

English war prisoners in Switzerland

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cas à l'avenir, si nous témoignons notre volonté de nous acquitter le plus rapidement possible, c'est-à-dire dans un délai de vingt à trente ans, de cette dette. A cet effet, il faudra obtenir un meilleur rendement des redevances fiscales de tout ordre et faire sourdre de nouvelles sources. Mais, de l'avis général, ce ne saurait être atteint sous le régime actuel qui, avec sa superposition d'impôts communaux, cantonaux et fédéraux, ne permet plus de répartir équitablement les charges. Il faudra donc de toute nécessité entreprendre une réforme fondamentale de tout notre système fiscal. C'est la grande tâche à laquelle M. Nobs devra s'atteler et qui accaparrera l'essentiel de ses forces pendant quelques années.

Malgré tout, il ne faut pas oublier que les dépenses de mobilisation ne sont pas les seules. Outre que le compte ordinaire de la Confédération est en déficit, il sera grevé prochainement de dépenses nouvelles qui ne sont pas une bagatelle. A cet égard, songeons à l'assainissement des chemins de fer fédéraux pour lequel un milliard trois cents millions au moins seront nécessaires. Songeons aussi que notre opinion publique réclame la réalisation rapide de l'assurance-vieillesse et survivants, dont on estime qu'elle exigera de l'Etat une dépense annuelle qui, à la fin d'une période transitoire, s'élèvera à environ 120 millions par an. Et je ne dis rien d'une période de chômage — dont nous constatons les premières manifestations dans l'horlogerie — au cours de laquelle des sommes énormes devraient être dépensées, afin d'occuper la main-d'œuvre et d'exécuter le programme des grands travaux! Enfin, d'autres éventualités doivent aussi être envisagées: par exemple, il n'est pas exclu qu'au moment où les frontières se rouvriront, l'agriculture suisse sera soumise à une rude concurrence étrangère; on serait alors forcé de voler à son secours, comme on l'a déjà fait en des circonstances antérieures.

Nous ne disons pas cela pour dresser un tableau pessimiste de la situation. Nous savons fort bien que les pays belligérants devront faire face à des charges infiniment plus lourdes encore et que ce ne sera point trop de la mobilisation des ressources d'immenses empires pour reconstruire l'Europe. Nous disons cela pour souligner l'ampleur de la tâche que notre ministre des finances vient d'aborder. Nous surmonterons ces difficultés, si chacun y met de la bonne volonté, si chacun apporte à cette entreprise d'intérêt national toute l'aide en son pouvoir. Il faudra pour cela que nous continuions à bénéficier d'un ordre intérieur et d'une paix sociale sans défaillances. A cet égard, beaucoup de choses dépendront de la conjoncture économique. Mais comme on ne peut compter que celle-ci sera toujours favorable, il faut souhaiter que se perpétue jusqu'à la fin de la guerre et après celle-ci l'esprit de solidarité qui est né dans les rangs de nos soldats et qui nous a déjà fait tant de bien. Ceux qui n'aveugle pas l'esprit de parti, se félicitent donc doublement de la collaboration qui vient d'être inaugurée. Elle portera ses fruits, si elle est pratiquée loyalement de part et d'autre. Convenons-en: ce sera une rude épreuve pour les deux camps autrefois antagonistes, car il n'est jamais facile de surmonter de vieilles habitudes et des préjugés. Comme il suffit d'étudier notre histoire pour savoir que nous y sommes toujours parvenus, fût-ce après de longues luttes, nous n'avons aucune raison de douter de l'avenir.

Pierre Béguin.

ENGLISH WAR PRISONERS IN SWITZERLAND.

(An excellent article in reference to above from the pen of its Zurich correspondent appeared in the "Daily Telegraph" February 24th; though in some instances the lot of the prisoner may appear harsh or pleasurable it is, of course, self-evident that his living status is in some degree affected by the British Government which pays for his upkeep.)

Torbenthal, which Baedeker has the grace to mention yet the discrimination to refrain from dwelling upon, is a village of some 1,350 inhabitants in the valley of the Toess. The road leading to it from Winterthur runs through hilly and wooded country. Church spires silhouetted against grey winter sky proclaim the presence of other distant villages to right and left. The scenery is typical of the eastern Swiss lowlands, where several thousand British and Empire troops are now billeted.

On a day last week when, as it seemed, I broke in upon its aloofness, Torbenthal lay covered with snow.

The Swiss children swished dexterously along on skis. It was a strange yet not incongruous spectacle to come upon soldiers in battle dress brushing the snow, still powdery and white, from paths and doorways. There are now some 20 of these Swiss centres in which khaki-clad figures become a familiar sight.

Nearly all these troops have taken part in the campaigns of Africa and Greece. They hail from various parts of the British Isles, from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and even Cyprus and Malta. They spent perilous and adventurous weeks and months making their way to Switzerland.

The men have adapted themselves to circumstances, and on the whole fit well into their surroundings. Many of them, both officers and other ranks, are welcome guests in Swiss homes.

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There are two distinct categories of Allied soldiers now in Swiss territory. In the British case the most numerous are so-called *évadés* who escaped from enemy prison camps. Their status is regulated by Article XIII. of that section of the Hague Convention relating to the rights and duties of neutral Powers. This article is brief and explicit. It states: "The neutral Power which receives escaped prisoners of war will leave them at liberty. If it permits them to sojourn in its territory a place of residence may be assigned to them."

After presenting himself to the Swiss frontier guards the *évadé* is passed on to the transit camp. There he remains for a quarantine period of approximately three weeks. During that time he may have no communication with any British diplomatic or military authorities. Moreover, these authorities have not been accorded any opportunity of inspecting the transit camps, of which the largest is at Olten.

The Swiss Government has, however, now consented to forward to the British Legation the name and particulars of every new arrival as soon as possible. Early opportunity is thus provided for transmitting news of the *évadé's* whereabouts to his wife or relatives. Many of these former prisoners of war have been registered as missing for long periods.

On emerging from the transit camp, cleansed, physicked and redeemed, the soldier is transferred to one of the small towns or villages constituting the "place of residence assigned." He comes under the control of British officers and is fitted out with uniform, which is generally received through the agency of the Red Cross. When the men arrive at the transit camp they are dressed in a wide variety of attire, which more often than not has been given them by friendly disposed persons in Italy.

Non-commissioned officers and privates are accommodated in factories, gymnasiums, schools and other buildings. Conditions, according to British ideas, are somewhat primitive.

A stringent daily routine is enforced. Réveillé is at 6.30, breakfast at 7.15, dinner at midday and supper at six p.m. Lights must be out by ten. But the slumber which it is insisted on should be thus peremptorily wooed proves often in present circumstances elusive. Soldiers well acquainted with the hardships of the desert campaigns, soldiers who lived through that bleak chapter in our history which will ever be associated with the name of Dunkirk, and men who fought bravely in the mountains of Greece do not ask for luxury. Yet a bunk, however hard, or a palliasse on which to lie would not seem an outlandish or unreasonable ambition in them. Swiss soldiers, it seems, habitually sleep on raised wooden floors covered with a layer of loose straw as our *évadés* are now required to do.

Efforts are being made to improve this state of affairs, but results must naturally depend on considerations of finance. The cost of providing bed accommodation conforming to British military standards would amount to about 15 francs per man.

I found our officers in Switzerland reluctant to talk about their essential wants. By dint of much interlocutory delving, however, three main desiderata were discoverable.

First, the amount of pay which officers may draw while in Switzerland is small. All officers fully appre-

ciate the reasons enforcing restrictions in this respect, but there is a very natural feeling that when the limitations imposed prevent them from returning hospitality it is bound to react unfavourably on British prestige, especially if comparisons are drawn with other nationalities. Moreover, the cost of living in Switzerland is immensely high. The purchase of most necessary articles is often beyond them. It does not seem too much to hope that some form of financial arrangement which is less radical in its effects will be found. The happy medium is all that is desired. Amounts which the officers at present are allowed to draw are below the sums which they would receive if still prisoners of war. This seems illogical.

Secondly, officers and men who have fought on various fronts resent the feeling that they are being regarded as "a legion lost." They would like to take full advantage of a seemingly golden opportunity of becoming mentally and physically fit in order to be in good condition to face and master whatever may lie ahead.

Greater possibilities of receiving vocational training would be welcomed. The morale of the troops is high, but inactivity is bound to react unfavourably in the long run. All sorts of excellent schemes have been devised for indulging in interesting and health-giving activities, but funds are required to carry them out.

Many *évadés* have been prisoners of war for long periods. Unless they can now be provided with adequate mental and physical stimulus apathy may be their lot.

Thirdly, there is a sincere desire among all ranks to establish and maintain a good understanding with the Swiss authorities, with whom they are in daily contact. Luckily, despite months, sometimes years, spent in Italian or other prison camps, most British officers have retained a sense of humour. This has done much to smooth over some of the difficulties and misunderstandings which inevitably arose during the first months of their stay in Switzerland.

It would not be correct to suggest that the *évadé* or internee is denied all opportunity for intellectual activity or recreation. From its centre at Muenchenbuchsee, near Berne, the Y.M.C.A. organised a circulating library, a technical library of over 500 books, from which volumes may be borrowed, while gifts of books are made to various detachments.

This organisation has also distributed footballs, boxing gloves, musical instruments, games, playing cards and other welcome acquisitions received from the British Red Cross. There are also some facilities for the study of modern languages, shorthand, engineering, wireless, mathematics and other subjects.

In the recreation room of one centre I saw an internal combustion engine, which is used for demonstration purposes. An Australian captain is in charge of educational work, and he is in constant touch with the Y.M.C.A., which, among its manifold activities, supplies detachments with exercise books, blackboards, chalk, pencils and other necessary articles.

The British community in Switzerland has enthusiastically launched welfare work and seeks by every means within its power to render life more agreeable to the troops. In this respect a debt of gratitude is owed to the initiative of Mrs. Norton, wife of the British Minister, whose able personal supervision and practical help has aroused general praise.

The private soldier has 12 francs a week at his disposal. He is lucky in that beer and cigarettes are not only plentiful but cheap — much cheaper than in England at present. These two commodities are, indeed, about the sole exceptions in the universally high cost of living.

The soldier has advantages in cheap canteen prices when he wants, for example, a cup of tea or coffee. Here again the Y.M.C.A. has been instrumental in working out a system of milk rationing which, while, of course, conforming to all Swiss regulations, reacts to the benefit of the soldier consumer. The troops are quite well supplied with radio sets, with full opportunities for listening to B.B.C. programmes or any others they may select. Many excellent wireless sets have been received with gratitude from Swiss donors.

The dismal routine in the évadé centres is occasionally relieved by rotation visits to Adelboden. These last about one month. During that time hotel amenities are enjoyed and skiing facilities are available. Excellent Swiss instructors are already converting tyros into quite proficient performers. Ski tests such as the second and third class ski tests in Great Britain, the Swiss gold and silver tests, have been passed by 23 officers and 32 other ranks. There is also a small detachment of officers and men at Arosa, where first-class skiing and gymnastics instruction has been organised.

With regard to the important matter of sustenance, the British soldier in general has an ampler ration scale than soldiers of Continental armies. Accordingly he sometimes finds the food ration small in size, but, in fairness, it must be said that the quality everywhere is admitted to be excellent:

There was much gratification when the International Red Cross authorities managed to divert to Switzerland parcels from home addressed to prisoner-of-war camps in Italy. Soldiers were also able to receive quantities of back mail.

A second and much smaller class of British and Empire troops now in Switzerland is that of the internees. They may have baled out of aircraft or be members of crews whose machines were obliged to make emergency landings here. Or, again, as infantrymen they may have retreated to the Swiss border and crossed it in the chaos that followed the fall of France. Soldiers such as these, in accordance with international usage, are debarred from leaving Switzerland until the close of hostilities, and must, theoretically at least, be kept under constant military guard.

The Swiss Government, however, has so far desisted from placing the internees in camps and much latitude is accorded them, for which the internees are duly grateful.

The évadés are free to leave this neutral country as soon as the frontier opens.

PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION.

Electoral Reform was discussed in the House of Commons on Thursday, February 3rd when various references to the system of Proportional Representation were interposed by members. As the "Proporz" is the medium by which most of our Federal, cantonal and municipal magistrates are chosen by the people opinions of English parliamentarians offer interesting though not instructive reading. Here are a few:

Mr. Greenwood (Labour) would prefer to keep the two-party system. Complication of parties did tend to confuse political issues and the strength of our system lay primarily in the two parties. Those outside them should make up their minds under which umbrella they were going to shelter.

Proportional misrepresentation would be a national disaster. It would result in a good deal of misrepresentation and the establishment of groups whose interest would be narrow and out of relation to the broad sweep of national problems. It could not be an ideal situation to take a still picture of the population on election day and say that it represented the mind of the nation.

Sir P. Harris (Liberal) profoundly resented the fact that Mr. Greenwood had put forward the undemocratic idea that electors should be forced to vote for one party or another, and that minorities had no right of representation.

Sir R. Young (Labour) preferred P.R. Wherever it had been tried it had been in the main successful — in Northern Ireland, Tasmania, South Africa, Belgium, Finland, and Sweden. Most remarkable of all was the fact that the Government had proposed P.R. for India. In this country it would encourage electors to vote, it would make a coupon election impossible, and it would be far less expensive than the present system.

Col. A. Evans (Unionist) said as to P.R. it was interesting to note that in Wales in the last General Election Liberals of all shades polled over 196,000 votes and obtained 10 seats, while Conservatives with 204,000 votes returned only six members. In spite of that unfortunate experience, the Conservatives were still violently opposed to proportional representation. There was sufficient log-rolling already. The success of our Parliamentary system was mainly due to its party basis.

Mr. Roberts (Liberal) said that there was an increasing gulf between the House of Commons and the general public. The power of the party caucus was overwhelming and it led to a sense of frustration, a belief that the vested interests of trade unions and big business were arranging the issues. Proportional representation could, he thought, remedy this, giving an opportunity of seeing the type of member within a party that the public liked. Something had to be done to improve the constitution.

OUR NEXT ISSUE.

We hope to go to press again on April 28th, and gratefully acknowledge "donations" from the following subscribers: F. Isler, Paul Walser, H. J. Dufour, W. Flory, R. C. Lentwyler, F. E. Eggar, W. Graf, Swiss Club Helvetia Cape Town, Miss H. F. Ruch, Miss G. Alpstätter, E. Reiner, Louis Chapuis, A. Homberger, Mrs. J. A. Lanz, Miss R. Imhof.

