagon. All these Russians addressed the Germans as "Master".

We felt the cold terribly when the thaw began. Our boots were practically worn out and a Russian fitted wooden soles to them which was a great help in keeping the moisture out. I suppose the coldest part of the year is when the thaw sets in. Everywhere it is slushy underfoot and it is impossible to keep the wet out. Sox had long since gone into discard and we wrapped our feet in newspaper. Now that the snow was disappearing our working hours were extended and there seemed a thousand jobs to be done.

We were now in receipt of weekly letters from home. I shall never forget the first day we received our mail here. The Russian interpreter - France Sikorski - informed us during the day that the guard had a lot of mail for us. That night I received 30 or 40 letters. Talk about a feast! I opened the letters haphazardly and read the news. Then I sorted them out in order and read them over again and then once again re-read them. The other lads did the same. Memories! News from the loved ones. Had a good cry and went to sleep. The Russians must have wondered at our excitement. Only 2 of them ever received any letters as very few of them could read or write. That was a red letter day for us. We tore open our parcels and were absolutely spellbound at the various assortment of foods - bully beef, pork and beans, soups, salmon, herrings, sardines, tea, sugar, condensed milk, cocoa, rice, flour, bar chocolate, coffee, soap, tobacco and cigarettes (a small parcel, containing Xmas pudding, cake muscatels and figs), biscuits, bacon, jams, tinned fruit and butter. The Russians were speechless when they saw our assortment of foods all ready to be eaten. We decided that since they had treated us "white" we should reciprocate, so after opening up bully beef, butter etc. we bade them "get into eat".

The Russian custom of eating is different from ours. We eat our food individually, they collectively. They would put the food in bowls and a group of men sit around each bowl each using his spoon and eating from the one bowl. This, they informed us, was their custom at home. They drank their tea very weak. A desert spoonful was all the tea used to supply them with a drink, although they are very fond of this beverage. After the feast we gave each man a packet of cigarettes and divided some parcels and soap between them. Needless to say there was no sleep that night. We were all too excited to think of going to bed.

The cooking for the guards and the Russian interpreter was carried out by a German woman - Frau Lovsky. All their meals consisted of soups, mostly dried fruits with potatoes. Once a week meat was cooked with the dried prunes, peaches etc. and apricots with potatoes. This woman had been widowed during the war and had felt the loss of her husband keenly. Occasionally she would converse with us on the horrors of war. The Germans in this village were a great home loving people and were quite content with their hard work and home life. Often she would tell us of the day when all troops were called to the colors. It was a fete day in the village. The soldiers had to leave by train very early in the morning. All that night the whole village congregated at the station and sang and danced all night round a bonfire. In the morning the troops entrained and were sent to the Russian front. The war would be over in three months and the soldiers would return with honors thick upon them. Alas! Six months later her husband was killed and she would never see him again. War was terrible. Why should it have to be?

No matter how much work had to be done Sundays and religious days were a day of rest. The Russians asked us if we would like to visit the Poles Civilian house one Sunday afternoon - a concert would be held. We were only too eager to go with them, so Sunday found us at the "Poles House" as it was called. An orchestra of two concertinas supplied the music. We danced with the women, while tap dancing and singing were also included in the programme. The women were a very robust race and were now employed in the brick pits and fields. Despite the arduous nature of their work they were a very content race...

The concert was at its height when one of the Poles rushed in and in a very excited manner shouted "The Commandant". Immediately there was a rush for the windows at the rear of the house. We (the English) were brushed on the side and the Russians climbed through the windows and jumped to the ground. Just as Jim and I who were the last live left in the room, were about to jump, the door opened and a voice commanded "Halt". We dropped to the ground and looked round to see where the Russians were.

The ground here was fairly level and about 300 yards from the house a drain ran through the fields. The Russians had made for this drain and were wallowing through the slush towards our barracks. About a foot of slush was in this drain which was only about 18" deep. The Russians were bent double and were making all possible haste. From the knees up every man was visible for miles away. We just stood where we were and waited.

The Kommandant evidently thinking the jump was too much for him, rushed through the house and in a few moments was in a high powered car being driven to head off the Russians. A few minutes later we were all lined up and put through a tongue barrage. "What were we doing there? Did they know the Poles House was out of bounds?" Then he saw the English prisoners all dressed up in new clothes. "Who are these prisoners?" With one voice the Russians replied: "Englanders".- "What were the English swine doing at the Poles house?" etc etc.

As we found convenient on different occasions we replied "Don't understand" to all his questioning. He then turned to the Russians and asked them if the "English swine" could speak Russian. On being informed in the negative, he told the Russians that since we could speak neither German nor Russian they were responsible for us being out of bounds and would have to be punished. Their punishment consisted of hours marching each night for a week after work for the day was complete with a bag of sand tied on their backs. We were left off.

A couple of Russians stated their intention of making their escape and asked us if we would give them some food to see them on their way. We provided them with four loaves of German bread (we had eaten no German food since the arrival of our packets), bully beef, bacon, tea and sugar. Less than a week later they were recaptured and wonder of wonders they would found making their way towards Berlin. We asked them why they didn't go due east. They replied: "have you ever been in Russia?" We answered "No". We were dumbfounded when they said: "Well, how the hell do you know where it is". Such was the intelligence of the average Russian.

One of the Russians - France Ivanoff - a well-educated and good natured man became great friends with us. All the other men seemed to look to him for guidance and always his advice was asked on any matter, however trivial. He told us he had been a political prisoner in Siberia, but through the influence of his uncle, as well as a big cash consideration he had been liberated. "Money in Russia as elsewhere the world is King of all countries" - was his opinion. Siberia, as he explained to us, was vastly different to the Siberia we had always thought it to be. Escape from this barren expanse of snow country was absolutely impossible. The prisoners in most instances lived in a village and not in prisons surrounded by huge walls as we had thought. France was ever considering our comfort and we had much to thank him for since arriving at Schackenhoff.

As all hostilities had ceased between Russia and Germany most of the troops were now returning from the Eastern front. The High Command intended sending these troops to the Western front and consolidating his position there, but evidently the soldiers had different opinions. Their contention was that since they had won their battle, they should not be pressed into further service, but should be discharged. The civilians were rather hazy as to what could be done to them, as practically all the units engaged on the Eastern front refused to do further service in France. Even to this day I have not heard or learnt what happened to the regiments which mutinied.

As nearly all the troops had now been withdrawn from the Russian front, France thought it would be a good opportunity to make a getaway. He would make the attempt with Fahmian (another Russian). We told him all the food we had (our stock would not have disgraced a small grocers shop) was at his disposal. We explained the various articles to him and bade him take an ample supply with him. The following day after bidding us good-bye and leaving us various souvenirs, he was off. As we heard no further from them, they evidently got through alright. Since being repatriated I wrote several letters to France, but owing evidently to the strict censorship of all mail matters there, he probably never received my letters.

Bolshevism at this time must have had a very strong hold in Russia, as the Russians were continually speaking of the Bolshevik movement. They had a very deep hatred of the Jewish race.

I had scratched my arm and it was causing me a little trouble. Despite repeat bathing it in hot salt water the poison gradually spread, so I was sent to Gerdaunen to attend hospital, which was next door to the prisoners quarters. I was sorry to leave Schackenhoff as we had become good friends with the Russians.

HEILSBERG

Upon arrival at Heilsberg I was sent to a hut which contained all nationalities - French, Serbians, Russians, Italians and French colored infantrymen and one of our battalion men - Les Adams. Les had a septic leg and had been in hospital since being taken at Bullecourt. His leg would be practically healed and would then break out again. He must have found life rather monotonous at times. He filled in much time studying the French and German language and became quite a good linguist.

The morning after my arrival I was brought before German and Russian doctors. They informed me that unless my arm showed some improvement in the next day or two, it might be necessary to amputate. I told them that under no consideration would I consent to such an operation. This interview put the wind up me, so returning to the hut I boiled my arm in hot salt water for hours. I had always been a firm believer in the above treatment, and my faith was justified as the arm showed considerable improvement in the next few days.

Russian doctors ministered to the prisoners. Some of these men were very accomplished. They performed some marvelous operations and without chloroform, which also seemed to be scarce in Germany. Dr Puroff could speak the language of any nationality under his charge - English, French, German, Russian, Serbian, Polish and Italian. He was very popular with the men attached to this camp.

The Russian doctor attending our hut was surprised at the headway my arm was making and told me that it was only a matter of a few weeks before the arm would be properly healed. He made a proposition to me - if I would teach him English for an hour each day he would keep me in the hospital indefinitely. I accepted the offer.

These men were thorough in everything they undertook. He would take up a whole lesson perfecting himself in the pronunciation of a word or the tense and mood of a verb. The daily lesson of an hour gradually

lengthened until I was tutoring him from 2 o'clock until 5 or 6 each day. He was determined to master our language and until now I had no idea how difficult English was to learn.

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