

German Internment

By Jill Rock

My Grandfather was a German immigrant interned at Alexandra Palace at the time of the First World War. Whilst this was something we always knew as part of our family history, it has only been because of this exhibition that I have investigated it. As the title of Janet Harris' book says this is a hidden history and I am indebted to her for all the information she has gathered together. In my home I have several things that were made by the Internees at Alexandra Palace. Although there was some money made available for the internee's families in England, this had to be supplemented by things that they made for sale in the workshops in the camp.

My Grandmother and my Mother lived in neutral Holland during the war as there was considerable anti German feeling in England. My Grandfather had been a manufacturer of rubber before the war but at the outbreak the Foreign Office shut down his factory because he was German. As the war carried on with more and more reliance on gun carriages and machines he was asked by The Foreign Office to arrange for rubber to be imported from his brother's German factory. After the war he rebuilt the Poppe Rubber and Tyre Company in Twickenham, which remained in family hands until the 1950's.

Gas Attacks

By Nicky Scott-Francis

Wilfred Owen poem, 1914 vividly illustrates in words the dawning of a new and dark age foretelling the horror and mass destruction of World War 1. The outbreak of war in 1914 generated a myriad of national feelings including: the potent honour, heroism and glory of dying for King and country; fear of death; the wrenching from the old and familiar life. Wilfred Owen was killed on the 4th November 1918 leading his men across the Sambre-Oise canal in Northern France just seven days before peace was signed but he has achieved immortality and great acclaim through the act of writing down in poetry his anguish and horror of his experiences living and fighting at the Western Front.

Gas poisoning was a new and hideous weapon of warfare deployed in World War One. The original SBR gas mask in the exhibition is tangible evidence of the cumbersome, heavy, fearsome, grotesque looking gas masks but life-saving equipment soldiers carried as part of their kit. There were serious consequences for soldiers in action who did not wear their gas masks during gas attacks as the lethal effects of inhalation of a gas attack were blindness, choking and death. Even civilians, such as peasant women and their children, wore gas masks in close proximity to the trenches on the Flanders Front to protect themselves.

Somewhere in Belgium

By Louise Kosinska

My grandfather was a captain in WW1 and sent postcards to my grandmother, writing as often as he could. The last one he wrote is enlarged, with his writing, on a map where he might have been and a photo of him in uniform outside a Belgian café printed onto a white tablecloth of my grandmothers. The wrench was two ended, for her waiting at home and for him writing from “somewhere in Belgium”. My grandfather loved Camp coffee, a taste he developed in the war. There was always a bottle in the cupboard. He said all food eventually tasted the same - of mud. I have made a still life, from WW1 army rations and a bottle of Camp coffee to echo the domestic scene at home, with the grim title in French not still life, but nature morte - Dead life.

My grandmother was a Red Cross nurse, in Gloucestershire. She treated soldiers who came back from odourless and thus undetectable attacks of gas. Soldiers made homemade gas masks by urinating on cotton pads and tying them in a cloth. These masks were sometimes called black veils, being inadequate for their purpose as the effects attacked all over the body. One lies on top of the clean folded muslin that would have been used to wrap my mother who was born in 1918 - 4 months before the ceasefire – the smell of life and death, encased in muslin.

Poland Mobilizes

By Monica Wheeler

During the First World War Poland was occupied by three empires, the German, the Austro-Hungarian and the Russian. While Poland did not exist as an independent state during World War I, its geographical position between the occupying powers had meant that much fighting, and terrific human and material losses occurred on Polish soil between 1914-1918. Polish territory, split during this period, became the scene of many of the operations of the Eastern Front of World War I. Entire families were divided and men were called into service for the three powers and often had to fight against each other. That was the history of my family.

The Krupp steel factory employed my great grandfather. They were the main producers of artillery for the Imperial German Army. He had seven brothers, they all died before the war ended. The effects of the war were so pronounced that no one within my family would discuss those lost or this period in our family's history as is the case with so many others. After World War I and the collapse of the Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian Empires, Poland became an independent republic, for the first time in 123 years.

Away From The Front

By Sara Scott

My father's father was 29 years old when the first World War started, prospective soldiers were examined by a doctor and passed or failed as fit for active service. As a child my grandfather had survived mastoiditis, a serious infection of the mastoid bone located behind the ear lobe. The operation to remove the infection had left him with a hole behind his ear into his skull and deafness. Because of his hearing loss, he served in England as part of the Mechanical Transport Corps until 1917. My grandfather obtained his release from Army Duties in 1917 and converted his factory premises in Bournemouth to an engineering works capable of repairing used shell cases and enabling them to be re-used. In 1917 and 1918 his factory repaired over one million 4.5. Howitzer Cartridge cases. Explosives were used in vast quantities, packed into cartridge cases. Repair and re-use was an essential part of the war effort.

My mother's father was sent to the front line as an army lieutenant, but was captured by Germans almost as soon as he arrived at the front. His commanding officer sent him to another trench with a message not knowing the trench had been captured. He spent the rest of the war in an officer's prisoner of war camp, enjoying playing football. He told my mother it was 'the best time of his life'. After the war ended he was required to remain in the army, as he had not seen any active service. Emerging from the relative comfort of a prisoner of war camp he would have seen the aftermath of the terrible conflict in fields of graves marked by crosses and poppies.

Alpine Front

By Jolanta Jagiello

The Alpine Front, was the south-western front of precipitous slopes, sheer walls, rocky spurs, scree and canals which ran along approximately 600km of alpine territory at altitudes over 2000 metres. It was fought between Italian and Austro-Hungarian soldiers. In 1914-1915, the priority was on the transportation of: materials for the sappers - artillery weapons, explosives, water, provisions, and medical supplies to the emplacements in the high mountains. So that the sapper could construct huts, kitchens, latrines, communication trenches, fire trenches, and caves for the gunners by drilling and blasting their way through the rock.

During the winter 1916/1917 temperatures dropping to -30 degrees, the enemy attempted to annihilate the soldiers by setting off aimed avalanches as well as those that came down unexpectedly. Italian soldiers suffered heavy losses when an avalanche swept away numerous huts, buried their soldiers alive to freeze to their deaths. On the 3rd November 1918 the armistice was signed between the Allies and Austria-Hungary. The peace treaty of St. Germain on 10th September 1919 meant the territory had become part of the Italian state. Today, an Open-Air Museum called the Theatre of War Anderter Alpe commemorates the War on the Alpine Front.

No Man's Land

By Elisabeta Chojak-Mysko

No man's land represented the area of ground between opposing armies - in this case, between trenches. Newly arrived novice soldiers were cautioned against a natural inclination to peer over the parapet of the trench into No Man's Land. Many men died on their first day in the trenches as a consequence of a precisely aimed sniper's bullet. The area of No Man's Land scarcely varied although its width would vary widely from sector to sector, from one kilometre to as little as a few hundred yards (as at Vimy Ridge for example). In the latter instance troops would be able to overhear conversation from their opposing trenches or readily lob grenades into their midst.

During nightfall in No Man's Land each side would despatch parties to spy on the enemy, or to repair or extend barbed wire posts. Reconnaissance missions were similarly common. Injured men trapped in No Man's Land would often be brought in under cover of darkness, as were corpses for burial. Consequently artillery shelling of No Man's Land was common, quickly reducing it to a barren wasteland comprised of destroyed vegetation, mud-soaked craters - and rotting corpses marked by a stone and makeshift cross.