

Author's Note: The following rough draft of Chapter One is from my new book, *WWI Crusaders: A band of Yanks in German-occupied Belgium helps save millions from starvation, as civilians resist the harsh German rule. August, 1914 to April, 1917*. The chapter does have end notes sourcing all appropriate information, but I chose not to put them in this rough draft sample. Projected publication is sometime in 2018. For more information please visit the book's website at www.WWIBehindTheLines.com or contact me, Jeffrey B. Miller, at jbmwriter@aol.com

One

Left or Right

“No one slept throughout the night”

Before the August 1914 start of World War I, the Belgian village of Virton was a thriving administrative and commercial center in Luxembourg Province. A Walloon, or French-speaking, municipality of 3,500 residents, Virton was known for its hilly streets, massive St. Lawrence's Catholic Church, and remnants of medieval walls. Located just south of the better-known Ardennes region and less than five miles north of the French border, Virton was the principal town of the small Belgian region known as Gaume, which boasted a warmer microclimate than

those around it. Gently rolling green hills and lush pockets of forest were peaceful dividers between picturesque ancient towns and villages.

When the war came, it did not pass lightly over Virton and the surrounding villages. During the invasion, more than two hundred men, women, and children were dragged from their homes and executed in one of the worst massacres of the time. Many houses were partially or completely destroyed. Across Belgium the Germans outlawed all movement outside a person's neighborhood without a properly authorized *passierschein*. A constant barrage of *affiches* commanded Belgians in all matters of life. These placards came from either the local German commander or from Belgium's German governor-general, Baron von Bissing. Any disobedience was met with harsh fines and sometimes imprisonment.

Nearly two and a half years of occupation had passed when the stories of the "slave raids" crept into Virton long before the German *affiche* was posted. When the official proclamation appeared on the town's walls in late 1916, people read the notice of their turn in the upcoming deportation of Belgian men more with horrified resignation than surprise. It ordered all men between eighteen and fifty-five from the town and the surrounding villages to appear the next day at Virton's Saint Joseph's College. The men were to be there at 7:00 a.m. with blankets and three days' rations. Nothing was said about what would happen to them or where they would go.

"No one slept throughout the night," wrote Joe Green, an American civilian who witnessed the event. "The women were busy mending and packing clothes and blankets. The men were settling their affairs. The notaries' offices were crowded with men making their wills. The priests and the burgomasters [mayors] and the leading citizens moved all night from house

to house, giving words of encouragement and advice, and promising to look after the wives and children left behind.”

Green was twenty-seven years old with thick black hair and a heavy moustache that reinforced his intense look. An air of seriousness rarely left him and his temper could be like a firecracker—quick and explosive. He did not suffer fools lightly. And yet, that evening in Virton as he walked among the people he was sworn to help feed, he had to contain his anger and sense of injustice—he was the provincial chief delegate of the American-led Commission for Relief in Belgium and had sworn on his honor as a gentleman to remain neutral when serving in German-occupied Belgium.

The next day dawned heavy, with low-lying pewter clouds and snow that changed back and forth to rain as it fell quietly. The sense of dread and foreboding was heightened by a reminder of the fighting to the south as the big guns thundered off in the distance towards Verdun.

Those who did not obey the *affiche* were taken from their homes by German soldiers wielding rifles with fixed bayonets. Protests, explanations, and pleadings were lost on the German soldiers who responded with rough handling and rifle butts to motivate the Belgian men. Women and children stood by helplessly as they watched their husbands, fathers, or brothers forced into the street. They joined others—the ones who had heeded the *affiche*—trudging toward Saint Joseph’s College. Most of them were workmen dressed in traditional Belgian corduroy pants, coarse shirts, and peasant caps. If it had been further north in Flemish territory, many would have had on *sabots* (wooden shoes), but this was Walloon country, so heavy work boots were what most wore.

By 7 a.m. the streets around the college were clogged with people. Green was watching and tried to remain calm as “the men, each with his sack on his back, were herded like cattle, village by village. The women and children, kept at a distance, stood in compact masses, wailing, moaning, wringing their hands. Order was kept by the Uhlans, especially brought from France for the purpose.”

German *uhlans* were lance-carrying cavalry that had become infamous from stories of their brutality during the invasion. When it came to crowds, these cavalry men knew how to control restless, desperate people. They would ride up and down, using their horses to cut wide swathes through the throng, clearing a way, breaking up little knots of people, always keeping them moving so a crowd could not gather in one place. Each *uhlan* carried a long lance that had a pennant near the end and a steel, razor-sharp tip. He would carry the pike loose in hand, not resting in the stirrups, and would brandish it at will above the heads of the women and children.

In Virton, the men who were corralled outside Saint Joseph’s College were called in groups by village. As they stepped forward, they were shoved and shouted at by the soldiers and formed into a single line that led through the gate into the courtyard of the college. There the Belgians found a long table and four German officers—the men who would decide their fate.

No time was given for any meaningful review or analysis of the health, employment status, or general fitness of each man. Any objections Green might have made were ignored. “Scarcely any questions were asked. There was no time for questions. The examinations averaged less than ten seconds per man.” Each man showed his identity card, which had his name, age, and profession. He then waited for the last officer to make his pronouncement. It was simply one word: “left” or “right.”

Left was freedom. Right was forced deportation.

Green watched as “those who passed to the right disappeared, waving a last farewell” as an “agonized shriek went up from some woman in the crowd.” And as more men disappeared, the crowd became more agitated. Women kept trying to break through the barricade of soldiers to “say one last word to a husband or a son.”

The horrifying scene continued to unfold as the young American bore witness. The women were “pushed back roughly into the crowd, often with kicks and blows. In a short time all the women in the front rows of the crowd were being beaten by the soldiers, both with fists and with the butts of guns. This indescribable scene went on for over half an hour, in plain sight of the groups of [Belgian] men, many of whom were weeping unrestrainedly from rage and helplessness. Finally an officer came out of the court[yard] and put an end to the worst of the brutality.”

As the rain and snow continued to fall, the men marked for deportation were herded by German soldiers with fixed bayonets to the train station. Cattle cars were waiting, and the men were shoved in. Each car had a recommended capacity of only eight horses or forty men, yet the Germans were known to force up to sixty men into one car. The Virton men probably fared no better.

By nightfall the Virton train, packed with its human cargo, was gone. As the train had pulled away from the station, the men had no doubt been singing, like many before them, the Belgian and French national anthems, “La Brabançonne,” and “La Marseillaise.” For any women and children lining the tracks who had been watching carefully, they might have also seen a few small scraps of paper tossed from the moving cattle cars—hastily scribbled notes from deportees wanting to send one last message to loved ones.

In the end, about a third of the men from Virton were taken and, as Green stated, “almost none under the age of 25. . . escaped.” The nearby village of Ethe was hit the hardest—only seventeen “able-bodied men remaining out of a population of 1,500. The women and children will be unable to cultivate the fields next spring. In one family in particular, four little girls are left alone. The mother was shot at the beginning of the war. The father and elder brother are now carried off to Germany. The Industrial School at Ethe lost 36 out of its 40 remaining students. This in spite of the formal promise of the Germans that none of the students would be taken.”

Green was shocked and horrified and would never forget what he saw that day in Virton. He ended his official account with “The deportations go on. The Province of Liège, Greater Brussels, and many other localities have not yet passed through the ordeal. Belgium waits.”

He was much more forthright when he wrote his parents about the deportations, dropping any pretense of neutrality: “They are carried out with the last degree of brutality. They are utterly unwarranted by the situation in Belgium and they may simply be regarded as the latest and worst manifestations of that systemized German barbarity which must be crushed.”

Ultimately, the slave raids would touch most of Belgium, ensnare more than 100,000 men, and herald a new, harsher existence for the civilians under German occupation. “These deportations,” Green explained to his parents, “have done more to break the spirit of the Belgians than all that has happened in the last two and a half years put together. . . Now an impenetrable gloom, apparent on every face, is setting down on the country.”

As one British newspaper reported, all the past demands and difficulties of the German occupation had allowed civilians to at least live peacefully in their own homes. But with the start of the deportations, “now the fear of exile hangs over every man’s head, and every woman and

child in the land knows that at any moment German soldiers may knock at the house door, and, at the point of a bayonet, drive husband, father, or brother away without a moment's warning, to be swallowed up in the slave army which goes to Germany for no one knows how long, and to return—if ever—no one knows when.”

Brand Whitlock, U.S. minister for the legation in Brussels, wrote in his official report on the deportations, “Appalling stories have been related by Belgians coming to the Legation. . . . Even if a modicum of all that is told is true, there still remains enough to stamp this deed as one of the foulest that history records.”

And “left” or “right” became words that defined the brutality of the forced deportations. None who were taken then, however, could have guessed that those two words foretell even greater terror only twenty-five years later as they became forever linked with the horrors of World War II's Holocaust.

But back in World War I Belgium, the genesis of the deportations—and how the Belgians and the small group of Americans that included Joe Green reacted to them—were all part of a much larger story that had its roots in the early stages of the war. That larger story was of the American-led Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB) and its Belgian counterpart, the Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation (CN), which joined forces to try and save nearly 10 million Belgian and French civilians from starving to death.

Food relief on such a massive scale had never been attempted before—by governments or private citizens—and was considered impossible during times of war. Would the Allies allow food into occupied Belgium? Would the Germans keep their hands off it? Would the Americans be able to raise the funds and organize the purchase and shipment of the massive amounts of

food needed to feed a nation? Could the Belgians organize the food preparation and distribution to millions of residents?

Those questions and many more were all back dropped by additional hurdles—Allied military opposition to the relief, a harsh German occupation, the deportation of Belgian workers, Belgian passive resistance to the German rule, and even infighting between the CRB and the CN.

In the end, all those forces and events would cause a tumbling together of extraordinary people into a chain reaction of life-and-death situations far from the trenches and killing fields of World War I.

And hanging in the balance were millions of civilian lives.

End of Chapter One