

Memoirs of Jaroslav Janda

Summary

Jaroslav Janda (1.1.1884 - 24. 9. 1969) was my grandpa. He wrote a book of memoirs devoted to his involvement in the First World War.

The former Austro-Hungarian Empire, of which Bohemia, where he had lived, was a part of, declared general mobilization and simultaneously declared war on Serbia and Russia which soon grew into World War I. My grandpa had been already drafted in 1905 and between 1905 -1908 he had spent nearly four years in active service in Dalmatia which he had finished as a corporal in military medical service.

In July 1914 after the mobilization he was forced to report again for duty immediately. He was housed and was on duty in the Prague Archduke Albrecht's barracks. After the formation of special medical troops in early August they were sent off to the Serbian front to become part of the General Potiorek army. They went by train from Prague to Vienna, Graz and Maribor to the Bosnia/Herzegovina and Serbia border. After some period of time grandpa was promoted to the rank of platoon sergeant. He and his fellow soldiers were to fight the Serbians whom we Czechs had never considered an enemy. Of course the Serbians did not know that this time there were soldiers of Czech origin in the trenches in front of them who would much rather go over to their side. The Serbians meant they were Germans and called them all "the Schwaba".

After the battle on the Kolubara River in December 1914 my grandpa and thousands of his fellow soldiers got taken prisoners by the Serbians. In 1915 the Serbians had to retreat and withdraw their troops from their homeland territory to go to Albania and Greece. After having served in a couple of military hospitals in Valjevo in southwest Serbia during 1915 the prisoners had to set out on a long journey on foot under guard. Their 800-kilometre route took them from Valjevo into the far off Albanian mountains and then to the Mediterranean coast. At the beginning they were getting some bread or flour, but with time they were starving cruelly. They were helping themselves out a little with selling underclothes, handkerchiefs, rings, watches, pocketknives, all they had in their packs- just to get a loaf of bread or a maize corn. Thousands of prisoners died of exhaustion during this march of death!

At Christmas time in 1915 they finally arrived at Porta Valona (port Vlorë in today Albania) and were transported by sea on Italian military ships and disembarked in the island of Asinara where they had to build up their own war camps. They were transported to France in July 1916 after roughly a six-month stay in Asinara. In France my grandpa spent another year in four French camps doing different kinds of work in ports, in the railway stations, in the woods.

It was an obvious decision for him to join the corps of the Czechoslovak legion in France (that time it was called the Czech army of volunteers. Such armies were formed also in Russia and much later in Italy). Grandpa signed up for the legion on 4 October 1917. Along with about 120 000 Czech (and a few Slovak) prisoners of war he switched sides and joined the legion to fight the hated German and Austro-Hungarian Empires and create an independent country out of his homeland. In October 1918, Czechoslovakia declared independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

In 1918 the Czechoslovak legion in France had three rifle regiments manned mostly by Czech prisoner of war volunteers. In the order of battle the 21st and 22nd Czechoslovak regiment and the 119th French army regiment under the French army leadership my grandpa took part in the fight against Germany at Terron and Vouziers.

My grandpa returned to his homeland by train through Padova, Verona, Vienna and České Budějovice on 4 January 1919 to be greeted by the first Czechoslovak Defense Minister V. Klofáč in Prague. After having been demobilized in May 1919 he returned to his civil profession. His memoirs were written down at the age of 50 in 1934 only.

Editing and Commentary

It took me more than one month to transcribe the hand-written manuscript and while doing this I realized some editing was also necessary. I devoted the next three months to preparing a serious historical commentary and plugging the historical holes.

It has been quite easy to get used to my grandpa's meticulous and tiny handwriting. I have strived for accuracy and have tried to preserve the original writing style although in some cases I had to shorten his ridiculously long sentences. I have had to leave out some details related mostly to the fate of grandpa's fellow prisoners of war and his fellow legionnaires which he had included twice or three times. In those cases I've rearranged sentences to keep his train of thought smooth and chronological. Chapter headings and commentaries are my own additions.

My grandfather spent the war period in Serbia and Albania, in Italy and in France successively. He could speak well Serbian and a little of all the other languages and so he often used some direct speech to enliven his narrative. It took me and my husband a lot of time to research a meaning and a spelling (especially the French spelling) of the original sentences written almost always phonetically.

As a little girl I had surprisingly enough patience to listen to my grandfather's war stories. Although I tried to remember every word that time, now that I am much older I feel happy to rediscover his stories and his personality. I also believe that my family and friends will be hooked reading the memoirs the same way I was.

Jaroslava Hlaváčková
October 2013