

The Great War 1914

The train hurtled into the night. The windows had been whitewashed to subdue any light from within the carriages and conceal the train in darkness: a forty-ton secret snaking towards the dawn. A celebratory mood reigned in the cars, replete with scenes of festivity and feasting. The recruits chatted excitedly like youngsters on the way to a holiday camp as the train rocked them gently from side to side. We had been chosen to take part in the Great Fight for Civilisation. We would bring our ideals to our oppressed neighbours, liberate them and inaugurate a new age in European civilisation. It was German culture and wisdom versus French superficiality and frivolity; Germany's idealistic heroes against England's avaricious materialists.¹

For six weeks we had practised saluting and marching, followed by three weeks of instruction in bayonet and rifle practise. Along with the other recruits of the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment, known as the List Regiment, we had sworn allegiance to Ludwig III, King of Bavaria, and to Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany. We were itching for our great and glorious adventure to begin. According to reports, our army had overrun Belgium and penetrated over one hundred miles into France. The French government had fled Paris. Our advance was unstoppable. It was now October, and the consensus was that we would be home by Christmas, decorated as heroes, perhaps sporting a battle scar or two that would merely enhance our sexual appeal. My comrades talked excitedly about the passion that the sight of a uniform and a scar aroused in women, confident that it would prove a man's willingness to defend his woman against any threat from a hostile world. There was only one fear we all shared: we worried that the war might end before we saw action.

We had been on the train for hours and rumours began to circulate about where we were; some said we had passed the Rhine long ago, while others believed we were heading to Ypres. Eventually the chatter in our coach peaked and then slowly wound down and dissipated as our anticipation exhausted us. The singing had died down,

¹See: Appendix 20, German Superiority

and most men were now dozing or sitting silently in the dark. Light from the lamps along the railway line shone intermittently through the whitewashed windows and flickers illuminated the faces of zombie-eyed men who couldn't sleep.

'I wish there was some way I could shoot this,' commented Frederick. 'This is quite unique, don't you think?'

'Yes,' agreed Dolferl. 'I was just wondering how to recreate this kind of atmosphere on stage.'

'The dramatist has an advantage there. All he needs is a pen.'

The folded tripod, the camera and his suitcase filled with heavy plates and chemicals penned Frederick in.

'One must take what one needs,' said Dolferl, philosophically, patting his backpack. 'I have my books.' He closed his eyes. 'They keep my body and mind together; especially Schopenhauer. His words help me withstand any pain, physical or spiritual.' He exhaled, deep in thought.

Men snored and the train rattled on in three / four time. It was curiously calming, this graceful mechanical waltz. Then a bell rang. Its peal was octaves higher than the clanking steel wheels, adding a counterpoint to the percussive sound of the train. Our corporal came walking down the aisle, shouting: 'Everyone get ready!'

The train whistle blew, signalling the approach to the station and calling to mind the squeal of the train the night I had taken Dolferl back from Dr Udrzal. My mind wandered to the flat cars transporting the ominous grey artillery.

Now it was happening. Our destiny was unfolding.

'Prepare to disembark!' shouted the corporal as he rang the bell.

We looked at each other. Was this it? The front line?

'We may have to change trains,' said Frederick.

'Maybe we can travel through as far as Paris,' said Dolferl, as if en route to the Louvre rather than the battlefield that lay in wait for him. For us.

'Perhaps we'll end up in Bordeaux,' said Frederick, always the gastronome, thinking of the region's exquisite wines.

The train's whistle wailed again. As the brakes were applied, the carriages rattled and Frederick threw one arm around his photographic equipment while his other hand gripped the seat. My feet pressed against the floor as the train shuddered to a halt, finally snapping us all backwards with one immense jolt. Rucksacks skidded under the seats, and boxes fell from the overhead rack.

'Everyone out on the double. Forward march!' ordered the corporal. He swung the bell, ringing it loudly. The men gathered their belongings and filed groggily into the centre aisle of the carriage. The door flew open and night air seeped into the train, moist and with the coolness of morning. The soldiers stretched their arms, arched their backs and yawned. Frederick's tripod rested on his shoulder alongside his rifle. His suitcase bumped against the seats as he made a staggering, erratic exit from the carriage.

'I'm so sorry,' he said to those behind, who were forced to stop and start continually as he struggled along. Eventually he navigated his way down the steps.

The soldiers piled out on to the platform, which was dimly lit by gas lanterns placed every few metres on its far side. In the midst of the soldiers hauling their belongings, Frederick remained oblivious to the commotion that surrounded him as corporals barked orders for the men to form orderly lines. Frederick heard none of that; instead, he stepped to the middle of the platform and positioned his tripod before quickly setting up his camera, pulling its front accordion section out. He was consumed with his mission: this was a moment not to be missed, creating a record of the soldiers' first step into the war zone. Frederick poured powder into the flash's horizontal groove. Then he stooped down under the black hood and looked through the lens. *Shoot before you think*. Camera verite. Soldiers shuffled back and forth in front of the door of the carriage. Dolferl and I had left the train and were standing in line further down the track. We turned and watched with incredulity at the gall of our friend. An unsuspecting private climbed down the steps and was greeted by the blinding explosion of light as the flash went off, casting a shadow from the girders above like the legs of an enormous spider. The disoriented man stumbled sideways, blinking as he tried desperately to regain his sight and overcome the shock.

'Great! Great!' shouted Frederick, congratulating himself on his first shot of the

war. 'The face of victory!'

http://www.younghitler.com/downloads/excerpts_novel/TheGreatWar_1914.pdf

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