

a journalist's account of Ruhleben camp



from *Two German Prison Camps*

ROBERT WALKER: The barracks in the camp.
(Ruhleben Internment Camp 1914-17 Sketch Book).

Ruhleben is a race-track on the outskirts of Berlin, and a detention camp for English civilians. This is quite another sort of menagerie. You can imagine the different kinds of Englishmen who would be caught in Germany by the storm - luxurious invalids taking the waters at Baden-Baden; Gold Coast negro roustabouts from rusty British tramps at Hamburg; agents, manufacturers, professors, librarians, officers from Channel boats, students of music and philosophy.

All these luckless civilians - four thousand of them - had been herded together in the stables, paddock, and stands of the Ruhleben track. The

place was not as suited for a prison as the high land of Zossen, the stalls with their four bunks were dismal enough, and the lofts overhead, with little light and ventilation, still worse.

Some had suffered, semi-invalids, for instance, unable to get along with the prison rations, but the interesting thing about Ruhleben was not its discomfort, but the remarkable fashion in which the prisoners had contrived to make the best of a bad matter.

The musicians had their instruments sent in and organized an orchestra. The professors began to lecture and teach until now there was a sort of university, with some fifty different classes in the long room under the grand stand. And on the evening when we had the privilege of visiting Ruhleben it was to see a dramatic society present Bernard Shaw's "Androcles and the Lion."

The play began at six o'clock, for the camp lights are out at nine, and it was in the dusk of another one of Berlin's rainy days, after slithering through the Tiergarten and past the endless concrete apartment-houses of Charlottenburg, that our taxicab swung to the right, lurched down the lane of mud, and stopped at the gate of Ruhleben. Inside was a sort of mild morass, overspread with Englishmen - professional-looking men with months-old beards, pink-cheeked young fellows as fresh as if they had just stepped off Piccadilly, men in faded knicker-bockers and puttees, men in sailor blue and brass buttons, men with flat caps and cockney accent, one with a Thermos bottle, and crisp "Right you are!" - a good-natured, half-humorous, half-tragic cross-section of the London streets, drifting about here in the German mud.

There were still a few minutes before the play began, and we walked through some of the barracks with the commandant, a tall, bronzed officer of middle age, with gracious manners, one of those Olympian Germans who resemble their English cousins of the same class. Each barrack had its captain, and over these was a camp-captain - formerly an English merchant of Berlin - who went with us on our rounds.

The stables were crowded with bunks and men - like a battleship fore-castle. One young man, fulfilling doubtless his English ritual of "dressing for dinner," was punctiliously shaving, although it was now practically dark; in another corner the devotee of some system of how to get strong and how to stay so, stripped to the skin, was slowly and with solemn precision raising and lowering a pair of light dumb-bells. Some saluted as private soldiers would; some bowed almost as to a friend, with a cheery "Guten Abend, Herr Baron!" There seemed, indeed, to be a very pleasant relation between this gentleman soldier and his gentlemen prisoners, and the camp-captain, lagging behind, told how one evening when they had sung "Elijah," the men had stood up and given three English cheers for the commandant, while his wife, who had come to hear the performance, stood beside him laughing and wiping her eyes.

As you get closer to war you more frequently run across such things. The fighting men kill ruthlessly, because that, they think, is the way to get their business over. But for the most part they kill without hate. For that, in its noisier and more acrid forms you must go back to the men who are not fighting, to the overdriven and underexercised journalists, sizzling and thundering in their swivel-chairs.

The dimly lit hall under the grand stand was already crowded as we were led to our seats on a rostrum facing the stage with the commandant and one of his officers. There was a red draw curtain, footlights made with candles and biscuit tins, and so strung on a wire that at a pull, between the acts, they could be turned on the spectators. A programme had been printed on the camp mimeograph, the camp orchestra was tuning up, and a special overture had been composed by a young gentleman with the beautiful name of "Quentin Morvaren."

You will doubtless recall Mr. Shaw's comedy, and the characteristic "realistic" fun he has with his Romans and Christian martyrs, and the lion who, remembering the mild-mannered Androcles, who had once pulled a splinter from his foot, danced out of the arena with him instead of eating him.

And you can imagine the peculiarly piquant eloquence given to the dialogue between Mr. Shaw's meek but witty Christians and their might-is-right Roman captors, spoken by British prisoners in the spring of 1915, in a German prison camp before a German commandant sitting up like a statue with his hands on his sword!

The Roman captain was a writer, the centurion a manufacturer, Androcles a teacher of some sort, the call-boy for the fights in the arena a cabin-boy from a British merchant ship, and the tender-hearted lion some genius from the "halls." Even after months of this sodden camp it was possible to find a youth to play Lavinia, with so pretty a face, such a velvet voice, such a pensive womanliness that the flat-capped, ribald young cockneys in the front row blushed with embarrassment. A professor of archaeology, or something, said that he had never seen more accurate reproductions of armor, though this was made but of gilded and silvered cardboard - in short, if Mr. Shaw's fun was ever better brought out by professional players, they must have been very good indeed.

It was an island within an island that night, there under the Ruhleben grand stand - English speech and Irish wit in that German sea. You should have seen the two young patricians drifting in, with the regulation drawl of the Piccadilly "nut" - "I say! He-ah's some Christians - let's chaff them!" The crowd was laughing, the commandant was laughing, the curtain closed in a whirl of applause, one had forgotten there was a war. The applause continued, the players straggled out, faltering back from the parts in which they had forgotten themselves into normal, self-conscious Englishmen. There was a moment's embarrassed pause, then the rattle of a sabre as the tall man in gray-blue rose to his feet.

"Danke Ihnen, meine Herren! Aeusserst nett!" he said briskly. ("Thanks, gentlemen! Very clever indeed!") He turned to us, nodded in stiff soldierly fashion. "Sehr nett! Sehr nett!" he said, and led the way out between a lane of Englishmen suddenly become prisoners again.

by Arthur Ruhl, American journalist

http://www.greatwardifferent.com/Great_War/Prison_Camps/Prison_Camps_01.htm