

My THREE YEARS in RAT-INFESTED RUHLEBEN by Percy Brown

In the early months of the war the author was a free-lance photographer in the war zone and later became accredited to the London Graphic. After some hazardous adventures he was unfortunate enough to cross the German frontier inadvertently, was captured and threatened as a spy. He eventually spent most of his captivity at Ruhleben, of life at which civilian prison camp he here tells a highly entertaining story.

To me Ruhleben was a rest cure. Here time stood still, no days or weeks to portion off the indefinite stretch. If you happened to pass the Y.M.C.A building, Sunday was faintly marked by the devout droning of hymns, a pause, a shuffling of feet after a prayer, and then the slow exit of prisoners breaking off into groups to discuss the sermon, just as in any English village.

But there was also much to see inside and outside the barbed wire. Trains packed with soldiers and guns passed to Germany's several fronts every few moments, night and day, on the military railway which ran alongside the camp. The cheering troops decorated themselves and their guns with signs, 'Nach Paris,' 'Nach London,' and foliage from the country they had just been battering. No sign of foliage or gaiety was noticed after the second year. The troops sat silent and weary in the open trucks staring enviously at us in our guarded safety. Occasionally a trainload of British soldiers fresh from the Western Front cheered and shouted good news to us as they passed on their way to the terrible prison camps.

Thanks to the British Government and relatives we were the best fed prisoners. No matter how many ships were sunk we got our parcels. It is true one sailor was shocked when slicing a loaf of mouldy bread; he had cut through a nest of mice. But that was exceptional. The British Government installed bakeries in Holland, from which we received long loaves of white bread. We had everything which could be got into a can. Our industrious gardeners provided us with vegetables in season, such as tomatoes, onions, beans, cabbage, marrows and beetroot, and everyone, whether English, pro-German, or, in some cases, pure-German, could draw a dole from our government.

Ruhleben receives so much publicity it is no wonder that several of the interned already regarded themselves as war heroes. We had only to read the English newspapers smuggled into the camp at three pounds a copy to find how we were suffering 'The Horrors and Tortures' of Ruhleben. It was in procuring these newspapers that I met the first 'hardship.' When in Stadvogtei (a Berlin prison), although it was against the rules, we had only to put what we wanted- be it newspapers, meat, eggs, coffee, whisky, kitchen and photographic equipment- on a list for the soldier warder, who bought everything at the catalogue price. Here, although we could buy useful stuff, such as mirrors, paper, shaving-tackle and vegetables in season, certain things were barred. Liquor was rigidly banned, except for the imitation beer obtained in the Casino and the wine sold at profiteering prices by one of the German officers. So in Ruhleben, as in America, prohibition created a racket...

Owing to the crowded state of the stables, wooden barracks were built to house late-comers. I wangled my way into one of these and joined space with a lace-machine maker from St. Quentin, Jerry Lane. After six weeks in hiding he had been arrested and sent to Wittenburg prison camp. We set up house in earnest.

‘Let’s make the best of the holiday. We shall have to go back to work soon enough,’ said Jerry.

On our allotted space of six feet by seven we built a kind of room which could be opened in day-time and closed at night. At meal-times the bunks were seats. Everything folded away. To cope with the camp thieves- they were few but very clever- I built secret drawers and cupboards which no one could open but ourselves. We were unlucky in not getting a space under a window, but were near the stove, on which Jerry cooked some of the meals I prepared. It is wonderful what variations can be got with bully beef, rice, onions, potatoes and meat tablets. Joe, a Kru ‘boy’ of sixty years, who had been rescued from a torpedoed ship, washed up and made delicious curry for us...

We had one serious shortage of food caused by the sinking of ships. Even the bread from Holland did not arrive, and hardly anything remained in our cupboards. The merchants charged famine prices for hoarded food. Jerry searched every corner of our stores for soup tablets, and any forgotten oddments. He could cook anything, and made a delicious dish of fried biscuits and sardines. He was becoming reconciled to the German rations, which, he said, were as satisfying as none at all, when Jim Doe clattered into the barrack saying that my name was on the parcel list. Jerry was away straight off the mark. In five minutes he came galloping back with a parcel and spread the contents on the table, carefully putting away everything but bacon and biscuits. As he searched the shavings for meat cubes and other small objects he found a piece of cheese and a tiny tin of meat essence.

We would have bacon and cheese he said. He made a fire with part of the outside door, as fuel, too, was scarce. The door was rarely used anyway, he said. Jerry was in his element again as he greased the pan carefully and tortured our appetites with the smell of bacon frying. Leaving the hot fat in the pan he forked out the lovely rashers on to a plate to keep warm. Then he cut up the cheese and laid it in the hot fat. But it would not sizzle. Something pulled down the corners of Jerry’s mouth. He stoked up the fire and moved the pieces about in the pan. A vile stink crept through the barrack. What Jerry was trying to fry was a piece of soap!

Seeing there was a big demand for smuggled liquor sold by prison bootleggers to the fighting gang who filled the cells, a German officer opened a wine bar under the main grandstand. He sold good wine at fourpence a glass and made money. So good and so comforting was the wine that the wine line became a popular rendezvous, with a queue of customers several times longer than any other of Ruhleben’s many queues. Here one could hear the latest rumours, scandal and war news.

Then the price was raised to sixpence a glass. The gang lined up, well behaved, for the wine was still wholesome and cheering. The demand became so large that the queue became a full circle. As the demand increased so did the price, until the fourpenny glass now cost three shillings and ninepence. And that price was the peak, for the queue shortened. Jerry and I dropped out at two shillings a glass. Only the rich and the rough-necks remained. It was a curious sight to see well-groomed British merchants taking wine with some of the meanest thugs who ever stole a sick prisoner’s parcel.

Many of the gang bought their wine with money made by selling presents from old ladies at home who had adopted what they thought were lonely destitute prisoners. Each man could get himself adopted by as many senders as he cared to write to. Lists of good-natured people were sent to the camp which the gang exploited, and they also got their names on every charitable society list. The scandal grew until one man got as many as thirty parcels a day. Then a central parcels committee took control, and no

matter how many parcels were sent to rich and crafty prisoners, everyone received exactly the same amount...

One morning during a talk in the grandstand and extraordinary thing happened right in front of us. My engineer friends had toyed with the idea of causing an explosion in the tremendous Spandau munition works and those along the Havel in the Gatow and Kladow district. Once started the lot would detonate from concussion, they said. It would cost only one of our lives to destroy ten thousand German and millions of munitions, and perhaps cause the war to end.

Well, one sunny morning our huge grandstand was lifted as if by an earthquake and then it sat down with a crash. Cracks shot across the large plate-glass wings as in new, unspoilt ice. Allied airman were bombing Germany, it was said. After the first shock we watched the smoke become a tremendous grey wall six miles long. All that day one explosion followed another. We never knew the cause, but we liked to think it had to do with us. We heard that an area of six square miles had been devastated and thousands of munition workers killed. We got no exact news, but could gauge the extent of the damage by the troubled faces of the officers.

One of the funniest incidents in Ruhleben happened when the camp was punished for a trivial offence. So serious was the matter to the Germans that high officers from the German war office made a field day of it and arrived in military cars wearing their best clothes, orders, medals, spurs and swords. The camp had been warned overnight by the 'captains' to parade on the course at eleven.

Imagine four thousand rushing, laughing prisoners on the promenade making for a narrow passage leading across the tennis courts to the racecourse. Into this they pressed to come out at the other end a machined ribbon of humanity, shepherded into tiny ranks forming a large square by the 'captains' and the camp police.

The irrepressibles were subdued and the scene set. The high officers and their aides appeared and strutted leisurely on to the racecourse to take up their positions in the centre.

At first there was a drum-head service silence broken only in the distance by machine-guns and the clang of structural steel from the factories around us. The officers chatted and lingered over the preliminaries, as all officers do when a crowd must wait their pleasure. They ranged themselves in attitudes of respectful attention lit up by their glittering equipment which heliographed the dazzling sunlight.

The great one was signalled. We saw him arriving, badly managing his sword. He represented the All Highest, at least in Germany, and glanced fiercely at the silent, expectant crowd. His aide-de-camp handed him the notes of his speech in admonition. He stepped out a few paces so that we could all hear his metallic voice, already affected by the quaver of senility, to deliver a message calculated to make the prisoners shiver with fright.

The scene was shattered by a tiny detail. The general was wearing a goatee. As he was taking his stance and his breath to make an arresting opening, there came piercing that dramatic silence the plaintive bleat of a goat. Our 'captains' became rigidly observant and 'shushed' us. But the cry was repeated and taken up by others, the air becoming vibrant with plaintive bleats.

Not a muscle moved in the faces of the prisoners, yet stronger and stronger grew the volume until the air was full of cries. The little beard waggled angrily. The general shut his mouth and turned to his startled suite. What was to be done? What could be done? Shoot the lot? That impressive strafe was a flop.

The chief actors, resplendent in their military glory, conferred and called the 'captains.' These did their best, but they had no control. The neat tidy ranks of

prisoners melted into a mob. The general and his party retired to their car, and the prisoners went back to their hobbies and occupations unrepentant.

Another funny occasion was after the baron had made a speech and gloated about German victories and British losses. He received a 'raspberry' from the sailor who cut down the Prussian Eagle and sent it fluttering into the mud of 'Trafalgar Square.'

For this the German War Office sentenced the whole camp to a week's C.B. Vey well, then, said the camp, reprisals! The word went round. We would all turn out for rations which the Germans were supposed to provide. Instead of collecting just the potatoes, the only useful food provided by the Germans, every man would march to the kitchens to demand full rations never yet provided. Instead of a few hundred there were four thousand.

The officers gaped at the march to the kitchens. There was something symbolic and sinister, so extra armed guards were put on to shepherd us to the kitchens. Barrack Four marched to the tune of a lewd chant. We had only gone a few yards when the guards rushed to the head of the column to suppress the chant. It broke afresh in the middle. The guards rushed at it again. They had to make a show, for their officers were watching. They stormed at us and suppressed it only to hear it break out again in full blast at the end, to which they rushed with shouts and threats.

There was almost silence for a few moments except for the steady tramp of feet. As we passed the flag mast, where the officers had seen their emblem insulted, the chant broke out afresh at the front and the whole column took it up to the beat of the dinner cans. The guards darted about like dogs at a fair, but to no purpose, for every man sung as if his life depended on it. The Baron watched and muttered to himself.

'Oh, these bloody Britishers, they'll be the death of me.'
He died shortly after Ruhleben broke up.

When I wanted a change I joined Jim Doe in his barracks, that of the coloured men, the happiest and cleanest in the camp. Most of the coloured men played, sang and danced. Their life was a continuous concert. Every kind of instrument was there.

Near the door were Mendigoes and Foolabs, whose King, Hundo of Abome, boasted a bodyguard of a thousand Amazons. They played haunted, plaintive melodies on large and small instruments, some grotesque, the cases of which were slung in the rafters of the barracks.

West Indians and Malays played lullabies in undertones, quiet, soothing music with no banging or discord. In the centre of the barracks was a laughing laundry firm of five Africans. As they ironed out the wash they hummed lifting spirituals to the strokes of the irons. At the back entrance our cobbler danced a queer rhythmic dance to the singing tone of the ukulele while half a dozen customers waited patiently for their clogs...

Looking on were contemplative Arabs, powerful Vaes with Indians profiles, and a group of bearded Indians of high caste. They felt their position keenly, being bundled into internment with Negroes and half-breeds...

Disputes were rare in the coloured barracks. If a young Negro became overheated in the wine line, the old men would calm him and tell him to keep out of the white men's troubles. Some did not care who won the war as long as it was finished quickly and they could go back to their own hot climates.

Meanwhile, they looked after their health. Several had their native herbal medicines sent by relatives all the way from their native countries. They made regular use of the bath-houses, being very particular about their skins, which they scrubbed

and rubbed with oils. One dark winter mornings their bronze bodies were invisible to us until they had covered themselves with foaming lather which made them look like ghosts. Then with a laugh they would turn on their ice-cold shower and stand rubbing themselves until every trace of soap was washed away.

The only plague which threatened us was rats. Hunger drove them from Berlin, and scores could be seen near the parcel vans scenting the bacon. We had a colony of big dark brutes under our barracks. They ate holes in the floor between the beds. We did not worry about them but listened to their gnawings and squeaks.

By the dim light we could make out their shadowy bodies about the floor. They seemed to work with a human understanding. One worked below the boards and another from above. Jerry had had experience of rat plague in the north of France. He said if the camp was not cleared of the pests they would breed so fast they would eat us alive after they had finished our food. Jerry said they talked. Rats passed the word from colony to colony during famines, which takes some believing!

One night I woke with a start. Someone had put a finger on my face, I thought. I could see nothing, but heard the usual noises of the rats. In the morning when Jerry went to the cupboard for the bacon, it was missing, also a big piece of cheese. I suspected thieves, but he assured me that a team of rats could remove articles bigger than themselves. We boarded up the hole, but it was gnawed away again.

Our most precious food, the occasional eggs, also disappeared. A rat as big as a rabbit ran along the top of Jerry's bunk, showed his teeth and dived into the darkness. The pests began to worry us. As they increased they became savage and determined, not vanishing when seen. In fact they glared at us hungrily.

Our saviour was Dr. Jephson, who got permission for the prisoners to own dogs. He organized a rat hunt. All sorts of dogs and men turned out and joined Jephson. He went to the root of the trouble. Attached to every barrack was a refuse-bin about thirty feet long, which made safe cover for the pests. A gang was put to work to dig out the accumulated refuse. More than a score of big rats were killed in the first half-hour. The brutes screamed and fought back fiercely, and several dogs were withdrawn from the hunt.

Every bit of cover was removed and disinfectant placed on the floor. This was done with the bins of the twenty-odd barracks. Hundreds of rats were killed during a campaign lasting weeks. Not until half the camp had been hunted did the rats seem to decrease. When the bins and drains were clear the rats were seen to lurk outside the wire waiting for night. Jephson went further and got permission to take the pack outside to hunt the area round the camp. Finally, after weeks of systematic searching, he destroyed the enemy.

But officially the plague persisted. Long after we had seen the last rat the doctor continued his meets, which started in 'Bond Street,' our shopping street. The hunt grew, men and dogs, now that the operations went outside the camp. There were wonderful drives into the neighbourhood, of course accompanied by armed guards, who also developed an enthusiasm for rat hunting. There were lots of things to do once out of sight of the windows of the offices. Rats became very scarce and it was a job to show results. When a few were caught some had to be kept back for slack days. In fact, when things were very bad we had to buy a few rats to keep the hunt going. When the doctor began to include Charlottenburg, a mile away, in his drives, and the crowd of hunt followers increased, the authorities judged that the danger was past and cancelled the permits.

One day word came from the kitchens that there was steak for dinner! Jockeys, professors, travellers, teachers, carpenters, footballers and golfers, music-hall artists

and musicians gathered in groups to discuss the news, steak for dinner! Mind you, this was the third year of the war. Some prisoners had never drawn any rations, but steak! Yes, we would all go up for that.

We marched to the kitchens in barrack formation and certainly collected a piece of meat each. And the meat tasted good. That evening several were taken ill. By ten o'clock half the camp had made the journey to 'Spandau' in acute agony. At midnight the place was crowded and in filthy overflow. Men sitting at their tables were suddenly taken short in terrible agony, and had to race away, only to collapse on the way to the lavatories. Their box-mates had to carry them to the bath-houses to be washed and have their clothes changed.

I was sitting in my bunk thinking how lucky I was when it seemed as if something tugged at my intestines. I ran- too late. I collapsed among scores of writhing and groaning men on the ground. Some lay still, too ill to move. The stench was terrible.

That steak caused a three days epidemic of dysentery and left us as feeble as kittens. A large shipment of meat had been condemned by the Berlin sanitary authorities. So that it would not be wasted it was rationed to Ruhleben. It was a miracle that no more than three died. The occasion brought out the best from those unaffected. They washed and changed the clothes of the victims night and ay until the epidemic had spent itself, the most unpleasant job one man could do for another.