Diary of a Prisoner in World War I

2nd revised edition

by Josef Šrámek

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Editor's Notes

The following text contains parts that can be understood as dishonoring a race or a nation or a religion. These statements have been retained in order to preserve the historical authenticity of the text. They do not express the opinion of any living person, do not pertain to any living person or group, and do not pertain to contemporary events.

I have tried to find translations of foreign words used in the diary and put them in footnotes. However some words and place names still escape me. Should you have any additional understanding of terms used in this book please write me to tomas@svoboda.com .

I will be happy to hear from you anyway if you have anything to say about the story. And if you have bought the book online please be kind enough to provide a customer review.

Foreword

My grandfather, Josef Šrámek, was born on October 26.1892 and died on February 3.1984. During his life he experienced situations most of us cannot even begin to imagine.

At the age of 22 he was drafted to fight in the First World War. At that age most of us care only about entertainment; we're just barely beginning to understand history and society. Even a brief, peaceful military service would be considered harmful, any reduction of our current undeserved lifestyle an injustice.

Soon after he was forced to enter the military, my grandfather became acquainted with

- hunger, cold, and death
- people who upon encounter with death turned into animals. Some of them turned into predators, some into cattle to be slaughtered
- situations where sheer chance made the difference between life and death
- disease which meant death in absence of any help
- hundreds of days his chances of survival were near zero
- throwing away all he believed in , escaping his duty and accepting enemy imprisonment as the only rational life-saving solution

However, even during the worst times, he kept writing in his diary. He saved it even when, as a prisoner in quarantine, he was stripped naked and left with nothing but his memories. Thanks to this book, we can take part in his experience today.

I take it as my responsibility to spread the word about my grandfather's dreadful experience. We also have our problems today, and they're not necessarily small ones. But this diary can help us realize there may be situations that are much worse than ours. It may even teach us to take joy in what we have. That is my ultimate wish as I prepare this publication.

Tomáš Svoboda

My grandpa and me in 1962.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Rainer Pauli for permission to use several precious photos from his archive.

Thanks also to the anonymous translator who began work on the first English version of this diary.

And big thanks to E* who does not want to be mentioned ☺

Introduction and historical context

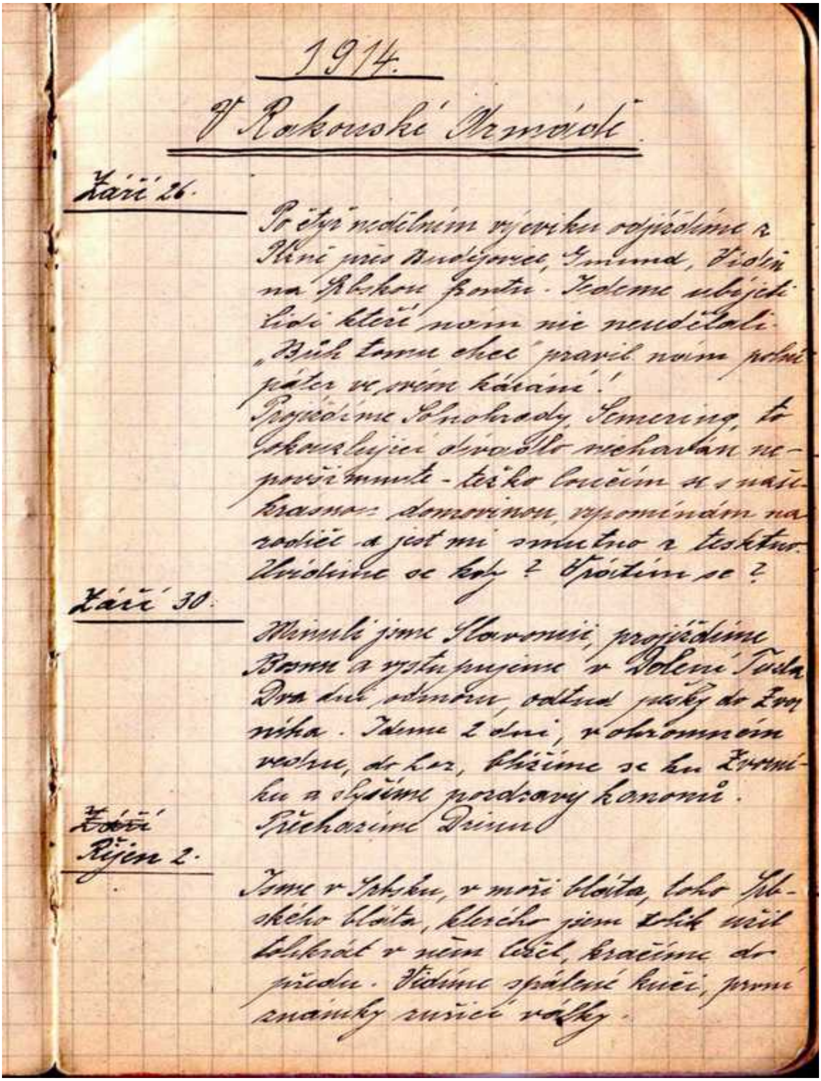
At the beginning of 20th century Europe was fragmented into a number of states which were remains of former feudal establishment and were heplessly out of date with the new trends of capitalist economy and national emancipation.

One very large of these states was the Hungaro-Austrian monarchy where the two leading nations were holding in subordinance other nations including Czechs. In 1914 there has been a well established Czech national movement due to which Czechs' loyalties belonged more to their subdued nation than to their Hungaro-Austrian state.

One of these Czechs was my grandfather Josef Šrámek. He was a boy working for a textile distribution company owned by Jewish partners Kohn & Kornfeld. He must have been quite good at trading and accounting as is reflected in wide use of numerals in his diary.

Then in 1914 came the irrational beginning of World War – a huge conflict that no one wanted and no one could really explain why it started. The Czechs were dragged into the war unwillingly and unmotivated because it was Austria's war, not theirs. The usual practice at that time was to draft young men into the military with no respect for their individual or national or ethnic opinions. This was very similar to a prison system in many respects. Civil disobedience has not been invented yet so most[1] had no choice but to enter the military. This is what happened to my grandfather and this is where his diary starts.

1 A family legend says that Josef's brother avoided the military by blinding himself using a chemical.



1914.

V Rakouské Armádě.

Září 26.

Po čtyřnedělním výcviku odjíždíme z Plzně přes Budějovice, Gmünd, Vídeň na Srbskou frontu. Jedeme zabíjeti lidi kteří nám nic neudělali. „Bůh tomu chce" pravil nám polní páter ve svém kázání!
Projíždíme Solnohrady, Semering, to pokouzlující divadlo nechává mne nepovšimnuté - těžko loučím se s naší krásnou domovinou, vzpomínám na rodiče a jest mi smutno a teskno. Uvidíme se kdy? Vrátím se?

Září 30.

Minuli jsme Slavonii, projíždíme Bosnu a vystupujeme v Dolní Tuzle. Dva dni odpočinku, odtud pěšky do Zvorníka. Jdeme 2 dni, v ohromném vedru, do hor, blížíme se ku Zvorníku a slyšíme pozdravy kanonů. Přecházíme Drinu.

~~Září~~ Říjen 2.

Jsme v Srbsku, v moři bláta, toho Srbského bláta, kterého jsem tolik užil tolikrát v něm ležel, kráčíme do předu. Vidíme spálené kuče, první známky zuřící války.

First page of the diary

Austrian Army *-1914*

September 26, 1914
Having passed a four-week training[2], we are leaving[3] Plzeň [Pilsen] for Budějovice [Budweiss][4], Gmund, and Vienna[5] to the Serb front. We are going to kill people who have done us no wrong. "It is God's will," said the army chaplain in his sermon!

Passing through Salzburg, Semmering, I am leaving this charming sight *of a foreign country* unnoticed. It is hard for me to part with our beautiful homeland. I am thinking of my parents and feeling sad. Shall we ever see each other again? Will I come back alive?


Josef Šrámek in 1914

September 30
We passed Slovenia, then Bosnia, and now we are getting off in Doleni Tuzla. Two days' rest, then we marched to Zvornik. We walked to the mountains in terrible heat for 2 days. When we approached Zvornik we heard the guns' salutes. We crossed the Drina River.

2 Military boot-camp
3 Probably by train
4 Within the Czech homeland a.k.a. Bohemia
5 In Austria – for the author a foreign colonizing state

October 2
Now we are in Serbia. It's a sea of mud—that Serb mud I've gotten to know so well while lying in it. We are walking forward. We see burnt *kutchas* [*cottages*], the initial signs of raging war.

October 5
Having wandered hopelessly without food and bread for 3 days, we found our battalion today. It is located 6 hours from Zvornik, and it took us a full 3 days to get here! Warm welcome—everybody found somebody they knew—but I am alone here! Met Capt. Jupa, he's from somewhere near Unhost. A nice man. He's bringing in bread at a time of shortage and hunger. Snow and rain, and we do exercises.

October 8
Building *deckung* [shelter] in mud and water; I sleep in water pools. The water has flooded our dwelling. We are building a new one on a hill. It rains hard every day.

October 10
We patrolled, walking for 4 hours; we could barely get there, and now we must get back. I stayed behind. I got back in the morning, and the battalion was about to move, so I followed slowly behind. I cannot go any farther. I am out of strength. I follow my battalion for 3 days, eating and sleeping with the regiments I meet.

October 13
I found my battalion in new trenches at the verge of a forest today. Hunger every day, too little bread available. Dysentery is spreading is among us. A portion of bread costs 3 crowns. Jupa furnishes me with bread from the kitchen. I am expecting packages from home - in vain—*feldwebels*[6] stole them. The same happens to rum and wine! Officers are drunk. They push us around and beat us with sticks.

October 15
We exercise "*Marsch einz*" [March] daily while our stomachs rumble. We are still in reserve. What will it be like when we are at the front? I write letters home and to Ústí [7] often, but I seldom get a letter.

Being in the army is getting tougher day by day. One is hungry so he eats a canned meal —so they tie him to a post for twelve hours, and he has to pay a 3 crown fine. The officers are drunk every day! We even lack water.

October 19
We were in the middle of our march when shrapnel started to hit us, so we ran away. Dysentery is on its way. So are the first lice. Patrols are getting tougher—we are expecting Serbs. My deckung is safe, but what if I have to go out?

6 Sergeants.
7 Ústí nad Labem – author's city of residence

October 24
Serbs killed our corporal while he was on patrol. Beautiful weather. Jupa went shopping to Zvornik so we are now bargaining with tobacco, chocolate, etc.

November 2
We were attacked at night. The Serbs assaulted us—but failed. Our officers were hidden like rats. I was lucky—a bullet went in through the loophole[8] just by my head. The next night there was another attack, a heavier one. It is getting tough. A control wire leads from my trench to a bomb. Patrolling in the forest at night, the enemy was some 300 meters away from us!

November 5
Forward! This morning at 5 we put our bayonets on and scrambled to attack. At 8 we hit the Serbs, and there was a scramble. They are well-hidden in corn and blow us away with their machine guns. 32 people out of my platoon of 56 men are hurt or dead. My hat caught a bullet when I raised my head carelessly. At last the Serbs retreated in the afternoon, but their artillery played some music for us. I'm spending the night in a hole dug just so-so. My friend Šimeček was hit by a bullet in his neck.

November 6
Getting up all freezing, marching on, eating in the forest, and shrapnel hit us. The major and the captain are hurt. Marching on, we got into

8 Opening in fortification to shoot through

a real bullet rain. A bullet missed my head but hit my coat. I counted 23 holes in it. We stay in Serb trenches.

November 7
We entered Krupanja and patrolled the entrance to the town. We cooked hens. The artillery is going toward Valyevo, which still endures. With great enthusiasm we think we have now won the war; there are even some prophets saying we will be home by Christmas. After all that's what Wilhelm the Almighty[9] said !

November 13
Going to Zavlaka, doing a parade in front of the corps leader at night. Me and cadet Brejnik go to patrol in the hills. We are covered with snow by the morning. It's freezing. We find half of a pig and cabbage—we are cooking. We stay in the kutchas and eat dried plums.

November 16
Back to the camp. There are many prisoners in there—we are taking 1300 of them to Lozhnica. It was terribly muddy on the way back so I stayed in a kutcha overnight. I went to Zavlaka the next morning and found the village covered by water. The hard rain, and maybe the Serbs too, caused the flood. Our train and the bakeries are underwater. The battalion is gone, and I am in the water, which reaches up to my waist, for an hour-long

9 Wilhelm II, German emperor, ally of the Hungaro-Austrian empire

journey. I am looking for the battalion. I have plenty of time.

November 21
After 3 days I finally caught my battalion in Valyevo. I didn't have a bad time on my way there. When the night was about to come, we [the batallion] found a kutcha, killed a sheep, and roasted it. When we left Valyevo, it was freezing and snowing. We slept in the fields—hungry, freezing, exhausted. Going on patrol, I was caught in a rain of grenades.
Miraculously I survived.

We are pretty near the Serbs who occupy the hills. Scrambles on patrol are our daily job. No bread—there is one portion for ten men. We stay without meals for 3 days, and the soup has not been salted for a month.
Searching for food all around—anything goes, mostly apples and plums.

November 27
Progressing in snow that is up to our knees. We reached the hills that the Serbs defended so tenaciously. A dead Serb is in every trench; they are frozen. Repeated scrambles. We progress as well as retreat every day. We are hungry while the Hungarian soldiers[10] near us have bags full of meat.

10 Their allies within the Hungaro-Austrian empire

December 1
Something is going on. I think we will run away. We are here as the "*rückzugbedeckung*."[11] We lie in the snow, hungry every day. It is really strange that I have been escaping an injury or death so far.

December 6
It is all in vain! We've been firing for the 4th day now. The Serbs are all around. For 4 days now, we've had no food, no officers, and we've kept the last hill. Today I was in a real rain of bullets 3 times. The unit is destroyed; each of us has run a different direction. Grenades crackle in the snow around me. I am dead tired. At night I sit at the fire with the Hungarians.

Suddenly the Serbs were here: "*Bacaj puški*!"[Drop your guns.] I was taken prisoner. The Serbs robbed us immediately. I didn't want to give them my bag. A Serb hit me with the butt end of his gun, and I fell down. Then the Serb artillery came in, and I was saved.

11 Defense on the retreat.

Serbian Captivity 1915. 5

December 9
Kraguyevats! It took three 3 days to get there, and they were filled with trouble. The first thing our brothers the Serbs did was take off our coats and put them on themselves. The same with our shoes. All that had any value—underwear, blankets, watches, money—everything comes in handy for them. All we ate in three days was 3 halves of a bread loaf. We slept on the snow the first two nights and saw the first swamps.

December 12

We arrived at Skoplye today. We'd been crammed in boxcars for 3 days and 3 nights, not even able to sit down. First they took us there and back, all over the town, and then they gave each of us one loaf and a piece of bacon, and that was it! The journey was terrible. It was there that I caught lice for the first time—that Serb specialty no one can escape. I could not get rid of them all the time I was in Serbia.

December 15
We have our lodging now. It is a former stable that's too bad for cattle but good enough for the "*Schwabs*[12]." There are several thousand of us crammed in here. Food is the same all

12 Peiorative name for Austrians - sounds like insects in Czech

the time—cabbage soup and mutton. I am writing my first postcard home. No work so far. The weather here is beautiful, like in May back home.

December 20
Diseases spread among us—typhus and dysentery. More and more people die every day. Bad food, foul water, and dirt are to blame. They forbid us to drink the water but there is nothing else. The soup is all pepper. The lice proliferate. We cannot wash clothes as there is nowhere to do so, to say nothing about drying. So, instead of picking the lice out, I brush them away. They're everywhere—in shirts, socks, blouses, coats, and hats. You can find them in your hair, your beard—simply everywhere. If you find 150 of them in your shirt, it's not so many! If you pick them all one day, you're full of them the next morning again.

We lie on the ground. There is no straw, and we must not lie on our backs but only on our sides as there is no room. It's worst at night—whoever goes out cannot get through and stomps on feet or heads. *Batina*[13] rules here. You get hit with a fist or stick for nothing, and if you can get away soon, good for you. The almighty master here is Captain Dogič, a true animal. "I am your God. I can kill you" is his favorite proverb. And our feldwebels, the Croats and the Bosnians, help him bravely, hitting everyone they meet.

13 Bullying.

December 24

Christmas Eve. How many memories run through my head! What a difference between now and a year ago! What are my parents doing at this moment? It is getting dark, and I am lying on my elevated bed (I sleep in a trough). I got in here to avoid the dirt and the lice, which cannot get in here so easily. I am recalling my homeland. My Christmas Eve dinner is a few apples and one dinar's worth of chocolate. And there are many here who don't have even that. All is quiet—perhaps everyone is thinking. If there were more light, I could see a tear in many an eye! We are so sad at heart. I am listening—there, in the corner, the 102nd Regiment starts to sing "Where Is My Home."[14] Everyone is trembling. Other voices join in, and our sty resounds with a sublime song, illustrating our feelings! Deep silence—and then a carol. And then silence again. Everybody is recalling. There is supper, and then everybody gets ready for the midnight mass. Many of those who have not prayed in a long time are now praying to the one who gave the world peace, asking for peace soon and that they may return happily! Will this ever be?

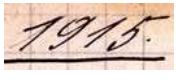
December 27

Christmas is over. On Christmas Day I worked all day and fasted. My whole lunch was a bit of cheese and bread. We work every day, doing various things. We go to the station, to building sites, to clean, dig, press hay, or build roads. Our jailkeepers drive us out to

14 Later to become the Czech national anthem.

the courtyard at half past five in the morning. There we stand in the rain and cold for an hour. Most of us are barefoot. Dogič walks by with his stick. Our feldwebels and gendarmes divide us into teams. At last all are divided. But not much work gets done. Those who work on the roads end up searching for lice; those who pass through the town tend to disappear — some go drinking at a cafe, some go to make money, some go begging. When the guard arrives at the station with 80 people out of 300, he swears: "I fuck their *Schwabish* mother in the ass." And that's it. They could never count us all, even if we were to be here for the next five years.

December 31
The last day of the year. The devil may take this year—it has dealt us badly. Recalling how nicely we welcomed it, I think it was in Krásné Březno[15] at the Czech House. I am mad!



January 1
New year, what news do you bring? The beginning of the year was pretty bad—I carried sacks at the station all day. I could not slip away.

January 5
I am sick. I have fever, cannot eat anything. I just want to drink but this water is deadly. I am lying on the ground like a dog. Nobody cares, nobody notices. I am not alone—more

15 Town near Ústí nad Labem

than half of the men are lying here too. Epidemic. And the town is not better off! Hospitals are overfilled, there are no doctors, and the prisoners—who have never even treated a sick person—are the nurses. They are masterful in robbing the sick!

January 10
I feel better, so I can walk again. I was commanded out to work today. I was to drag flour sacks, but I was barely able to walk. I asked for an examination. They lined us up in the yard. Dogič came around with his stick, and the examination began: "What's the matter with you?" "My head hurts." "Your cunt..." And the stick danced on his back. The rest of us did not wait, and the examination was over.

January 14
The first postcard from home. Karel wrote: "Daddy is glad that you are out of danger." If only he knew what dangers are here. Hundreds of prisoners die daily in the worst dirt. There are so many lice I cannot stand it anymore. I haven't washed my shirt for a month. In hospitals, people die helpless; here we have no doctors, no medicine, no beds, no food.

January 17
More news about peace. The shortage is getting worse. There is no bread; when there is, sometimes it is purple and sometimes it is yellow. We've had no meals for 6 days now—first there was no wood, then there was no

water, and now there is no meat. I am waiting for money from home, but it is in vain—the officers here steal everything.

January 23
I work every day. We get damson cheese instead of meals, and there are beatings every day. There is no prison here, and trials are wonderfully easy: “25 blows on the butt, is the usual sentence. Those who are beaten stay marked for several days.

January 28
The epidemic is peaking. Our crammed sties got terribly empty—more than half of the men moved beyond that white wall. Men who are full of life in the evening cannot get up in the morning.

February 5
A Greek countess visited us and brought us boxes of underwear, sugar, and tea. I got a shirt, 2 handkerchiefs, and some sugar. We press hay, and I drive oxen. Now and then I get a postcard from home, but the deliveries are bad.

February 14
I was commanded to work at the hospital as a nurse, but when I saw the mess there I ran away. Here in Skoplye just a handful of us prisoners were left out of 1200. Again several days with no meals, just some spoiled cheese and damson cheese for lunch.

February 26
We left Skoplye for Djevdjekia. It is on the very border with Greece, on the track that goes Nish-Skoplye-Salonica. There are 15 of us, and we are assigned to be nurses. The town is nice, and there are Turks, Bulgarians, Greeks, etc. The weather is lovely. There are about 500 Austrians serving within an American medicinal mission. Some of them are enjoying a golden age; the Americans have brought just about everything—underwear, medication, beds, food cans, sugar, tea, kerosene, boots. Everything.
They are putting everything in order, setting up hospitals, and separating the injured from the typhus-infected.

February 28
I work as a nurse. The hospital is a former Turkish state store, an enormous building of 5 floors. I was assigned *to department* Soba VI. There are 5 of us as nurses serving more than 80 people who are sick with typhus. I shudder to look at them. The majority of them are Serbs, thin recruits with frostbitten legs. They lie on mattresses on the ground, in dirt like I have never seen in my life. They cannot walk, and the toilets are too far anyway. The ceiling is made of planks so it's dripping and running upon them from above. It's hell. 6 or 8 of them die every day, and others take their places.

The lice seem to move the entire building. There is no medication. A doctor comes once every in 3 days. We have a lot to do. We carry meals and divide them, clean the rooms, carry

water (to the 3rd floor), and apply compresses. I don't know how long I can take it. We must be on duty and apply compresses at night too. And all you get for that toil is swearing. All you hear all day every day is just swearing. "*Yebat*!"[16] The Croats and Bosnians rob the dead and search them—I would not touch them even if they had thousands on them. They immediately sell the clothes and shoes they take off the dead.

March 2
I have a fever—39°C—but I keep on working as I am afraid to lie down. Few of those who lie down can get up again.

March 22
Finally I came around again. I don't know what was going on with me for 20 days. They say I could not accept anything for 7 days; later I could only accept tea and milk. My fever reached 41°C. I got a grip on myself slowly. I did not know where I was or what my name was. I am still too weak to stand up.

March 25
I am slowly regaining power and hunger. I could eat five times as much as they give me. In the meantime someone stole my uniform and coat, so I am naked. They also stole my wallet. I had my letters and about 4 crowns in it. I saw the wallet with one of the Serbs, but when I demanded it he hit me. I am so hungry and penniless. I spent my last 2 dinars on bread, roasted meat, and wine.

16 Fuck.

March 28
Today I was dismissed from the hospital and sent to the headquarters. A harsh wind came, and the feet of the sick in the hospital got frostbitten.

April 4
I'm a nurse in Hotel Magasin, an old Turkish tobacco store. Here there are just the injured or frostbitten. The order here is much better. The Americans and our fellows manage it. There is a lot to do, but enough food too. I like it here. Figs are blossoming out in our garden.

An incomplete article from Samostatnost *("*Independence*"), dated February 15, 1918, is inserted here. It is as follows:*

> *There were no weapons, no ammunition, no clothes or sanitary aids. The lack of means of communication caused bad food deliveries. The result was that we ran from the larger centers, where people were really friendly to us, to the newly won countries of Serbia where most people, although they were good in their hearts and hospitable as true Slavs, did not understand our rebellion*[17] *the way it*

17 Rebellion of Czechs and other slavic minorities against the Hungaro-Austrian empire

deserved to be understood due to their ignorance. Only the lucky ones could join the heroic defenders of the still endangered small homeland of Serbia. And then, at our heels, the terrible typhus epidemic crawled to Serbia. So many Czech heads and hands helped in insufficient hospitals in Serbia to beat this vigorous enemy. And the reason, why hundreds and thousands of our boys died along with those who faced the insidious disease with superhuman zeal but insufficient means, was that they fulfilled their helping duty with true understanding, self-sacrifice and love in the harsh Balkan conditions. Small wooden crosses on Serb cemeteries are aching memorials of those terrible times; but this sublime effort and work of ours so endeared us to...

The rest is missing.

April 20

The Americans left, and Dr. Borssitch took over the hospital. There was a massive alarm —the Bulgarians assaulted the Serb corps near Strumtets. They killed many. The

inhabitants move out for fear of the Bulgarians. We receive a full train of injured soldiers in terrible condition! All covered with blood, unconscious, dying. We have been bandaging and washing all night and all day. Many of them died the very first night, some are in agony, some are wounded horribly. One was stabbed by a bayonet 16 times. The Bulgarians were like animals.

April 26
Now we are taking care of the wounded only; those with fever are moved to the other hospital. I am well off now. We have an abundance of everything, including milk, tea, and eggs. I seldom receive anything from home. I am still looking forward to this situation ending soon—and, meanwhile, newspapers say Italy has declared war.

April 30
The new Serb *sobar*[18] started off rough but slackened soon. I discovered his dirty deals, and now he has to be quiet. I met Sergeant Roubík. The first batch of prisoners is leaving to build the railway to Knyezhevats. Then we all will leave.

May 5
I am leaving Djevdekiya for Nish to build the railway. We got 2 dinars each for the journey. Before we got from the station to the stables in Nish, we got all wet from rain. This is our lodging with a new surprise—fleas. They are

18 „Sobar“ probably meant „Commander“ in that context

as big as flies, and you get hundreds of them within half an hour. Nobody can even think about sleep.

May 7
Each of us got 3 loaves of bread and a piece of smoked meat for the journey. We went through Nish to Knyezhevats. We spent the first night in a forest. I froze to the bone, having no coat and no blanket and sleeping on damp grass. The other night was better—we slept in an abandoned school. The journey is getting harder, going over hills and ravines unlike anything I have ever seen.

May 1
We rested for 2 days in Knyezhevats, where we were accommodated in a café and slept under the tables. Everyone got a pair of sandals, and some were hit with a stick.

We arrived in Banitsa in late afternoon. We bathed there in a thermal well while our uniforms were boiled in cauldrons. When they were so-so dry, we went to sleep in Ragost, where I and several boys slept in a chicken shack.

May 23
We finally arrived, having marched all day in immense danger. We are to live in a large cave where a kitchen is set up. Rocks are all around us, wild Timok is underneath, a bit of blue sky is above, and eagles are our partners. One can't see grass anywhere—it is all bare rocks. A real wasteland. We have to dig our

paths—make a bad move and fall down. There are 35 of us, mostly Czechs with Sergeant Roubík. Our commander is Theodor Tcheikovitch from Monte Negro, a first-class bastard. He looks like a fugitive convict. The boys immediately nicknamed him *Babinský*[19]. It fits him perfectly. With an oak stick, he is always ready to earn recognition through slaps and blows, and he becomes a real nightmare for everyone.

We are assigned work on a railway construction here. The railway is routed along nothing but bridges, tunnels, and embankments. Dynamite has to be used to dig everything. The work is very hard. We sleep in the rocks like badgers, and I am cold, as I have neither coat nor blanket. Meals are all the same: beans with a bit of goat's meat for lunch and supper, thickened soup in the morning, and one loaf of bread daily.

June 3
I do not work the rock but go for bread and kitchen stuff every day. I must get up at 4:00 a.m. to bring the meat before 7. They carry it from the slaughterhouse to Glisura on carts. From there we have to drag it on our backs across the rocks for almost one hour's distance.

When there is no rain it is good. But when the rain starts, it goes on for days and days, and you can't get your feet out of the mud.

19 Legendary Czech criminal

June 20
120 new men arrived. We work hard. Our wage is from 50 hellers up to 1 dinar but it's worth nothing because we can't buy anything but *rakiya*[20]. The Section pays when they want (well, when they have).

June 28
Two prisoners were wounded during explosions today. You can't hear anything but thundering noise all day long. Instead of soup we get damson cheese in the morning. It is great. We have coffee. We are not hungry. I am glad for one thing—we got rid of the lice. Well, one can be found here or there, but we got cleaned. But fleas still pop up.

July 12
Our team increased to 300 men. They came from Skoplye and Brtolye. Everyone has a nice, new pair of boots that arrived from the American Czechs. They say 30 thousand pairs had arrived but the Czechs only got about 3,000 of them. The Serbs "took care" of the rest. With the transport, Salomon Hruska arrived, among others.

July 25
I got a card from Karel. He's been drafted. Messages from home arrive seldom. Sometimes I get cards from Ústí from F.T. or A.M., but also one from S.F[21]. We still think the end will be here soon. We don't hear any news of the world; it is like we are on a bare

20 Liquor typical for the region of Balkan
21 Unknown identities

islandA provisionary track has been built so we carry bread on trolleys. People get hurt in explosions every day.

August 10
Days pass on by, and we keep working like slaves. God knows, maybe it's our fate not to return. Here one is permanently in danger of being hit with a flying stone.

August 25
Babinsky wheedled my watch, which didn't work, from me for 5 dinars, but he raised my wage. Now I get 80 H.

September 12
The construction goes on well. The tunnels have been made, and very high bridges cemented. This costly track is made of the calluses and sweat of the *zaroblyeniks*[22]. People who have never done such work in their lives work with hammers and wedges as if they have done it from their birth. Nobody here asks about your profession—you get a pickaxe or a wheelbarrow and go!

September 25
These days I only go for meat and I bargain with plums, pears, nuts, cucumbers, even sausages. The butchers at the slaughterhouse made sausages. I brought 200 of them back for myself and the others, and they were all gone in a moment.

22 Forced laborers – note the slavic „ROB" root which later became global in the Czech word „ROBOT"

October 2
Last night , 7 boys ran to Bulgaria. It is not far —about 6 hours. Men from other units escape every day. We fear the winter; it will be rough here. I bought a blanket and a fur coat. This week I received money from home two times: first 10 dinars and then 12.

October 6
News is here that the Germans assaulted Belgrade and the Bulgarians counteracted. Here many men run away, and accidents happen almost every day, mostly in the tunnels. At night we hear guns firing. Babinsky assures us it's the Bulgarians doing maneuvers. But we think it stinks.

October 10
Last night there was an alarm. We heard the firing clearly. The Bulgarians clashed with the Serbs on the border. About 800 people left Glysuca[23] to dig trenches near Kralyevo. The Knyezhevats got very upset. The civilians fled. Each of us got 2 blankets, 2 pairs of sandals, and some underwear for the journey.

October 16
We ran away from the Bulgarians, who have gained Knyezhevats. At eleven we received a command to run. We threw away our meals, got our sacks on our backs, and off we are

23 Glysuca or Glisura – unknown geographic entity

going to Nish. We are taking the tools and *kazans*[24] with us.

It is a huge procession: prisoners, Serbs, civilians, all the Section flee using the tunnels, as the road to Nish has been cut.

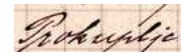
October 19
In Nish. We spent the first night in a tunnel and, in the morning, we hustled over the hill and over the unfinished bridges toward Gramada. The journey was extremely dangerous, and, on top of it all, we dragged all the tools and heavy kazans. The other night I found a postcard from home from Tonik (my stepbrother) in the mailbag. There are wagons of bread and many barrels with damson cheese. We arrived in Nish at night and went to sleep to an engine room.

The city is in great confusion and panic. Everything is moving. Rumor says the government is now in Prokuplya.

October 20
Our fellows have a camp beyond the town. They brought an immense quantity of Austrian shoes; the prisoners fight for them, and I was lucky enough to win a pair—it was worth being hit with a stick. About 8000 prisoners have gathered here. Bread and damson cheese were given away again. It rained all day long. For the night I ran to the engine room again.

24 kettles

October 22



Having marched all day, we arrived in Prokuplya at 10. We were crammed into cafés. We slept crowded on the floor. The next day we moved to a meadow. It keeps on raining all day and all night. I am drenched. It keeps on raining. I bought timber for 3 dinars, made a campfire, and tried to dry myself a bit. We moved to another meadow.

October 25

We arrived in Korshumliya and slept in a café the first night. Our team was divided there. One half went with Theodor to repair roads somewhere. Our officers were camped there. Misery, hunger, and lice were beginning to appear. We went all day over hills and through, no rests, road or no road. Mud was everywhere, and it kept on raining. We reached a village in early evening, but there was no place for us, so we went to a meadow. Sitting in the water, I was trembling from cold as it was raining hard. When the rain stopped for a while, we made a fire with great effort. But a storm came, and we had to run away from the flood. It rained very hard, and the thunder roared all night. This was one of the worst nights I've experienced.

In the morning we marched on. My wet blankets weigh three times their dry weight; we are fatigued, sleepless, hungry. We have half of a loaf bread per day. Happily, I have saved some money.

October 28

Prishtina. We got here after 2 days of an immensely demanding march across forests, over hills, and through rivers without bridges! Misery has arrived. A 2-day ration of bread gets eaten easily in one day, and if you want to buy some more you pay 2 or 3 D. The boys sell underwear, blankets, and boots for a piece of bread. Our guards rob us—a shame to think. They never let us buy anything but bring it themselves and collect 10 times the price.

We walk all day without stopping. Those who stay behind get beaten with a stick or gun butt or stabbed with bayonets. You mustn't stop to have a sip of water as the guards keep on screaming, "*Četyry a četyry*[25]" The road is flooded. We walk in water that reaches up to our waists for almost 4 hours.

Prishtina is an old Turkish town. It is half empty, and its mosques are a beautiful sight. We sleep in a stinking sty full of dung, but we're glad to be in a shelter. We get 2 loaves of bread for 5 days.

October 30

Last night we slept in the rain again. Our guards raged—they hit, kicked, and robbed us. In the evening we reached Orekhovatch and slept crammed shoulder to shoulder. Actually there was no sleep as we could not even sit.

25 Literal translation „Four and Four", probably a command to march

November 2

We were able to see the goal of yesterday's journey—Prizren—as early as noon of that day. A beautiful Turkish town with a great Turkish castle and many mosques. Surrounded by high mountains, it was a beautiful sight. This was a border point of three territories—Serbia, Monte Negro, and Albania. We were lodged in large, Turkish barracks. We lay on the ground, but we were happy to be in a shelter and to stretch out as much as we liked. We stayed there for 2 days. I used that time to inspect my shirt and to get rid of at least some of those white parasites.

Our daily dose was the same—l loaf of bread for 2 days. If I had no money, I would have to sell my blankets as others did, or maybe even my shoes and walk barefoot. And I am lucky to have my cash in silver coins. Nobody wants bank notes; one can hardly sell them for 6 dinars. Rumors has spread that we are going to Dratch and then to Italy! I don't care as long as we escape those Serb bastards.

November 4

Marching on, we heard Bulgarian guns from Skoplye, and our commander ordered, "*Eilmarsch.*"[26] We slept at Kosovo Pole. Rumor says Kumanovo was won. We pass many hills and ravines. The Albanians are not bad people, but they are also hungry.

26 Fast march.

November 6
We march on and on through barren lands. No sign of a road, only broken shacks here and there. We have to wade through creeks deep up to our knees as there are no bridges. We sleep outside every night in the rain, and we're happy to make a fire in the evening. We look like Gypsies—torn, barefoot, hungry, and full of lice. Last night we walked for ten hours and reached a village called Preshkoplye where there are field bakeries. It takes a whole day before they have bread baked for us. We get bread for 4 days. I bought two more loaves so I have a good supply.

November 8
We reached Debro after a day of climbing and descending hills. We stayed in old Turkish barracks, half crumbled. There is one transport of Bulgarians taken prisoner and several Germans. We are hungry, and the Serbs rob us of our last money. It is terrible to be at the mercy of several yokels who can rob you, strip you, and beat you to death whenever they wish. I stick to the fore; those who come late or cannot go are beaten and robbed. I don't know if I'll be strong enough—the sea is still very far, and the misery is growing harder! God help us!

November 10
Our platoon was divided yesterday. We were called the *Radnitchka* platoon and took off to build a road. Our commander is Professor Zhizhkovitch, a man with the eyes of a basilisk.

We marched all day; in the evening we arrived in an Arnaut[27] village as it began to rain hard. The commander wanted us to live in kutchas but the Arnauts were locked inside and didn't want to open. Our guards broke the gates after a long and useless negotiation, and we moved in. But we are now in the rain again because the roof is full of holes.

Steblova is a small village. We buy potatoes as small as cherries. Arnauts sell us baked pumpkins and corn flour, trading for underwear or boots. A kitchen has been established here; the ktichen crew boil water with a few green leaves twice a day. Bread is available only sometimes.

It started to freeze and snow. We looked for timber and dismantled the fences. There was no sign of a fence in 3 days. Arnauts dismantled and hid the rest. I made pasta balls and other specialties from corn flour. It was not greasy, and it was unsalted, but everybody liked it—though not even dogs would eat it back home.

November 12
Sad times—no bread or meals for 3 days, and yet we have to work. We are dying for food. It is raining; the creek flooded the road, and the supplies can't reach us. We boil corn and rose hips. I traded a little corn flour for a shirt and underwear. The Arnauts do not want Serb

27 Albanian.

money. The boys trade flour for their last blankets.

Nobody wants to go to work. Today someone shouted at the *narednik*[28]: "Give us bread or shoot us. We cannot live like this." We're hopeless.

November 16
Finally bread arrived today after 6 days. Thank God! We got 3/4 of a kilogram of bread for 5 days! But still there are no meals. Hunger is there still. It's freezing and snowing all night long. We are at a high altitude. There are huge snowdrifts, and many men are barefoot.

November 19
Still freezing and snowing. The supplies arrived today again, and everybody got 3/4 kilogram of bread again, but it was completely drenched. Our guards were called to Debro at night. We are alone here, and perhaps we will stay here. We're so hungry that we lose our minds; it's still snowing and freezing. There is news that the Bulgarians won Nish. We are convinced that we cannot get to Italy, but if the Bulgarians do not come, we will perish here.

November 20
There was an alarm at midnight. Our commander Zhizhkovitch arrived and commanded us to leave. Instead of bread for the journey, we have to carry all the tools and

28 officer

the entire kitchen. We are going to Elbasan. As we descended to lower ground, it got warmer. At about 9in the morning, the commander noticed that several people had thrown away their tools on the way. He ordered [the guards] to stop, separate those with no tools, and give them 25 blows. A terrible sight. There were more than 80 people, and most of them never had any tools. All of their pleas were in vain, though; a stone would have been more merciful than the commander. I was one of them without tools but managed to get away. Those who were proven to have thrown away their crowbars received 50 blows and never got up again.

We went past a cornfield in the afternoon. Being hungry, some men grabbed a few ears. When we stopped in the evening, the commander summoned all six *zugskommandants*[29] (including Roubík and Salomon) and ordered them to lie down on the road, and each received ten blows as a punishment. Thereafter he forgave them and said there would be no meal tonight, also as a punishment. We are sleeping in a shed.

November 21
Cabbage soup was our breakfast, then we set out at 6. the river Shkomba lay in front of us. We had to wade through. It took us almost fifteen minutes; the water reached up to our waists and even our chests, and the current was very strong. Several men got carried away

29 Petty officers

by it. By the time we reached the other shore we were drenched, and it was freezing!

We descend from the hill to the lowlands, walking a rocky path in a terrible blizzard. We held on to a rock wall so as not to get blown away down into the river below. We got to an old Turkish road—the sights were beautiful. On the south were the great Bitolye glaciers; to the north was the Albanian snow plain; and opposite us was the Elbasan Valley with palms and cypresses. But we could not appreciate this natural beauty. Our minds were occupied with Elbasan and the bread that awaited us there.

At last we arrived in Elbasan at 10:00 p.m. The Turks gave us lodging in the town. I am staying in a mosque. The Turks are very genial and nice to us. The town is a real El Dorado for the smokers, since one kilogram of tobacco costs just 2 dinars and 60 para here.

Inserted: a cut-out article and picture—no source given. Transcription follows.

> *The clever Albanians knew, as always, how to make the best out of the situation. As they were afraid to kill and rob among the large groups of refugees, they robbed us in another way—selling food. A piece of bread here—actually, a hard and musty corn cake of disgusting taste, a piece of*

bacon there, a corn ear or a potato elsewhere—everything was worth gold. Other sorts of money became totally useless. Those who had gold could eat some. Those with bank notes from Monte Negro or Serbia were worse off—they were at the mercy of others. But there were also many places where even gold would not buy anything as Albania was eaten almost completely by those who got there before us. In fact, we were the last ones to escape. We were to cross Albania—a country perhaps less explored today than central Africa. There is no such traveler who would dare go among the wild Albanian tribes that only live in never ending disputes and fighting, where human life has no value, where an Albanian who gets a new gun will rather try it out on the first person he meets, feeling more sorry for the bullet than for his victim.

It was much worse with food. Anyone who had any, however few, they hid them jealously. A piece of corn

bread weighing about a pound was worth 40 to 50 crowns, only if the seller was greatly kind and merciful.

Pitiful was the look at Austrian prisoners. Among them, a great percentage of Czech was who perhaps chose to become prisoners. Everybody forgot about them in general confusion, nobody cared about them any longer. Worn and gaunt, they wandered the streets and rags that used to be Austrian uniforms failed to cover their miserable bodies. Looking like skeletons rather than human beings, they begged for a bit of bread.

Attachment: a magazine photograph of6 people and 3 horses crossing a mountain comb. The font suggests these cutouts are not from the Samostatnost *magazine but more likely from a picture weekly.*

November 25

Not only tobacco but also bread and meat are cheap here. One kilogram of mutton costs 70 hellers. But alas—Serb bank notes are worth nothing here. You can be glad if you get 2 or 3 dinars (that is, chereks) for one. We get a meal and half a loaf of bread daily. The town is full of mosques, but one can also find shops that

are European in style. There are oranges, cypresses, and olives. Unfortunately it started to freeze on the third day after our arrival, and it kept snowing for 3 days. The oranges were gone immediately.

So far more than 2000 prisoners have arrived. They tell us about how many of our fellows froze and died in the Bitolye mountains. They each got a cup of flour after five or six days and, having no timber to make fire, they ate it as it was.

My colleague Vlček arrived. I was happy to have money so I could buy him bread and give him my meals for a couple of days. Reportedly, the Bulgarians won Debro and Bitolye, and we cannot go to Dratch—we will have to go to Valona and then to France! Oh, God, let me withstand it all!

A disease has spread among us. They say it's typhus but I think it's from hunger.

December 2
We left Elbasan yesterday. The town is packed with prisoners and civilians. 400 men left with Roubík to repair a road. We had to wade through a river right beyond the town. We met convoys with American flour on their way from Dratch. We stayed in an Arnaut kutcha; my colleagues built deckungs[30]. No meals and no bread for 2 days now. Not knowing what to do out of hunger, Roubík and I caught a little goat, slaughtered it, and boiled it at night. The

30 shelters

boys steal calves, turkeys, etc. all about. The Arnauts shoot at them with guns.

December 4
About 15 sick Austrian officers arrived in the evening. In total more than 600 officers passed through here today. They were torn, tired, and hungry, and there were even *oberleutnants*[31] among them. The road is always busy. Thousands and thousands of prisoners pass every day. They are barefoot and look more like Gypsies. They beg and steal, and all of them look ahead—toward the sea and liberation. Unfortunately hundreds and hundreds of them drop down due of hunger, fatigue, and sickness. Once in 3 days, we get soup with *zwiebackem.*[32] Usually the men storm the kettles, and one needs a stick to maintain some order.

December 7
The commander arrived with his brother yesterday, and they spread fear. Four Hungarians sold their shovels in Elbasan and were denounced, and now he was punishing them. He had them tied to a tree for 3 hours till they fainted from pain. Then he sat them at a table and talked to them while having someone play a violin for him. The next day he had them tied again and watched the torture.

Three prisoners ran away from their unit, were led back, and had to dig a grave for themselves. He commanded soldiers to shoot

31 Higher lieutenants
32 Biscuits.

them. He then pardoned them but left them tied up.

Today we witnessed the height of his animality. The cooks, due to a lack of firewood, went to cut down a tree about 600 steps from the mess. Zizkovic saw them and brought a rifle from the tent, saying that he must test the aim. **He aimed and shot one cook, Janota, in his belly. When Janota was brought back, the commander said, "My arm fell down—I was aiming at his head."** When the medic, Krticka, requested to have the wounded Janota transported to Elbasan, Zizkovic refused, saying, "Let him die. He killed enough Serbs." Poor Janota died the next day in terrible pain. Such a monster has power over us!

December 9

Once every 3 days we get a few biscuits or a half of a loaf of bread. The weather is nice and warm. We have gone 4 kilometers farther and built a camp. I went for 2 hours to the Arnauts' houses to get something to eat—in vain. From afar an Arnaut shouted, "*Ska ič buka*[33]," waved his rifle, and released his dogs. Somehow I am not surprised. The captives pass through the country like robbers, attacking houses at night, stealing cattle, chicken, and corn. They risk their lives. Many are killed by Arnauts; many starve to death in valleys and swamps. These are not people anymore but animals who would murder their own friends for a piece of bread.

33 Unknown meaning

I saw the following incident: There was an Austrian lying by the road, and near him two Bosnians stood. A group of Czechs came along and asked, “What are you doing?”

“Our brother cannot go,” said one of the Bosnians.

The sick man opened his eyes and whispered, “I am not Bosnian, I am Czech. They want to beat me and strip me.”

And the sticks got to work on the Bosnians’ backs. Here nobody goes out without a good stick. Law of the fist rules here.

Inserted is a cutout from an unidentified magazine. On one side is a picture with the caption, “Serbian army retreating. Poor Albanian cottage where the Serbian king Peter spent the night with a few of his soldiers.”

On the other side is the following text:

> *On this impromptu road it was possible to advance only slowly one man after another and every step had to be considered. Every once in a while the road was blocked by a fallen horse who either broke his leg or fell deep into the mud. Soon there were dead horses in heaps on both sides of the road, in places*

one had to walk over piles of carcasses, feet slipping on the soft flesh of freshly fallen horses, then again old carcasses surrounded by swarms of flies stinking intolerably, and hen again a horse who was being walked over still raising his head as if begging for death. In places Albanians were seen cutting off the skin from the carcasses to make their sandals.

Cholera, hunger and suffering were taking more and more victims from among the fugitives who fell down from fatigue and never rose up again. Like rows of madmen, with eyes staring, themselves close to falling down, walked the fugitives among the dying, everyone looking only after himself. The instinct for survival controlled everyone. "Forward" was the motto, "forward until I fall myself." A son forgot his father, brother forgot his brother, a friend forgot his friend. Often mothers threw away their toddlers to be more free to drag themselves forward.

The fallen were immediately robbed by the Albanians of the last things they had on them.

Hard to imagine for someone who did see it himself the miserable state of the once victorious army now fleeing. The soldiers were just skeletons covered with yellow skin who were already two months fleeing, clad in muddy rags, mostly barefoot, throwing away their weapons. Not one in a hundred had his rifle, and soundlessly they dragged themselves forward. Legs up to the knees in mud, and it was most difficult to advance step by step. Everyone was throwing away everything unnecessary and soon unnecessary was everything except for remainders of food that were being saved for the worst.

December 11
We lie indifferently, expecting death from starvation. For 3 days already I've had nothing to put in my mouth.

The Serbian cavalry was passing nearby, pitiful and exhausted, and that was our

salvation. In the most critical moment God sent us help. There were fallen horses lying on the road. We attacked them like a pack of wolves, cut off pieces of meat, made fires, and cooked and smoked the meat. We were saved by fallen horses. The half-raw pieces of meat, dirty from smoke, tasted like the best pork to me. We even fried some meat to store! What a scene. Everybody full of blood, cutting and tearing. One searching for the heart, another one trying to break the skull with a stone to get the horse's brain, which should be even better than a pig's! Joy was shining from everyone's eyes today as we filled up after a long time.

Unfortunately many have paid the price of death for their voracity. Farther along the way, every ten steps lay a corpse of an Austrian or a Serb who will disappear here unrecognized and whose dear ones at home will be waiting in vain.

December 13
Yesterday we arrived in Lesino, and in the evening we had to wade over the river Semeni. The river was deep and wild, above my chest. One moment the current started to carry me away. I felt dizzy and thought I was lost. From the other side men started to shout at me, and that brought me to my senses somewhat. Many captives stayed in the river, and many died during the night.

We made a fire and spent the whole night drying ourselves. In the morning the

commander allowed us to cook 2 *magorce* who were almost dying. From the city they brought corn flapjacks; each got one, and we went on to Valona, where supposedly ships were already being boarded by prisoners. Before leaving, the commander beat about 50 people for coming late. He beat them on their faces with a bullwhip!

By nighttime we got to Rezna, where we each got half a flapjack. We carry the kazans with us. Today my platoon had to carry them. The Hungarians got into an argument because no one wanted to carry, and the commander had 12 blows given to every man. It was my first beating in Serbia. It was not so terrible because it was delivered to me by a friendly guard, but if I'd had a gun I would have shot the bastard. He rages like a mad dog—worse every day. Sometimes we think he is out of his mind.

December 14
Today we set out early. Our goal we saw before us: dark hills. There we had to be at night. As no road led there we went straight through marshes. Our platoon carried the kazans again as a punishment. At first it went well, but the going was getting worse all the time. Our legs sank into the mud. Often we had to jump over wide trenches. They were underwater rice fields. After noon the water was up to our thighs, then knees, then waists. Our feet sank; we fell, carrying kettles that weighed 80 kilograms. So we went into the evening in resignation. I wonder where we got

that strength! We thought about nothing; we were just being pulled forward over the hills, where liberation was. Many poor men were left in the water—they fell from exhaustion and sank into the mud! Oh, Serbia, you have much on your conscience!

In the evening we reached the hills and slowly scrambled up. There are giant cypresses and olive trees here. We camp in the forest, from where we see the wide valley and the rolling river Semeni. Thousands of fires shine along its banks. Those are captives coming from Drac.

December 16
In the evening we were soaked. When we made camp and got some firewood, Zizkovic ordered only one fire per platoon, meaning 80 people. When the guys lit more fires, he went in the dark from one fire to another and beat the poor guys with his bullwhip in their faces. It was a scene I will not forget until my death. **I wonder why, among the 400 men, not one was found who would do away with him.** We were so downhearted that nothing mattered to us, and we were calling for death to set us free! He, being aware of his crimes, was trying to retain his authority through cruelty and lead us all the way to Valona, where he would get money for supporting us on the way.

Today at 11:00 a.m. we reached a wide river. I was afraid we would have to wade again, but there were rafts and Arnauts to do the transporting. At 11 at night we finally were

ferried to the other bank, where thousands of captives from Drac camped . They told us how much flour and American bread they got while we were starving to death. Drac is being bombed from both sea and air. Serbian soldiers and civilians are embarking there to sail to Corfu.

December 17
Today we passed through the town of Fiera, which is full of Italian soldiers of all kinds. What a difference between them and us. They are well-clad and well-fed, and we look like Gypsies—torn, barefoot, and burnt. Just stinking corpses along the way, both ours and Serbian. We had been walking for 3 hours in ankle-deep water. No road. In some places we had to wade across ditches up to our waists in water.

In the afternoon we reached the river Vojusa. On the other side, Italians welcomed us. From here it is just 2 days to Valona. I am happy our travel will finally end, and so will our suffering. However, on the river bank, several thousand hungry captives are camping because Italians transport no more than 1000 men per day, and there are 8000 of us here. The Section came here with us but must go to Drac along with all the Serbian soldiers. Theodor too must go back. Here is great misery and hunger. There is nothing available, no firewood. We break the brushes. Nobody gives anything for Serbian money, and if they did I would not have any left.

A piece of corn *broj*[34] costs 8 cereks! Here only cereks and liras pay. Nobody cares about us. Our sole hope is the other bank.

December 18
This night I will never forget. I lay down in a thorny ditch. At night a storm came, and I did not wake up until I was lying in water. It kept raining the whole night and then the whole day. Our situation is hopeless. The river is flooding, and ferrying is impossible.

Today 60 died from exhaustion. We are a terrible sight. Rags hanging from everyone, barefoot with frostbitten legs, unshaven, unwashed, all the suffering of the way mirroring in our faces. You have no certitude —at night someone steals your *brotsack*[35] from under your head, your blanket, your coat —anything you may have. Those who cannot rise up have their coats and boots stolen from them for resale. 400 people from the Radnicka platoon today carried kazans and tools back to Fiera, where Zizkovic sold them.
December 19
It rains all the time. No ferrying—the river is flooding. Italians brought rations: One biscuit is food for 3 days. The second day we each got 2 spoons of rice. We boil it—water is unavailable, dirty. No firewood. God free us!

December 20
More that 200 dead were collected today. Misery reaches its peak. Albanians came and

34 Unidentified food
35 Small bag

brought broja. If you have good boots they give you about 1 kilogram, but you have to be careful. Our commander left today. Thank God we got rid of that monster!

The number of people is still rising because the Italians ferry only 600 people daily. Serbian soldiers steal publicly. They beat whoever has good boots in order to steal them; they steal your coat, blanket, and anything of value. They steal the rations sent by the Italians and then sell us a biscuit for 3 cereks. No appeal is possible. What do we live on? We brew a tea from raspberry leaves, look for snails and turtles, and dig up roots. I hear in some places even human meat has been eaten. In resignation we look toward the future. We are destined to die here, looking at the other bank. There is liberation; here is slow dying. Several people have turned mad—others are unable to rise to beg for death. And it is still raining day and night. The river is rising again. The water already took tomorrow's rations.

December 21
No ferrying today because the river is flooding again. There was a terrible storm, lightning and rain. We sit in water. In the morning 300 dead lay on the riverbank. And still new thousands of captives are coming. Today we got a cup of flour for the whole day. No drinking water. I took water from a slop where several dead bodies were laying. Still raining! One was lying beside me—I saw him dying!

When will my turn come? Tomorrow? The next day?

December 22
There is a ferry today, but only for the sick! Indescribable scenes take place at the raft. People rush like mad, push each other, fight. Serbians beat them with sticks and gun butts. Many people are beaten and kicked to death, then thrown into the river.

Everyone is trying to save himself from death by hunger. Our platoon's turn should be tomorrow. We got 3 spoons of flour each today and set out to look for places to sleep in the thorns. We picked some grass and lay down. Around us bullets from Albanian guns fly.

December 23
Not our turn yet. Rafts are still ferrying the sick, who number more than the healthy. The night was freezing; many people got frostbite and had to be supported to warm up. The Arnauts give a piece of broj in exchange for boots. I gave them my blanket for a piece. People walk around like mad. They bite leaves, grass, tree bark. Tomorrow, rumor says, we will go for sure.

December 24
Christmas Eve day—how sad and miserable. I fast because the sergeant stole our rations. In the morning I was already by the raft when the order came: there were enough people already, and I had to go back. The Italians will celebrate the holidays and will not ferry.

In the evening I recognize that I have a fever—I am ill. Is this the beginning of the end? God, don't let me give in. We got 2 biscuits but I can't eat! I remember home. Such a sad Christmas Eve. I lay burning in the thorns and praying like never in my life! I wonder what my parents are doing now!

December 25
A Christmas feast! Radnicka platoon embark! I stood in queue for departure. Our sergeant was missing; my platoon was not going. All my friends left, and I stayed here. I joined the 10. platoon but when we reached the raft they had stopped ferrying. I am hopeless! I gave my last underwear for a piece of broj and my last 3 dinars. Now I am penniless.

December 26
Again no ferrying today! Horror is reaching its peak here. Full of corpses no one collects and no one cares to bury. An ugly stench is in the air. Flocks of ravens circle the sky. They smell a good feast.

December 27
No ferrying today. I have lost all hope and given in to destiny. The Serbs steal all that is still left. More than 2000 people left for the woods but keep coming back—there is much snow there, and Albanians who beat them to death and rob them. They say Zizkovic too was robbed and killed there.

December 28
At sunrise I was at the raft in vain. The night was very freezing; more than 200died, about half of them frozen. At 3:00 p.m. suddenly the order came: “Embark!” And in less than an hour we crossed the river. Thank God, we are saved! Farewell damned Serbia!

Inserted is a cutout from Samostatnost *dated 15.II.1918:*

> *Then came Albania, those terrible alleys of death where the Czech man opted for death in its strictest form—from hunger—rather than be returned to the Austrian army. We went through deserted Albania. Corpses marked our path to the unknown through forbidding mountains. Barefoot, hungry, naked, half alive, we dragged not like humans but like frightening, miserable human resemblances through those valleys and swamps between the rivers Skumpi, Semeni and Vojusa, feeding on grass, tree bark, worms—even (responsibly, without exaggeration) human meat. Bitter remembrances.*

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December 29 (1915)
It seems to me that I am in a different world. When I stepped out of the boat yesterday, I felt like leaving wilderness. Everything just seemed to be other, nicer - the Italian soldiers are kind. We do not understand a single word of theirs but there is one thing we understand very soon: "Mangiare"[36]. I threw rags off my boots that I tied onto them to hide them from the spying Serb eyes. In the evening, we reached an Italian army camp and got rice soup from cans with meat and biscuits. Oh how I enjoyed those few spoons of hot, salty and greasy soup! I hadn't eaten salty soup in more than 20 days! We slept on a hill. It was freezing at night so we set out at 5 in the morning not to freeze. We were not allowed to light fires. We are going to Valona. We can see the beautiful Valona bay as early as noon.

December 30.
The port is beautiful, there are about 7 large steamers. Some 4,000 prisoners are crowded at the port, they push forward, step on one another and fall to the sea. The Italians have fun throwing pieces of biscuits among them and watching the prisoners fight just as dogs fight for bones. Finally, at 10 p. m. I managed to get to a motor boat that took us to a large cargo steamer - "Armenia" from Marseille. It's a cattle ship, there are troughs in it. I sleep in the hold.

36 To eat

December 31.
My breakfast was a cup of coffee and a biscuit. How I enjoyed coffee, nice and sweet, that I had not had for so long! My lunch was rice, meat and some wine. People are like cattle - the Italians are nice but good manners just don't work with our fellows. They only obey a whip. At 4, the anchor was lifted and we set out. I am seasick, can't sleep the whole night.

January 1, 

This morning the Italians drove us to the upper deck, stripped us, bathed us, and dressed us in Italian uniforms. Meanwhile they cleaned the lower deck—threw all our things into the sea and disinfected all the rooms. They threw away all our things—shoes, blankets—I just managed to save my diary, which was already on its way out. Things the men had to drag all through Serbia, and with which they didn't part even in Albania, are now floating.

Unfortunately there was more that they threw into the sea—the dead. There were 20.

Our ship is still cruising along the coast, accompanied by two more: *Sinai* and *Danten*.

Yesterday was the end of that unlucky year—1915—in which I put so much hope and which disappointed me so much. Every one of us believed that year would bring us liberation, but instead it was a year of the

worst tribulations and misery. The last 3 months were the worst; more than 4000 people died, and those who stayed alive looked like skeletons. Today, free of those rags and in clean underwear once again, we look ahead to the new year with new hopes. Will it bring me what I long for—peace and freedom?

When I feel bad or good, the memories of my home always give me strength and patience. Now, so far from you, my dear ones, somewhere near north of Africa, I am wishing you and myself much happiness and good health in the new year! May God fulfill my only wish—may we all meet again and stay in good health!

I wish I were free and at home today, just as I was 2 years ago.

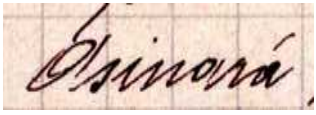
January 2
The night was cold. We have no mantles or blankets, but no lice either. The meals are poor—a bowl of soup with a few macaroni and a few bits of meat. This is to be divided among ten people who are hungry like wolves!

Many people die of exhaustion and being seasick. They are just thrown into the sea and that's it. Nobody cares about their names.

January 3
We keep sailing, and we are still hungry. There was no supper, just 3 spoons of macaroni for lunch. That's a strange beginning for a new year. The ship doctor said we mustn't eat

much as we are weak. But we are weak because we are hungry like wolves!

January 4
Today we landed on an island. 8 large steamers were anchored there. We were so hungry. We get less and less food every day. Many dead men were thrown into the sea again today. They think they can stop that dying by giving us less food. The lunch was very poor. They keep giving us biscuits instead of bread. I am looking forward to a piece of bread *so* much. I am hungry as I haven't been since the Albania days. Lunch is 5 spoons of soup; supper is just coffee. We are completely hopeless. We lie in the hold, many among us sick. I saw one who could not eat macaroni and vomited them. A Croat came and picked the macaroni from the vomit on the floor.

January 5
At noon we disembarked on the Asinara island,  where we are supposed to be for the quarantine. It's a small and bare island, just rocks and shrubs. Thousands of prisoners are camped here. Every one of us got a can of meat and biscuits. I made soup from the sea water. I met Šalomoun and Hruška. We sleep in one tent. Also Roubík, Černý, and others are here.

January 6
It seems like we had a feast today—I am sated once again. The day is beautiful and warm. The worst thing is there is no water. We walk

very far to get it from somewhere in the rocks; we have to dig a hole and wait till the water appears and then take it out with a spoon. It's bad and muddy, but what can you do when you're thirsty? We get one meat can and 3 biscuits daily. I signed up with two groups so I get a double dose.

January 7
Disease is spreading among us. The water is to blame. Canned meals are salty, so people drink muddy water—even sea water. Then the stomach starts to ache, diarrhea comes, and as people are weak, sometimes they are dead on the second day. These are the consequences of Albania—all that strain, suffering, etc. People get as far as here and then die. We sleep under tents without blankets, and it's cold at night. We make campfires; there is an abundance of wood. About 140 people died in our camp last night. It is terrible to look at those thin figures.

January 9
The meals are all the same every day. It is very windy today; the wind tears down our tents. I got a cape today. The disease is identified - it's Asian cholera brought from Albania. People who lie down healthy are stiff in the morning. We are crammed into tents by five, and the infection spreads very quickly. You can see a poor creature in spasms behind every shrub. They are all very thirsty, so they crawl to the sea to drink, and soon they're dead. Drinking water is extremely rare. A few feeble springs in the rocks are besieged by the thirsty all day.

The sick get here, drink the water that kills, then get in the shrubs and die unrecognized and unidentified. Our island is not large; it is near Sardinia, and it's all rocks. Some say Turkish prisoners were here years ago, building wide stonewalls. Our camp is in the middle of the island. On one end of the island, there is a camp called Real. Ours is called Streti, and then there is Tamborina.

January 11
There are more and more sick and dead every day. Doctors examine us every morning. Everyone must put their pants down and show their shirts. People deny they're sick because otherwise they would be separated immediately. The doctors are our countrymen, but they have no medicine. They promise us all the time that they will cook meals for us, but they keep feeding us from cans. To our surprise we got a loaf of bread each instead of biscuits today. I liked it so much!

January 13
Feldwebel Salomon is in charge of the newly established hospital. I've moved along with him to be a cook. We make coffee, but it's difficult to get any water. I fetch it at midnight! The Croats started bargaining with it. They walk among the sick, selling water for biscuits and robbing them. We set up night watches. We got thirty cans of food for the sick; the wind tore down our tent, and someone stole the cans. I have good times. There is enough coffee and bread. But disease is rising still, and more and more men die day by day.

January 16
We cooked hot meals for the first time today—rice and meat and rice soup in the evening. The meat is frozen, from Argentina. Salomon organizes coffee parties—there are more and more frequenters day by day. Each platoon prepares coffee for its members.

The camp is now divided into groups named after the ships that brought them—Sinai, Armenia, Dante, Regina, Elan, etc. Each group is divided into platoons of 50 men. The men are divided by their nationalities.

January 18
Cholera is raging horribly. The number of the dead is peaking. Today we counted about 1800 of them. We gather them in piles and then bury them in one grave. Nobody tries to find out the names of the dead.

František Šaroch—a neighbor from my place of birth, Vraný near Peruc—died in the other camp. He was brought along with the sick and died on the third day. Cannot get any news about Toník, my stepbrother.

January 20
The Italians bring water on ships, along with meat and rice or macaroni every day. The cholera seems to have stopped somewhat. Today I met Karel Reichl. He told me Kulma had died here [on Asinara].

January 22
What makes the boys suffer the worst is that there is nothing to smoke. They smoke dry leaves or grass—anything they can. They pay 1 Serb dinar for 1 cigarette. Anyway the value of the Serb money has dropped greatly. Ferdinand sold a one hundred-dinar banknote for 15 lire.

The rate of dying is decreasing, so at last the disease has stopped. What helped most was a change in the food the Italians give us and the drinking water they bring here. Many lives could have been saved [if they'd done this earlier]! They let us out on a barren island without water, and they gave us canned food that made us very thirsty! Everyone was feeble; when they got cans, they ate the food raw immediately and died by the next morning.

Inserted: a cutout from the Samostatnost *magazine dated February 15, 1918, by Otto Brokl:*

> *The fate lead us to Italy. The cholera Asinara was our lot. On a barren and contaminated island, cholera killed many a man among us mercilessly again. And finally, when we were able to count the Czech survivors, we all felt distressed. Out of the proud 33,000 Czechs in Serbia, there were only three*

and a half thousand left of us in a year. We were thinking profoundly about the horrible facts—while Italian sun and sea were miraculous cures for us, back home the Austrian persecution raged, our countrymen filled notorious prisons, even gallows were built into the stringent environment ...

January 28
We moved to another hospital. I am in the kitchen again, along with thirteen other people. They are Hungarians, Romanians, and Dalmatians. The *oberkoch*[37] is a Hungarian who can speak some 7 languages.

Theft is flourishing here. The officers have real feasts at nights while the rank and file starves. I loathe to act thus. They eat all sugar and bacon while the men eat macaroni without any grease and drink bitter coffee.

January 30
Our pay is 20 centesimo daily. I am to get L4.20, and I chose to get paid in kind—a bit of sausage, 2 oranges, and some wine. I still have a lot to do.

January 31
I got a little sick today. The weather got ugly. The Italians never let anyone into the healthy camp without a test. They've got glass flasks;

37 Chef.

everyone must give a piece of their * into it, and then their doctors examine it for cholera or dysentery bacilli. Dysentery keeps on raging. Those who suffer from it get so weak they barely can walk. I saw boys who tied themselves to the latrines so as not to fall over —they were so weak!

February 5
We got Italian cards so I am writing home. The last time I wrote was October 1, 1915.

February 10
All the Jonio camp left for the healthy camp, and our chief cook left too. I don't miss him, the bastard. The Italians are building large tents for the sick.

The weather got nasty, bad winds and rain. I pay my dues in the kitchen—it's open-air, and standing in rain, wind, and smoke all day isn't easy! I've heard there is snow in Sardinia.

February 18
A Spanish consul is to come for a visit tomorrow, so we are cleaning everything. I visited the camp of the healthy today. I was surprised how nice it is managed there. The tents are lined up; there is a small garden near each tent; the streets are covered with sand. The tents even bear numbers and group names.

The larger areas are adorned with beautiful memorials and various sculptures. It is all

concrete and nicely decorated with shells and colored sea stones.

February 20
Our hospital was divided into three departments: the Suspect, the Bacilli Carriers, and Cholera. One man died in Cholera today.

February 23
There is still a great shortage of water. The Italians bring it in little barrels borne by mules. Dr. Atzelt makes us feel like we're in the army all day now, walking around with his cane and hitting the sick and the nurses alike. Today the ship *Foseton* arrived from Dratch with 120 Austrians and 30 Bulgarians. Most of them are sick and frostbitten; they brought along a bounty of cans, sugar, flour, rice, etc. All of it comes from an American mission in Dratch.

February 28
The headquarters exchange Serb money—for ten Serb paper dinars you get L6.50, and for silver you get L7.50. I write home every week, to Ústí sometimes too. Our chief cook was accused of bargaining with sugar; Dr. Atzelt came, paid him with the cane, and brought 5 people to the kitchen from the foundry instead of us.

March 6
I am with the Foseton group, but not for long. I applied for the Sinai because all my acquaintances are there.

March 10
After the medical test, we moved to the healthy camp, and I went to Sinai, to the tent of Feldwebel Roubík.

March 12
We have nothing to do. The days are long, and so we dwell on politics for a long time. Fresh news arrives every day but no one knows where it's from. We call it *latrinenbefehle*[38] yet we like listening to it. As we have been left without any news from our home for more than 6 months now and cannot talk to the Italians much, we fabricate, combine, and distribute these rumors !

Someone from Real brought us the news that F.J.I. (Emperor Franz Joseph I) ordered Italy to release us immediately to neutral countries —the Swiss or the Americans. Reportedly he also said Austria will pay nothing for us. Someone else heard from the *freiwillige*[39] that the Italians will bring us to Italy to work in factories as civilians.

A piece of news arrives every day—it's always guaranteed!

March 15

We all write home every day but wait for replies in vain. Only a few lucky ones get money by postal order. We are well provided with underwear, uniforms, and shoes. Each of us has 2 good blankets, a cape, and 2 sets of

38 Latrine rumors.
39 Volunteers.

underwear. There might be a little more food, though, especially bread, and what the boys miss most is money for tobacco and cigarettes.

March 17
There is a specialty here—daily markets. What for, here on a barren island? Just about anything. If you stroll at Piazza Vittorio Emanuello in the evening, you can buy a portion of meat for 10 Cts., cheese for 10, biscuits for twenty, loaf of bread for thirty, coffee, rice, macaroni—just about anything. The sellers, mostly Serbs and Croats, choose to starve just to have some money for tobacco. It is a wonderful sight, this spirit of trade.

We've gathered stones to build a wall around the cemetery. 1004 rest there—those who, having suffered through all the woes of Albania, thought they were saved.

March 19
It's my name day[40]—a rather sad one as I'm penniless, but still it's jollier than the previous one I spent in Djevdjekia, Serbia. I bought 3 portions of cheese and one loaf of bread.

The Italians are rather worried—they are missing some 600 people. They don't know where they are. It looks like they're back in Serbia. The Italians are making new lists of people.

40 A tradition in of celebrating the date associated with one's given name based on calendar a of saints.

We have noticed one interesting thing—there are really many who have ranks. People who were privates in Serbia are corporals and sergeants today, and former corporals are feldwebels now. We call them "Albanian ranks."

March 21
We can recognize sergeants—they have June ribbons on their caps, but you can also tell them by their large bellies. They get extra *mangiare*[41] and 20 cts. daily. Those who can speak a bit of Italian have golden times here.

In our Sinai there is one Serb *narednik*[42] who beat several prisoners to death on the way through Albania. He never gets out of the tent, or else he'd get beaten.

March 24
They vaccinate us against cholera now that four quarters of us are behind the cemetery wall. It is getting hotter during the day.

March 26
The Italians keep on building one house after another. We carry bricks, stones, and planks. Some get mail from home, mostly those who are Jewish. We had a visit today: three pretty ladies. All the camp was upside down—it has been almost 5 months since we saw a woman (except for hooded Turkish women and ugly Albanians).

41 Food.
42 Sergeant.

March 28
The ship *Sinai* boarded 1,570 people—200 died on the ship, 254 died on *Asinara*, and 291 are missing, i.e. died and were buried without identification. That is 754—one half of all!

March 30
Today flour arrived for the finished bakery, which, however, had collapsed thanks to the crafty Italians.

Mail arrives very seldom. It's always just a couple of German postcards. I am unhappy. Four Jews from Sinai have already gotten money from home; they also get mail (of course it's German). We got one more set of underwear each, along with belts, needles, and combs.

April 2
Mr. Vlček came to visit me today. He's in the other camp and has received money from home—36 lire. Meeting him really made me feel happy. We revisited those beautiful times in Ústí in our memories. He gave me 2 lire and a piece of cheese. A nice boy.

April 4
We were on duty in the camp today, and we lost as bad as we could. A private and a corporal were arrested. The Italians are experts in punishing—they arrest one for 10 to 15 days without any bread. Our lieutenant collected Serb bank notes and went to Rome, and when he came back he said they were

worth nothing. Yet he goes around the other camps and buys them still. A real good officer!

April 5
The bakery worked for the first time today. Our cook stood in for the baker. I was to go to the kitchen but I refused. We are getting a second vaccination. I am still waiting for a letter from home, but it's in vain! Mail arrives very rarely. Still there is news that peace is near. Supposedly we'll get 15 cts. daily.

April 7
Our meals are all the same—at noon it's rice or macaroni, and in the evening it's soup and a bit of meat. No potatoes or vegetables. I dislike that food now. The rice is boiled down to a glue, and it's never greasy, and the macaroni is the same. Coffee is but a little dirty water.

Vejvoda from our platoon and Ryba from my tent got some money from home. The priests here are making a secret list for Austria[43]. For teachers they set up a special group like for one-year volunteers.

April 9
It is ordered that everyone must have their hair cut bald to get rid of the last few lice that still resist here and there (mainly among the Croats).

43 Purpose of the list is unknown

Mail arrives every day. How I wish for news from home—I haven't gotten a single line for 7 months!

Monument of Hungaro-Austrian prisoners on Asinara – photo courtesy R.Pauli

April 12

Our daily pay will be 15 cts., corporals and

sergeants 30 Cts., and feldwebels 50 Cts. The Italian prisoners in Austria get the same. Today I was in Rial and spoke to Eman Růžička. They have a beautiful memorial there. It reads, "In Memory of the Suffering of the Austrian Prisoners in Albania." It was built by a prisoner. It is a statue of a man looking toward the sunrise, which stands for suffering. The statue makes a great impression on each viewer.

Vich, who used to live in Vraný, told me that František Šaroch had died in Fornelia several days after landing. I went there to learn find out for certain but my visit was in vain. They also buried people without identifying them there. Later, in France, Mr. Sis told me František had died after four hours.

I can't get any news about Toník.

They should pay us *lohn*[44] but they keep postponing it every day. Once the documents are not ready, then they have no change. We have to wait for payments up to 8 days.

We received an order that every officer must sign to confirm his rank, so everyone started reducing their ranks. The stripes and stars fell down like rain.

April 22
It's Good Friday today, and we are not fasting, but I think that's not a sin as we fast every

44 A salary.

day. Roubík got a German postcard. I didn't get anything.

We set a table and bench in front of the tent. The heat is rising day by day. This Easter will be rather sad—what a difference between this one and the one 2 years ago! There was a mass in our chapel; teachers were singing, and our Croat parson gave a sermon about the difficult road to heaven. We have fasted enough here, walked our way of the cross long enough. The Bible says the way of the cross leads to heaven, but this is anything but heaven! We must have lost our way!

April 24
Today I got my first letter from the Ladies K. and K.[45] from Ústí They sent me 40 crowns and wrote that Lorenz is dead. They wrote to my parents too. I'm very happy—this is the first letter in 9 months. Here they search for craftsmen and farmers to work in France.

April 26
I received my first postcard from home, dated March 26. I'm happy that everyone is healthy. Karel was hurt on the Russian front and is home on leave.

April 28
We get a whole loaf every day so we can eat as much as we like. I got a second postcard from

45 Mrs. Kohn and Mrs. Kornfeld – wives of former employers.

home—from Anna Šarochová. She asks if I know about Frantík[46].

The Italians keep talking about an early departure for France. They want us to get rid of all lice so they can disinfect. The camps, one after another, go to Realu to bathe and change clothes, underwear, and blankets. All of them are steamed.

About 70 parcels came. Ryba received one, so the tent smells of Virginia cigars every day. We make tea and eat chocolate.

May 1
Two postcards—one from home from Mařka.[47] Today was a beautiful day. We swam in the

Prisoners at Asinara taking a sea bath – *photo courtesy R.Pauli*

46 František Šaroch who is reported dead earlier
47 Josef's sister.

sea. Selected craftsmen were placed in a special department. Some say they will go to Tunis or Algeria.

The Italians continue to test us. We fill the test tubes, and the doctors examine them. We have to fill them under supervision, as even here people are swindled. Usually one does the tests for ten boys.

In the evening they took our boots and gave them to the selected ones so they are ready to go. Everyone has 2 sets of underwear, 2 pairs of boots, a towel, a vessel for food, a cup, a field flask, etc.

May 3
They pay us *löhnung*[48] every 15 days but there is a bad shortage of change. The Italians only send us five- and ten-lire bank notes, and nothing in the world can give you change for that here. Changing costs 30 Cts. Here they keep bargaining, mostly with bacon. A man can buy one kilogram of bacon, cut it to pieces, and go from camp to camp and sell it for 20 cts. a piece. The same goes for cigarettes. One can buy s 30 Francs worth of cigarettes and sell them to get the change for his bank notes. Everyone keeps their silver half-lire, and the shortage of change is worse and worse.

The weather's gotten badly windy. Our tent is torn down every now and then.

48 War salary.

May 6
Some more news—they say peace has been declared and we will go home, hence the preparations. Today again the Italians collected towels and handkerchiefs for those who are ready to leave. In the 4 months we've been here, they've given us a pair of rags, and now they want it back. Nosek keeps furnishing us with bacon, cheese, sugar, and coffee from the storage. I make coffee three times a day.

The Italians had the payroll signed by barbers and sergeants—but then drove them out and gave them nothing.

May 8
Many pay slips are gathered, but the payments take incredibly long. You have to wait for ten days; even if you go to the office every day, you get nothing every day. We just about assault the office hut, but the Italians have a terrible mess in that area.

Finally they returned the collected Serb bank notes today, saying they are no longer exchanged. The Italian soldiers are going around the camp and buying them for 4 lire apiece. They tried to draft volunteers for the Serb army; many Serbs enlisted.

May 10
Today Roubík was paid the money that was sent on March 23. It's L19.07 for 25 crowns. News spread that our officers from the Isle of Elba left for Austria. All of us believe peace is here. Everybody is excited, and we speak of

nothing but an early journey home. I am looking forward to it, but what if we will be disappointed again?

A lieutenant visits everyone to check if we've kept the prescribed equipment. I get mail from home and Ústí regularly these days. We spend days talking about the journey home, but nobody knows where the rumors are from, and nobody cares either.

May 12
At 10:00 a.m. there was a zeppelin to the east, flying toward Sasari. The entire camp watched it with great interest. As it approached Sasari, suddenly it shook, flames burst out of it, and it fell to the sea. Immediately several steamers set out from Real to search for the drowned, but it was all in vain. We were convinced it was a German zeppelin, but we were told it was French. Two French high officers visited

Camp at Asinara – photo courtesy R.Pauli

May 14
The peace enthusiasm has calmed down again. It's getting hot. We swim in the sea every day, but the heat is unbearable. The Italians haven't brought any water for 5 days

now. They say it is rather expensive—15 cts. per liter. Daily we consume 280 hectoliters.

A sailboat from Sardinia comes every day, bringing cheese, wine, lemons, cherries, etc. for sale. Everything in the canteen here is incredibly expensive. Still prisoners always besiege it, buying mostly potatoes and onions.

May 16
Our daily dose: 4 liters of water, 700 grams of bread, 137 grams of macaroni or rice, 200 grams of meat or cheese, 10 grams of sugar, 8 grams of coffee, 5 grams of bacon, 10 grams of Pomadore, and 12 grams of salt.

A great visitor came. Toward noon the archbishop of Sardinia came to consecrate the church in Real, and with him were 5 churchmen, including a Swiss bishop. They visited all the hospitals and asked thoroughly about everything. They also consecrated the cemetery and gave us blessings. Guards at the gate (they were actually prisoners) received commands in Italian: "*Attenti*![49]" The Swiss bishop wondered why we had Italian commanders although we were Austrian soldiers. Well, the parsons really gave the Italians a proper licking. They gave us papal greetings, and everyone got a box of 10 cigarettes plus a cross or a rosary to remember the visit. This means the cigarettes must have cost them more than L6,000 and the rosaries must have cost at least as much.

49 Attention

The visit had a good effect. The Italians got a little scared, and our situation improved somewhat. Now they pay us better.

May 18
Everyone is enjoying papal cigarettes. It's the first time anyone sent us anything. The Jewish Community of Rome sent maces to the Jews here.

And some more excitement among the folk—some news. Prisoners from Russia are going home—ergo peace is certain! Our transport to France was changed, reportedly—we'll go to Italy.

May 21
We were beaten again—the general appeared suddenly in the evening, and, as some men had their shirts off (it's been real hot all day), our lieutenant Kakatchi arrested the *lagerchef*[50] and 5 sergeants. The prison is a tent erected at the end of the camp. The convicts had wine brought in and feasted. At night each of them went to sleep in their tents, and in the morning the daily corporal came with a courteous plea: may the gentlemen come back before the lieutenant arrives?

Roubík and Feldwebel Zwick were not at home, but, having learned that, they went to the prison to join the others. The lieutenant's surprise and anger were great as he found 8 convicts instead of 6. Thereafter, the Italians abandoned the punishments.

50 Camp commander

May 23
Today the first transport is leaving with selected farmers from Real, Streti, and Tamborin. There are 5,000 of them going to France, reportedly, but everyone thinks they are going home!

All the day is filled with talk about peace, which everybody here takes for granted. Various rumors spread mouth to ear, but everybody is convinced that the peace is there. My neighbor, Sergeant Ferdinandi, excels at that. I run away so I don't have to listen to it, and I don't believe it.

May 24
I got a parcel—a box—from home that arrived untouched. There were biscuits in it, some brandy, tea, sausage, and chocolate. I enjoyed that very much. It came from my home! There was also a set of underwear, socks, and a handkerchief. I am so pleased. Oh, I wish I could get back home soon and reward you for all that, my dear parents! Daily, hundreds of parcels arrive, as well as many pay slips. The Italians wonder at how much money the *Austriaci*[51] receive.

Our kitchen received a double dose of everything today—the storage is overfilled. The pay slips are now paid much faster, as are our salaries.

51 Austrians.

May 26
Again transports leave us and Real. This time they don't say they go home, but to Algeria instead. Reportedly, Gruenhut from Prague had it written on his ticket. They say one ship sank; a warship accompanies each transport. Terrible heat every day.

May 28
Ferdinandi received more than 200 lire, so I made a feast dinner—fried potatoes and fried fish with wine.

The Italians ordered us to go bathing at Real while our underwear and uniforms were steamed. We moved to our old place. There was a gale at night that took away the roof of the storage.

May 30
Now I get mail often, from both home and Ústí. Dysentery is spreading again due to the heat, and almost everyone has colic. The Italians line the camps up 500 men at a time and do tests with alembics as before, under control to avoid cheating. They say we will get moved away—maybe to England. The time's up, otherwise we might get baked here on this Ass Isle.

May 31
I was bored, and the sun shone so hot, I wrote the following poem and sent it on a card to Miss Anna in Ústí. It arrived alright, and Anna wrote to me later that she burst into tears

when she read it. Strange; I wanted to amuse her!

The "poem" goes like this:

Nejmilejší slečno Anči— jak Vám, tak i slečně Fanči zasílám přes širé moře tisíc vřelých vzpomínek.	*Dear Miss Anne—to you and to Miss Fanny, I am sending a thousand warm memories.*
Těší mne, že vzpomínáte na ty krásné staré časy, které jistě nikdy víc bohužel, již nevrátí se!	*I am glad that you remember those good old times that, alas, will never come back again!*
Píšete, že byste "gerne" odešly do velké "ferne",poslechněte moje slova a zůstaňte pěkně doma!	*You write that you'd love to travel far—but listen to me and stay home instead!*
Všade dobře, doma nejlíp, praví pořekadlo staré, všade špatně, doma nejlíp novější je—ale pravé.	*It's good everywhere but it's best at home, says an old proverb; it's bad everywhere but it's best at home is a newer proverb, and it is true.*
Procestoval jsem já Srbsko, prošel celou Albánii, na Oslí se ostrov dostal Asináru v Itálii.	*I traveled through Serbia and Albania, and got to Ass Isle—the Asinara here in Italy.*
Bůhví, kam přijdeme ještě, co z nás ještě udělají, jedno pravím, to mi věřte, domů	*God knows where we will come or what they will do to us. I'll*

bych jel nejraději! *say one thing, and believe me: I would like going home best!*

June 3
The heat is intolerable. There are no trees. We swim in the sea every day. We are killing our best times here—what I could experience t home if there were not that damned war.

We are well off. We boil potatoes, make potato salad, and buy fruits and various things the Italians bring in from Sardinia. Much wine gets drunk here—one liter costs one lire—and we play cards. The Italians set up one central kitchen for the entire camp; theft is easier that way. Sergeants get extra macaroni and all the bacon. The rank and file get some ugly brew.

Nobody wants rice anymore. It used to sell for 50 cts. per cup, and now you have to give the men 10 cts. to make them eat it.

June 6
Strong winds brought a sandstorm to the isle. Everyone in my platoon has money, and I am penniless, although two payments are on the way. My platoon is ready to leave for France but Roubík, Ferdinandi, and I will stay.

June 10
The service is getting tough. We have to do pushups daily. The doctors were searched, and their papers and books were taken away. The suitcases of the parsons were seized. The Italians discovered that a Spanish barge used

to come here with newspapers. The barges from Sardinia were prohibited to arrive here. The Italians are scared of German submarines.

We all must be in our tents after 8 in the evening, no fires and no smoking. The gendarmes patrol in the camp, breaking up any gatherings with sticks.

This is a trustworthy sign that the Italians are now bad off. It was the same in Serbia: When the Serbs were losing we felt it with our backs.

The Italians bargain with bacon that Nosek brings us from the storage.
The sunsets are beautiful here; I have never seen anything so beautiful and charming in my life. The nights with the moon are charming too.

June 12
The Italians rage like they are possessed. They discovered that reportedly our fellows signaled to the submarines at night. In the Indiana camp they searched the tents and arrested ten officers for espionage. They seized all their things and ripped the collars and sleeves of their coats to see what was hidden in there.

June 18
There is a great line-up every day. The Italians count us at 8:00 p.m. Smoking at night is forbidden, and those caught outside the camp lines will be shot immediately. We are listed for departure and fully equipped.

June 20
Intolerable heat. We received our wages up to today. It's Corpus Christi today. Everything must be blossoming back home, and here there is barren waste. All is burnt by the sun. Days pass by. We don't even know if it's Sunday. Remembering and longing in vain still. Will the day come when we break out of this slavery, free to enjoy the world in our homeland? I am ready to doubt that this will ever be.

June 23
The Italians read the lists of those who will leave. I am separated from Roubík and Ferdinandi. The Italians examine our underwear and our genitals. We were to leave today but no ship came. The mail works poorly now.

June 28
Finally money from home arrived. I got L25.90 out of the 36 crowns they sent. The next day money came from Kohn and Kornfeld from Ústí—I got L32 from 40 crowns. Ferdinandi got two parcels—food cans, cigarettes, chocolate. The Armenia and Regina Elena camps left. Dante got a new lieutenant who requires order and discipline from his Serbs and Croats.

July 2
Many parcels arrive daily but half of them are robbed. The Italians smoke Austrian cigars and cigarettes in public. The large ship *Sinai*

came today but the departure was delayed again. We will leave tomorrow.

We got an order that all must embark. The sick—there are many of them—will use a great Red Cross ship. The guards took our blankets and gave us backpacks.

July 7
Today it is exactly 6 months since we landed on Asinara, and we are embarking on a journey to France. The ship is huge and is called the *Seine*.

Goodbye, Ass Isle. You hosted us for six months and did us much good but much more bad. Well, we swore at you a good deal, longing for the day when we would leave you. We were convinced we will be free people, but we are heading to be prisoners again. How will we do there?

The anchor is raised. I look back to say goodbye to our comrades beyond the white wall under the green grass. You poor ones. This is where you found the peace that everyone was looking forward to so much. Sleep tight. The tide will tell you about your distant homeland, and we will bring your greetings to it.

We are leaving the bay slowly. The isle is getting smaller. The last contours disappear in an hour.

French Captivity - 1916

Copied from notes in July 1940—twenty-four years later.

July 7
At 4 o'clock the anchor's lifted and we are leaving...

Goodbye, Asinara, Goodbye, Italy. You gave us much—good and bad—but didn't give us the freedom we longed for! Thank God you cleansed us of lice and diseases—the worst things we could encounter.

I thank you, my God, for protecting me here for 6 months from all diseases. Now I am looking toward the future with new hope.

We sail slowly, the last contours of Asinara and Sardinia disappearing slowly. The sea is calm, and we on the upper deck suffer from heat, but those down below are much worse off. They are crammed in much worse. My old friends Roubík and Ferdinandi from Veltrusy are with me.

At 6 o'clock we got a command: no smoking, no speaking aloud. The Italians must be afraid.

The night is real bad—rather cold at times, and no space. We sleep sitting, cringed, and twisted one over another.

July 8
I woke up in the morning with a strong headache and stomachache. I ran to a latrine, seasick for the second time. It lasted about 2 hours. Half a cup of good coffee put my stomach in order.

At about 7 we approached a forested coast and arrived in the port of Toulon. It offered a little more certainty—when you are on the sea and see nothing but water all around, it seems that the ship is not moving and you can never get out of those waters. There were *festungs*[52] and lighthouses on both sides. There was a large Red Cross hospital ship in the port, a warship, 5 monitors, and some submarines. Right at the pier there were 5 huge steamers, high as 6-story houses and as long as a street. The people on them looked like ants on a railway car. We got bread.

At half past seven we got off and went through a cordon of French soldiers, all youngsters aged about 17. Their uniforms were dark blue; their officers' were colored the same as our field uniforms, and higher ranks had white cloth uniforms.

We got on 2nd class railway coaches elegantly outfitted with plush seats. It's always 9 prisoners and 1 soldier. Well, being a soldier, I hadn't traveled in such a luxury so far! What a difference—2nd class or cattle van! The soldiers are smart—they bring water to our

52 fortifications

field flasks. We haven't drank such cool water in a very long time.

A hydroplane flew quickly over us, landing every now and then. We saw huge factories and storage facilities, huge pyramids of briquettes. A huge military transport passed by with horses. We left Toulon at night.

July 9
The signs in the coaches are in French, German, and English. Passing through the Toulon suburbs, we saw civilians again after 8 months and the forest green we'd missed so much on Asinara. But, most important, we watched women. Each of us was just gazing at those lush daughters of the French south, and our thoughts were so strange! Small wonder—none of us had even approached a woman in 23 months. None of us had tried the pleasures of love. I must admit that French girls are really pretty!

Just to be free at home—now we feel the full weight of our fate. A soldier with a bayonet is placed five steps from another one. Every move and step are commented upon.

The train passed through beautiful gardens and well-kept vineyards. Figs, olives, and fine spruces swished by our windows. Some mountains approached slowly and a longer tunnel. Tired from the ship, I fell asleep. I was awakened by the command to get off at a small village named Cassis. It was 12:15.

From there we walked on a great but dusty road, and after an hour we could see a bay. The road went along the shore, climbing so it reminded us of wild Albania. A milestone at the crossroads said "18 km to Marseille." It was very hot; we were fatigued. We branched off at the 6th kilometer and arrived at a prisoner camp in an hour. It was in a valley surrounded by bare hills. The old building was a forsaken monastery. Beautiful park and buildings. Cells for 14 people sat in a huge square. Some 500 steps farther there were 15 houses with German prisoners.

The Italians handed us over, lined us up, and brought us to cells. I fell asleep immediately. The camp was surrounded by guards with bayonets. We felt like we were in an animal farm. They don't take a single step without bayonets here. They go for water, to the canteen, for meals or bread—always lined up perfectly and with bayonets. The Germans look real good in their brown uniforms and wide straw hats. Their shirts and hats bear large, printed letters—"P.G."—plus a number. You can tell a *prissonier de guerre*—a war prisoner—from afar.

There are 3 big canteens where you can buy bread, anchovies, cheese, or lemonade—all adequately expensive. 3/4 liter of lemonade is 60 cts., i.e. 1 lire. They deduct 25 % from the Italian currency. It's a strange charge. What's worse, they give us Italian coins as change, thus stealing from us twice.

Incredible stuff: Every now and then, they do *Verkaterny* or *Sur Eptenut*, as they call it. They line us up for hours, then count us and line us up again. They keep counting us and never seem to be done.

July 10
We wake up at half past six and get a cup of canned coffee (not worth saying much about). At 9 we get approximately 600 grams of bread; at 11 we get a great soup made of potatoes with peas or lentils, and a piece of meat as big as a finger. We like it; it's well-spiced and tasty, and there's a lot of vegetables. They serve it in dishes for ten men.

600 to 800 people leave every day. Our turn is tomorrow. [Those who leave are given provisions] for 2 days—bread, a piece of bacon, and one can of fish is a one-day portion. We are divided by trades but then we are sent out mixed again.

July 11
French soldiers are a strange mixture—65-year-olds with 18-year-old recruits. The uniforms vary—black, blue, brown, white, and green. It pleases the eye to look at all the colors within one unit.

Officers are mostly pensioners or disabled. But they're intelligent and much more polite than the Italians. I must admit they treat us well; it's a pity we don't understand them—everything would be much easier. As it is everywhere, the Serbs are the worst crew here.

They want to get everywhere just like cattle. They pulled out their Serb *chaykashes*[53], which we generally hate. It's hot here as it was on Asinara—it's a pity we cannot hide under the trees that are around the camp.

We miss our homes so much. Our memories have always given us comfort, but where do I get a chance? We play cards every day.

Camp de Carpiagne

July 13
Verkaterung[54] - we got food for 3 days - a loaf and a half, 4 bits of bacon approximately as big as those on Asinara for 1 Lira, and 3 cans of *sardines*. At 10 we got our last tasty meal and *marsch*[55] to the Cassis station. From afar we saw a new transport from Asinara that had just arrived. The people on it went a different way so we wouldn't meet. There was a large transport of blacks who showed us their white teeth.
They [56] wore uniforms - and would escort us. Their fingers were full of rings, and they showed off.

53 No idea what it means
54 Catering
55 Marched.
56 Unclear whether this refers to the blacks from previous paragraph

We were in tens in 2nd and 3rd class coaches, going to Marseille. We departed at 2. We passed 2 big tunnels, and at 4 we were leaving Marseille station over the P-L-M route (Paris-Lyon-Marseille). There were two tracks, built expensively with long tunnels and lofty bridges. Wayside signs showed its length is 834 kilometers.

We passed along the sea for a moment, then hillside, rocks, meadows, grazing flocks, fields, vineyards. The train went very fast. Brick and ceramic factories passed by our windows. A large city at kilometer 802 (Miramar?) and an unending flat behind it. We had our supper, and I fell asleep sitting up. We reached Station Orange at night.

July 14
Morning, half past seven, and we were at kilometer 582—Roues—so we had traveled more than 200 kilometers overnight. Then there was kilometer 778—Arles, where we passed through vineyards. At night our black guards were replaced by the 320th battalion—all old geezers. We felt broken, having slept sitting up.

Station Wienne. Ceramic factories.

At kilometer 509—Lyon, a huge city. Lovely, wide streets, great palaces, many factories.

Leaving at half past 8, each of us got a *trinkbecher*[57] of coffee. So far we are satisfied with the French. They treat us decently and pass us water in the coaches, and girls wave and even blow kisses. Maybe they mistake us for Italians, as we still wear Italian uniforms.

We admire the French women. They are jolly and dress tastefully. They care about fashion. As it is everywhere, anyone with straight legs was drafted from age 16 to 60. Women have replaced men on the railroads and trams, and everywhere.

Kilometer 482—Lozane. All meadows around the track with grazing cattle. It was noticeable that we were moving northward. The harvest hadn't even begun there whereas down south, it was over. Cold, cloudy day. The guard was replaced again by Battalion 85.

Kilometer 380—Taras-le-Mars. We got coffee from the Red Cross.

Kilometer 349—Moulins. A large station at quarter to four. Hundreds of cars with corn, huge storage halls.

Kilometer 314—St. Pierre. We meet a Red Cross train carrying the injured. Half past six —Sangaze. Guards replaced again—Battalion 123. Black coffee. It's comic how at each stop we jump off the coaches and *sturm*[58] the toilets.

57 Cup.
58 storm

The tracks branched off at kilometer 275. One went to Paris and the other to Bordeaux. We passed a large city at night after St. Pierre. We didn't learn its name.

July 15
5 o'clock in the morning: Tours. The guards were replaced by the 3rd Regiment of the French cavalry with helmets and long, horsehair tails. Our transport was divided there. I parted with Roubík and Ferdinandi, and we left. Guards changed again at nine. We passed through a town where the women really gazed at us. It's humiliating to be looked at as wild animals. Oh, when will our ill fate turn good? When will we be free again?

At 3 p.m. we arrived in a large town—Les Sables de Otone, near the Atlantic. That is from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic! This town is our destination. A huge industrial town with a forest of factory chimneys and ships.

We arrived at a briquette factory where the smoky faces of the *Reichsdeutscher*[59] prisoners welcomed us. They work here, and reportedly they're quite satisfied. They welcomed us in a friendly manner and started to collect mattresses. We slept in a huge storage facility, and they were kind to us. They have their own canteen, a library, and a band here; the band performed "Radetzky Marsch"[60]

59 German.
60 Czech/Austrian military march tune

to greet us. The Germans gave us a good meal and coffee. I lay down happy to stretch my aching and twisted limbs. We will never forget how friendly they were to us. They divided all they had for us like real brothers. We talked long into the night.

July 16
Today is *rasttag*[61] for us. The Germans are still very kind to us—they gave us 3 meals today although they received nothing for us. They give us bread and treat us like brothers. A French corporal asked them, "Didn't you fight Austriaci?" The fool! The French counted us three times a day.

There was a big concert in the evening. We sang the Austrian anthem, "Deutschland Über Alles[62]," etc. Their meals are very good and the bread is great.

July 17
The guards divided us into groups of 20 and took us to the station after lunch. We got on the train. It passed through the city more like a tramway. Everybody frowned at us as they would at cruel monsters; they clenched their fists and swore: "*Bosch*! *Kraut*![63]". We do not know what they mean, but they certainly aren't nice.

61 A day of rest.
62 „Germany above all" – nowadays the German anthem
63 Connotations for Germans

My team has 2 Czechs, 6 Germans, 1 Russian, 3 Dalmatians, and 8 Croats—20 citizens in all, an illustration of our beloved *Oesterreich*[64]! At 4 we got off and walked 8 kilometers to a village with a nice castle and a church. We were taken to a house with 3 rooms—2 for us and 1 for the guard. There were 5 guards for 20 prisoners. Planks and straw were ready, but no blankets—they hadn't arrived yet.

While we were making our beds, 4 civilians came to choose workers from among us. It was a hard deal—none of us could speak French, and they could only speak French. German didn't help; nobody understands it. This is typical of French education. Every one of us could speak 2 languages besides our mother tongue. We spoke one by one, trying to communicate—in Czech, German, Hungarian, Croatian, Romanian, Italian, and even a little English. All in vain, as my father would say. Five of us were chosen, and it was done.

July 18

The five of us got up at 4 and went to work in the castle. First we cleared a shed—our future dining room—and then we got our first breakfast: a cup of sweet coffee and lovely white bread. Then we got pitchforks and got to work the hay in the meadow.

We had lunch in the field at noon: beans that were really nice, and then some mixture that looked awful but was edible, especially when we were so hungry. A nice view—5 men sitting

64 Austria.

and eating around the dish . Great white wheat bread, huge loaves, and one liter of white wine. There should have been more of that. 2 hours of rest. Supper was that mixture again—boiled bread, carrots, beets, beans, potatoes, and cabbage all together.

That white wheat bread, the fact that we always got enough of it, and the good wine reconciled us with the French village. These things healed us. We worked out under the hot, southern sun, slept tight (though sometimes there was very little sleep as we got up at 4, started work at 5, worked till 7, and slept for 2 hours at noon when the heat was peaking. The meals of the southern French villagers—beans, pork, poultry, eggs, butter, vegetables, and the good wine, gave us strength. I don't know how the comrades in the factory camps were doing, but we wanted to finish the war working in the country. We got used to farm work, and the inhabitants got used to us; some even liked us. Every time they got on better with us than with the Germans. They gradually understood who we were and learned to differentiate between an *Autrichien*[65] and a *Bosch*[66]. And, later still, when we learned to understand them and communicate with them, they really liked us and tried to make our fate easier as much as they could.

And our boys, handsome and strong, got into good shape: They shaved, went around clean

65 Austrian.
66 German

and neat with their beards under bands. They even started intimate relationships with girls and soldier wives. That was forbidden and punished severely; this was why the guards were always with us, going to work and home, locking us up at night: Certainly not for fear that we might run but to prevent us from contacting the civilians.

Gradually the discipline loosened. The guards also started to pursue their own interests, and as our boys were together with the workers all day—in the fields, barns, sheds, and stables—it was difficult to prevent contact. Many friendships and love affairs were started, and when the matter became too widely public, the prisoners were just relocated to another village in a different district, and gone were the affairs. The persistent ones, though, found their ways even so. They found good-hearted Frenchmen who delivered letters secretly. We had trouble writing these letters, but finally we made it. I wrote so many love letters for my friends, always following a single formula: "*Ma cherie Viktorine, Germaine, Lussete, etc. Je pense—je ne—oublie jamais...*[67]" My friends, Valdeman and Novacek: what's left of these promises?

But never mind. It improved our miserable lives, that daily contact with the village people who were kind and sympathetic. They often kept our minds busy with their "*pauvre*

67 My darling... I am remembering, I will never forget

enfants"[68] and their kind inquiries as to where we were from, what it was like in our homes, and how we lived. Communicating with them was hard; we spoke using our hands. Anyway, those good villagers were completely ignorant of where our homeland is. And when we made the mistake of telling them we were neither Bosch nor Autrichiens, but that we were *de la Boheme*[69], it was all over. *La Boheme* is a Gypsy—so they kept wondering why we were not black but blond. Sometime a Gypsy with a bear came to the village.

We had hard work explaining to the French who we were. When we learned French and explained that we were Czechs—*le Tcheque*—it was good. But then we had to move to a completely new environment. They asked us about our families; we showed them the photographs and explained what life was like at home. Our boys boasted that everything was better, smarter, and more perfect.

But then again we could boast justly. We were ahead of the French in everything: land cultivation, household matters, cuisine, education. There were very many people here who could not read, who had open fireplaces in their houses with kettles on chains, burning shrubs, and dried cow waste they collected, dried, and stacked in the summer.

68 "Poor children."

69 In French like in English „Bohemia" is the geographic territory inhabited by the Czech nation, currently the Czech republic while „Bohemes" stands for Gypsy ethnicity

They didn't know about dumplings or cakes; their soups were only of bread or vegetables; they ate pork boiled, never roasted; they had boiled poultry and beans for breakfast, lunch, and supper. And they ate a lot of bread for every meal. They didn't eat much potatoes, and if they did they were only baked.

But all cooking is done with good butter, and no beer—just wine morning, noon, and evening. And what wine! When we got home years later, we never liked any wine because it could never be equal to the homegrown south French natural wine. And it was cheap! One chop—approximately . 4/10 liter—was for 15 cts., but you didn't even need those 15 cts. They offered you a taste and kept pouring again and again.

There was one more specialty in the coastal areas where we worked for farmers: fish, oysters, and snails. When they first gave us a dish full of snails, none of us would even touch them—we loathed them. It made us sick to see the people eat them and to suck their oysters. It took us a very long time to learn how to open them with knives and suck them out. The snails were boiled in garlic sauce or roasted on tin pans, and then there were things like prawns and other sea beasts that we didn't know. But we got used to it, as we did to the clogs that replaced our leather shoes.

The menu was all the same—very tasty cabbage, beans, pork, eggs, and bread—and

we always had an appetite. At first we ate separately as directed—and we ate all that was brought to us. If a farmer's wife was careless and left a whole butter lump on the table, she would not find it again. We cut it with spoons or hid it in empty cans. Later they were more careful and separated portions for everyone.

This went on the whole week. On Sundays we had a day off and cooked for ourselves. The mayor brought us bread, meat, grease, beans, and salt, and we took turns being Sunday cooks. Everyone tried hard to earn praise for their lunches. We often greased the lunches with what we kept for the whole week—a bit of grease here, some beans there, or a piece of meat there. Sometimes the farmer's wife would give the cook something secretly so our Sunday lunches could be even more substantial.

One cooked, and others washed clothes. We wet them on Saturdays in the nearby pond, using stones as weights so the clothes would not float away. Sunday was the washing day—with brush and soap we ground our miserable shirts and underwear, then rinsed them in the pond and dried them on the fence.

The first 4 who were done with washing sat down to play cards. The others shaved, twisted their mustaches under bands, and wrote home.

After lunch we would sit in the garden, talk about memories, and sometimes sing. That was when the village beauties walked by our house and peeped over the fence.

After about 3 weeks, we received an order to stamp all our underwear and clothes. A guard brought tin forms. Jára, who was sick, got the forms and paint and started printing "P.G." and a six-digit number. Jára was very skilful. He could do anything in the world—repair watches and ploughs, shoes and stoves—but could not read or write. We only learned that much later. He concealed it well, as he was ashamed of it. He would get no letters and wrote to no one, so we never learned anything.

So Jára printed and printed. But alas, when the guard came back from his stroll in the evening he found that Jára had also painted the underwear that was being dried in the garden. It could not be erased nor washed off.

July 19
Waking up at 4, then coffee and haymaking. We work as if we were paid 5 crowns a day. Lunch at noon, as yesterday, that mixture for supper, then potato goulash and finally milk pap. It was dark when we got home. Our work is a bit too much for 20 cts. daily. Guards watch us. We cannot leave them for a single step. They are with us in the fields all day.

They don't fuss around with us at night. To avoid having to watch, they lock us in, give us

a *nachttopf*[70]—a big tub into which we do it—and, as the door and windows are sealed, there is a wonderful aroma all night.

July 20
We yielded our Italian money and got various instructions. We can write cards home one Sunday and letters the next. A doctor came today and inspected our two sick men. At night I feel like I've been beaten. I'm not used to such hard work.

July 21
Still haymaking. Meals are getting better day by day. Coffee, bread, and butter in the morning, bread soup, beans, bread and butter, and a glass of wine at noon. Bread soup, potato goulash, milk pap, salad, and bread in the evening. We must hand in all money; we can't keep even a penny, maybe so we can't buy a car and flee.

July 22
We got straw hats with "P.G." painted on them. Great sausages for supper today.

July 23
Sunday. We sleep longer, make coffee. I write a card home, and we wash. What a difference—a Sunday two years ago and now. I long for freedom so much. A barber came and shaved us all.

70 Night pot.

July 27-30
Days pass in work. Digging vegetables such as beets, harvesting wheat, etc. Lots of work. I am always glad when the evening comes.

Food is good and abundant. Bread is great and there is plenty of it. Meals are various, such as I have never seen. Boiled green beans with butter, beans, green peas, and a salad twice a day. Sometimes even meat. We can't buy anything; the guards took our money. And then we cannot communicate—if we could, we would be much better off.

The French are not bad to us. In farming they are backward. Their kitchens look like Albanian ones—no ceilings, smoky beams, Serb fireplaces, chained kettles with fire underneath.

July 30
Sunday again. We look forward to these few moments of rest so much. I wash, stitch, and write home, including 4 cards to Ústí—to F.T., A.S., A.M., and Kohn & Kornfeld.

I long for home, for you, my dear parents! I am losing my hope ever to return. How happy I was two years ago, and now? A sad anniversary in recent days—2 years of war! When will that poor, damned war end?
It is extraordinarily hot today.

August 8
Sunday again. Service in the local church. We are a beautiful sight: Lined up in pairs, a

soldier in front and one in back, *bajonet auf*[71]. The locals look at us as at wild animals.

The church is nice. The farmers' wives are in black, with white caps and clogs. I pray for my parents and for my happy return home.

A strange habit—during sacrifice, a boy walks around with a basket, and everyone takes a bit of white bread and eats.

We got *lohnung*[72] for 12 days. We had Fr2.40 in vouchers that we used to pay.

A barber comes and shaves us every Sunday.

After working hard all week, it's finally harvest. Harvesting wheat with obsolete sickles and tying it without wisps. We sweat a lot.

We worked at the neighboring farm for 3 days. The food was better there. We threshed on Saturday and got a great supper.

This country reminds of us Albania and the Arnauts again and again. The rooms, fireplaces, carts, ox yokes, and hip bands.

The people are not bad, and we would certainly have good times if we could communicate.

I weighed myself yesterday—63 kilograms.

71 Bayonets deployed
72 salary

I bought a knife for 50 cts.—2 1/2 days of plodding in the fields.

August 13
Another 6 days of plodding are over. I'm real glad when Sunday comes. I'm tired up to here for the whole week. This week we harvested and tied corn and had pretty bad meals. Only on Saturday we got back to work for our old lord.

What I regret most is being with the Croats—they're worse than animals. The French tell us about big defeats of the Austrians; in Galicia; they say General Bothner gave up with an entire corps.

We got paid for 9 days—Fr.1.80.

August 15
The Day of Our Lady. No work; going to a service. The way local people look at us really annoys me. They're not bad. They want to talk to us and offer us snuff and cigarettes. A strange habit in progressive France—boys from about 14 or 15 all have their own snuff boxes, and they use snuff. Girls from 7 years up wear laced corselets and wooden shoes.

August 20
Sunday. We love to rest. Worked with thresher for 2 days. Much work and much food, much wine, and that counts.

Our team goes around to all the houses, stack to stack, with the thresher. They have no barns here—the straw stays stacked in the fields. Passing crops up to the machine in heat and dust is real hard work.

Threshing here is a feast when the *patron* tries to out-feast the neighbor. Soup, 2-3 kinds of roast meat (mostly mutton), vegetables, salads, eggs, butter, and, on top of it all, snails, oysters, and fish. When they first gave us snails, we did not know what to do with them, and one exceptionally clever Croat wanted to crush them with his fist on the table like walnuts.

I can't stand the Croats, and they know it. They repay me when they can. How on earth did I get among these bastards?

Thresher menu: white coffee and bread and butter in the morning; pauper's snack is bread soup, duck with carrots, potatoes with butter, mixed salad, and pap.

Lunch and supper: pap (milk and semolina; the pap is very sweet). Snails in great sauce—we have learned how to eat them, and we enjoy them. The French have started to treat us differently—they eat in the kitchen, and we sit in an extra room. There are huge beds made up high. One lies right next to the ceiling. I wouldn't like falling down at night. The bed has a huge canopy in Louis XV Style. There are great lacquered chests, clocks, and floors of stomped clay.

32 people are at the feast, including all our guards and corporals. They go with us and with the thresher from house to house and eat with us. The local workers are boys and girls aged 7 - 12.

We drink much wine every day.

I exchanged my lire for francs at a ratio of 35:29.80, i.e. a charge of 15 %.

Today we were divided; 10 men, the worse hell-raisers, left for the next village, thank God.

The day after tomorrow it will be 2 years that I have been on duty for the emperor - here with the thresher in the field.

I bought butter, bread, and anchovies. I will make coffee and have a nice Sunday. I will write letters to F. and A.M., and cards to F.T. and K. and K.

I received light pants, a shirt, and shoes with wooden soles. The tops are from old, leather military boots. The local people have a nasty habit—chewing tobacco and spitting it out.

August 26
Saturday. Surprise for us: we're not going to work. A doctor came to vaccinate us. This week we worked 3 days with the thresher and ate well; now we are at the castle, sawing timber.

The women in the castle keep looking at us. We don't know who they are. They change clothes 7 times a day, looking sharp with much make-up. But we can't fall in love with any of them. Our desires are elsewhere; we are not interested in anything here. Today there was one who spoke German. She asked me just about everything. The coquettes!

A servant brought me a bottle of excellent wine in his pocket. He said his son was a prisoner in Germany. He feels very sorry for us. Well, common suffering bringss people closer to one another.

News—Romania declared war on Austria. My lohn from August 10 to 20 was Fr1.40.

Today we saw the countess, the owner of the manor—a slim brunette. Her daughter, the comtesse, is blonde, and she is dressed beautifully.

My address: Josef Sramek, *en equippe agricolete*,[73] Porroux par Avrile, Vendee-France.

73 Agricultural team.

After the War

Little is known about how Josef Šrámek returned home after the war. It is believed he became part of the French Legions — military units of the newly formed Czechoslovakia, which played a symbolic role in ending the war and liberating the country.

The following photos marked "1920" seem to have been taken after his return home:


1920

He married Ludmila Anna Nováková, who is mentioned with affection in the diary. They had two children: Josef Šrámek Jr., who passed away in 2006, and Jarmila Svobodová, my mother, who lives in Prague.

For the family's genealogy, see www.rodovid.org and look for Josef Šrámek.

Josef Šrámek with his wife and daughter in the 1960's

Clarion Foreword Review

At the start of World War I, Josef Šrámek, a young Czech textile worker, found himself drafted into the Austrian army. As part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Czechoslovakia fell under the empire's rule, and the twenty-two-year-old had no alternative but to serve. Loyal to the Czech national movement, Šrámek wanted nothing to do with the Austrian cause, but he had no choice. From the day he finished basic training in 1914 through the end of August 1916, he kept a diary, which his grandson Tomáš Svoboda has now translated and published as *Diary of a Prisoner in World War I*. The book offers an astonishing view of one soldier's tremendously challenging, disheartening, and life-threatening experiences during a war that he and many others never wanted and never understood.

"We are going to kill people who have done us no wrong," Šrámek starts. "It is hard for me to part with our beautiful homeland." Hiking from Plzeň to the Serbian front, he encounters the first of many hardships. Extreme heat followed by deep mud, lack of food and water, and dysentery and lice make the trek almost impossible. After only two weeks, he admits, "I cannot go any farther. I am out of strength." The war has not yet even started for his battalion, yet the troops are already

exhausted. “What will it be like when we are on the front?” Šrámek wonders. His question is answered in only a matter of days, and what has seemed impossible up to this point is now minor compared with what is to come.

One of the most intriguing aspects of this young soldier’s diary is his succinct, often unemotional presentation. “Serbs killed our corporal when he was on patrol,” he says in one entry, followed by, “Beautiful weather. Jupa went shopping.” Most of his entries are short, undoubtedly of necessity, yet he does occasionally philosophize. Even then, his words are brief: “Miraculously, I survived,” he says one day, and, “It is really strange that I have been escaping an injury or death so far,” on another. In a much later entry, he allows, “We are killing our best times here—what I could experience at home if there were not that damned war.” Nothing can make him believe in what he is doing.

Barely three months after his enlistment, Šrámek is captured by the Serbs and spends the rest of the war as a prisoner. His diary offers chilling details about his ongoing imprisonment: stretches of three, four, and even six days without food; no shoes or appropriate clothing in the freezing temperatures; deadly fevers; forced work details; forced marches; and violent treatment at the hands of his captors.

Šrámek's diary is both informative and eye-opening. **His grandson has done a masterful job putting it into a format accessible to a broad audience[74].** There are some issues with the text itself[75], including a few oddities that are probably mistranslation, some abrupt font-size changes, and more than a few spacing errors. But overall, *Diary of a Prisoner in World War I* is a **must-read for any student or aficionado of twentieth-century history. No historian could have written a more poignant tale.**

Cheryl Hibbard
November 21, 2012

74 Bold emphasis effect added by the editor.
75 Editor's note: These were corrected in the present edition as best as possible.