The Lost Legion: A Czechoslovakian Epic

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Chapter I – The Great Migration

It was late in the afternoon when Major Krolich turned our detachment from the frost-bound road into a field, and ordered half an hour's rest. We were all dead tired and threw ourselves wearily upon the snow-covered ground. The Sergeant-Major passed down the lines.

"Major's orders are that nobody must go into the road during the halt," he shouted.

Struggling with our equipment and heavy loads of ammunition, we collapsed upon the frozen snow, which crackled crisply beneath us. From the distance came the dull reverberation of the Austrian and Russian guns.

Never in my twenty years of life had I felt so miserable.

Probably most of my comrades of the 8th Infantry experienced much the same feeling. The Regiment was composed almost entirely of Czechs, but we were officered by Germans who knew very well that we loathed the Austrian cause and hated us accordingly. As a soldier, the Czech suffered even more humiliating treatment from Habsburg masters than he had been accorded commonly in civilian life, and that had seemed the acme of injustice. The armies of His Imperial Majesty Franz Josef the First, Kaiser of Austria, and King of Hungary, had no love for their Czech regiments.

Suddenly fierce swearing broke out some distance down the field from where I lay. It was Major Krolich, our hard-fisted commander.

"Who is that swine on the road over there?" he cried. "Ah, it is Stepan, the pig-dog of a Czech. I will get the big ideas out of your head – you! Sergeant-Major! Tie up that man."

I looked up to see the Sergeant seize my old school friend, Stepan, while our platoon leader, Corporal Binner, hastened forward with a length of rope. Why Stepan had been foolish enough to disobey orders I do not know, but the punishment that followed was utterly out of measure with the importance of the offence. The poor lad's arms were forced upwards behind his back, and his wrists lashed to the branch of a tree high above his head. The rope on which he hung was adjusted so that it was just short enough to compel him to stand a-tiptoe. The agony of such punishment in bitterly cold weather may be imagined, and Stepan's face soon became blue. In an effort to relieve the strain upon wrists and shoulders, he vainly strained to rest the balls of his feet upon the ground.

"Leave him hanging until we move," yelled the foul-mouthed Major, adding some unprintable remarks about the soldiers of his detachment.

I scrambled to my knees at the sight of Stepan's pain, but was dragged down roughly by a fellow-soldier named Danek.

"Lie down you fool and take no notice. There is nothing we can do just now; we should only get the same treatment ourselves. Our time will come." He glanced up and down the lines of prostrate men and added: "Look at their faces, Gus, and judge for yourself."

The men were doing their best to look indifferent, but their faces glowered, and jaws were set in unnatural firmness. Every now and then, covert glances, telling a story of hate, were cast towards the Austrians. But no one moved. The Sergeant and Binner stood staring at Stepan; they were pleased with their work,

I lay very still, occasionally glancing towards Stepan, and thinking of the brutal treatment which I had once seen my brother suffer in a street in Brno, our native town. The incident occurred on the occasion of the Volkstag Festival in 1905. I was a lad of eleven at the time, and my brother had taken me out to see the fun. Unhappily, this 'fun' only too often was the thin mask concealing bitter racial hatreds which the Austrians sometimes seemed to foment deliberately. Probably they did not actually wish to foment them, but they desired to crush the national aspirations of the Czechs,

aspirations which had been maintained successfully for three hundred years in face of despotic alien rule.

For days prior to this particular Volkstag thousands of Austrian-Germans were brought to Brno, where the population was overwhelmingly Czech. They had come with the sole purpose of making use of the occasion to carry on the work of germanization. Needless to say, serious riots broke out, and blood flowed.

The Austrian police, composed solely of Germans, made no allowance for the indisputable fact that the trouble had arisen out of the arrogance and unprovoked provocations of their own countrymen. They charged the angry Czechs, using their sabres freely. In one particularly fierce attack my brother, who was trying to protect me, was struck by a mounted constable. The man savagely slashed his overcoat from shoulder to seat. Fortunately, he was not much hurt, but the brutal assault made a deep impression upon my young mind. On the morning after the riot we reached our Czech school to be told that we could not attend that day because the Germans, in venting their spite upon us, had attacked the house, smashing windows, and strewing the floors with broken glass, stones, and fragments of smashed furniture.

Until the outbreak of the War race-feeling grew in Brno. We Czechs were not allowed to forget for an hour that German was the predominant strain, and that we must submit to superior blood, regarding it an honour to be absorbed into the conquering race.

Persecution and petty irritation was not limited to authority, however. The ordinary citizen of German blood often followed the example of the Government, heaping insult and indignity upon us. These people were infuriated that we remained aloof, refusing to be absorbed willingly into the great German bloodstream. They forgot that they had never given us reason to desire closer union with the Fatherland than was politically necessary. Thus our attitude was traitorous in Austrian eyes.

One of my best friends of those days was Charles Kovar, a lad a little older than I. Charles' father had suffered badly from the German hate. Naturally enough, he had desired his son to be brought up as a Czech in Czech schools. But his employer in a German-owned firm was of another opinion. When Kovar refused to transfer his son to a German school he was dismissed from his post. Charles was mobilized immediately on the outbreak of war, and was marched off to the Front with an early draft. The evening before he left Brno Charles and I had a heart-to-heart talk.

"I've got to go now, Gus," he said, "but you may be sure that nothing will make me really fight for Austria. My plan is to get across to the Russians at the first opportunity, and then I'll fight right enough."

Charles Kovar was not a coward. So much depends upon one's point of view in these matters, and from the Czech angle he was a true patriot. But of course he knew that were the Austrians to catch him in the act of desertion to the enemy he would be shot as a traitor.

"Gus," he said finally, "keep in touch with my mother and father for so long as you stay at home. If they don't hear from me for some time try to cheer them up, and tell them that silence does not necessarily mean that I have been killed. I shall write from Moscow just as soon as I get there. And I hope I shall meet you soon in Russia." And so, indeed, it turned out, with the difference that it was in Siberia, in the Czech Army, that I next met my friend Charles.

The dismissal of Charles' father for desiring his son to be brought up as a Czech was not an isolated incident of its kind. The German-Austrians enjoyed irritating and provoking us Czechs in every way possible. I shall never forget the vindictive malice of one old Austrian who lived in Brno in a flat across the street from our own. Doubtless he would have described himself as 'a grand old patriot.' But he was far too narrow-minded to recognize the virtue of patriotism in another who entertained other than German ideals. He had a cracked, quavering voice, a rasping irritation to all who had an ear for harmony, which he employed in singing 'Die Wacht am Rhein' into our very windows on

any and every occasion when he thought the performance would be an annoyance to us. Sometimes we were provoked beyond bearing.

“Quiet, you old buzzard, you will choke yourself with your mouthings,” my brother would shout, whereat the singing would be renewed with gleeful vigour.

This incident may seem amusing as set down here, but it should be remembered that similar irritations were practised upon us in their scores every week, and in their thousands throughout the Czech country, and it will not be found surprising that, as a nation, we felt no shred of loyalty towards the tyrannous Habsburgs. The outcome was inevitable. An abiding hatred arose between the races, and day by day we chafed the more for the opportunity to throw off an intolerable yoke. The War brought us that opportunity. It was not as though we had been treated in a reasonable manner. Our traditions and racial aspirations had been suppressed and mocked persistently; at one time our very language was proscribed.

Before 1914 Austria was tyranny’s stamping ground, and when at last in August of that year the bugles sounded the Habsburgs knew that the rod they had set in pickle out of wanton arrogance was now to be used as a scourge for their own backs. It is true that the Czechoslovak problem was a serious cause for anxiety to the Austrian Government. The country’s leaders knew that in their midst were 8,000,000 Czechs and 3,000,000 Slovaks who, given the smallest chance, would gladly help in an effort to pull down the Empire. So when riots broke out, as many did, they were put down ruthlessly by the military, and hangings took place in many districts. To round up the Czechs for Army service, during which they would be severely disciplined and carefully watched, seemed to be a partial remedy. Whenever possible, the Czech and Slovak battalions were sent to the Italian Front, as far distant as possible from the Russians and Serbians who, as Slavs, were their half-brothers. But it was not possible to maintain this principle when men were urgently needed on the Eastern Front, a consideration accounting for the fact that my comrades and I found ourselves behind the Front in Russian Poland in early February 1915.

Doubtless the thoughts of my comrades watching poor Stepan gradually sinking into insensibility were similar to my own. Their personal experiences of the Austrian oppression differed from mine only in detail. But the sight of our comrade’s pain could not but increase our hatred for German blood-and-iron methods. The cup of Czech suffering had long been filled.

Suddenly 2nd Lieutenant Stanislawski approached the spot where Stepan hung. Stanislawski was a Pole, and the only non-German officer in our detachment. He was not in sympathy with German methods, and now, after watching Stepan for a short time, he went to the Major. A lively argument took place between them, and then the Major angrily gave the order for the march. The Lieutenant called the Sergeant-Major, Stepan was cut down, and collapsed in a dead faint. Stanislawski still stood beside him when the detachment was lined up to march away.

“Good fellow, that Pole,” muttered Danek to me. “He hates the Germans just as we do.”

Late that night we arrived in a half-ruined village where the thunder of the guns was much louder than it had been before. Here the detachment rested. Next day it was split into a number of sections, each of which was to be used to reinforce different parts of the Front Line. At this time the Russians had already retreated into Poland, The lines followed the course of the River Nida, which, at the spot where we now found ourselves, flowed between them. The distance to the Russian trenches was not great, but I saw at once that the river and large swamps which lay between them and our position, would make crossing unnoticed practically impossible.

Danek and I were in the same dugout. Most of the other men also came from Brno, or nearby districts, and all were Czechs. But they were restrained, friendly in so far as questions were asked concerning things in town before we left, and the health of any mutual acquaintances which happened to be discovered, but beyond this nothing. There was no mistaking the atmosphere of suspicion which obtained everywhere.

Danek was the only one who spoke freely and without the second thoughts which, in the others, usually caused the lips to remain closed. He had been on the Galician Front in the previous August and now explained to me the reason for the reticence in our companions.

"They call me 'Crazy Danek' in Brno because I am less apt than most others in concealing what I happen to think," he said. "But don't you take example from me. Keep your mouth shut until you know the folk to whom you talk. We Czechs all know that we are anti-Austrian almost to a man, and that we fight for the Empire only because we are forced. But the Government has put many spies amongst our troops and are always watching us for signs of treason. And after all, it's no good risking lives until we can get on to the right side of the trench lines."

As the days passed, I began to comprehend the point of view of the older soldiers. I caught myself watching the men arriving with the new drafts, for any one of them might be a spy or informer. Men would form themselves into small groups of seemingly intimate friends, speaking freely amongst themselves, but carefully avoiding all political conversation with those outside their particular circle.

For some time, I felt that I stood apart from the others. Stepan, on the other hand, quickly won the confidence of a number of men who, I knew, spoke to him quite freely. To this extent the cruel punishment he had received worked to his advantage; men felt that his trustworthiness had been proved. Danek was the only man to speak to all and sundry with outspoken candour. Under the circumstances, he was indeed 'crazy.' I afterwards learned that his bitter recklessness arose from the fact that he kept in good memory the thought of how his father had become a helpless cripple following injuries received at the hands of the Austrian police during one of the frequent riots in Brno.

There soon came a day, however, when an event happened which caused the men in my section to become far more communicative to me. Private Matula worked as a clerk at regimental headquarters, thus having access to records not open to the inspection of the average soldier. One evening he paid us a visit. He was an intelligent boy, who usually brought interesting news, and we were pleased to see him. But on this occasion his news was of a kind to fill me with surprise and anxiety, even though I tried to pass the matter off lightly.

"Becvar," he began abruptly, "today I was looking up the records, and found that your card is marked 'Politically suspect.' "

"Well, well," laughed Danek, "I am sorry, Gus, but that means that there can be no promotion for you on this side of the lines, so the sooner you get over to the Russians the better."

"It means just nothing at all," I argued. "You will find that the card of every Czech student is marked that way. Matula, will you look up Stepan's card and see if what I say is not so?"

"Well, as a matter of fact I did," replied Matula. "Stepan's card is clear. It must be that you weren't careful enough in barracks during your training, Gus, or that there is something against you from the time of your student days. In any case, if I were you I'd watch my step."

Hardly a day passed when something was not done by our Austrian officers to increase the tension between themselves and their Czech troops. Major Krolich was particularly objectionable, swearing constantly at the men and treating them as the 'pig-dogs' he never tired of calling them. I could not understand his purpose, for, no matter how much he may have disliked Czechs as a race, one would have supposed that he would have tried to dissimulate and to win their confidence and loyalty for the sake of the cause of which he was so fanatical a supporter. The fact of the matter was that Krolich and his officers considered us fit merely for *kanonenfutter*, or cannon fodder, and that he saw no possible reason for gaining our good will. So his treatment of us became rougher and his language more foul.

It should be remembered that in other parts of the line there were tens of thousands of Czechs who harboured memories of Austrian oppression just like our own, and who, day by day, were

confirmed in their views by the brutality of hundreds of officers identical in outlook with our own Major. When these facts are born in mind the amazing manner in which the Czechs ultimately deserted in their thousands to the Russians is readily understood. We hated the cause for which we were forced to fight, and we knew very well that when the time came at last the mind of every man would be prepared. Meanwhile, we had to wait with what patience we could muster.

One day an incident occurred which gave us hope because it suggested that even behind the lines and in high quarters Czechs were managing to make their influence felt. A soldier named Frank Prosek, belonging to the neighbouring company, was caught by an Austrian patrol when escaping towards the Russian lines. It was generally felt that the prisoner's sentence was inevitable. In the eyes of the Court, he must be regarded as a deserter in the face of the enemy. True he had been caught with his rifle in his hand, but the circumstances were so damning that it seemed that he could not reasonably hope for the benefit of a conceivable doubt. "The firing squad," we said. "Poor Prosek."

Sometimes it is given to a man to escape alive from the foot of the very gallows. To everyone's amazement, it was an escape of this kind which Prosek now achieved. His defence was unexpectedly subtle. He pleaded that he was an enthusiastic and ambitious soldier. But he laboured, he said, under a serious and unjust disadvantage. Because of his Czech birth discrimination was made against him. Promotion went only to German-Austrians. What chance had he in the ordinary course of a soldier's life, even though he might perform his duties more efficiently than any other private soldier in the Army! His race damned him in the view of his superiors. He had, therefore, determined to attempt some deed of daring. He would storm a Russian post single-handed, and bring back prisoners for interrogation. Were he to be successful in this attempt, he argued that authority would at last be forced to recognize his worth, despite the fact that he was a Czech. Unfortunately, he had been prevented from carrying out his idea, not by the enemy, but by an Austrian patrol, who showed astonishingly little understanding of his motives. To the amazement of the Regiment, the Court accepted his plea, acquitting him of the charge of desertion.

We enjoyed discussing this incident in our dugout, laughing at the clever way in which Prosek had succeeded in fooling the court-martial.

"The whole thing sounds far too easy to me," maintained Danek. "Prosek could not have managed it himself."

Danek was right. I afterwards learned from Prosek himself that the Court Prosecutor had been a Czech barrister. This case illustrates the occasional inconsistency in the Austrian attitude. Occasionally the Czechs were treated with unusual humanity. In the majority of instances, however, the position was very different.

One would suppose that Prosek's ardour for escape would now have been thoroughly damped. But not so. A few nights after he had returned to the line he renewed his attempt. His chances on this occasion were even more slender than they had been before, and his punishment on capture would have been prompt and ruthless. Nevertheless, he again slid silently over the parapet after darkness had fallen. Again he crawled away into no-man's-land, and again his comrades waited in suspense. Hours went by and he did not return. In the morning there came no news. Prosek had escaped. To have pulled off this feat was really an astonishing achievement. The difficulties were greater at that spot than even the most fortunate man might be expected to overcome. Long afterwards when I had myself been in Russia for some months, I again had news of Prosek. He had been sent to a prisoners' camp in Western Russia, and at the first opportunity joined the Czech Legion, a regiment which by this time the Russians had recruited from Czechs resident in Russia from the days before the outbreak of the War. So Prosek reappeared on the Austrian Front, but this time he fought on the side of the Russians.

Thoughts of escape seethed in every one of us each day that we were forced to guard the Austrian trenches. Prosek was not the only man who had succeeded in deserting to the Russians. Many others

were doing the same constantly at different, and frequently easier, places in the line. The escapes kept our minds alight, and determined. Then, early in April, there occurred an astonishing event which threw the whole regiment into the utmost excitement.

Several of us were sitting in the dugout one evening when Stepan stumbled in, his eyes filled with excitement. He stared at us, and for a moment was too out of breath to speak. Then he blurted out:

"I have just seen Matula, and he has great news. The story has come from Army headquarters that the 28th Prague Regiment has gone over to the Russians."

"What! The complete regiment!" exclaimed someone incredulously.

"The whole — boiling. Matula says that everything will be in tomorrow's Army Orders, and that martial law has already been decreed in every Czech Regiment on the front line."

"Martial law!" broke in someone else. "That's bad. They are taking no more chances evidently. We shall have to be very careful in future."

"Careful be damned," cried Danek. If only we could move away from these beastly swamps we could do the same."

The thought made us draw our breath in and we crowded closer round Stepan, who proceeded with his story.

"Matula couldn't stop then to talk any longer, but he said that the escape must have been very carefully planned. What happened was that Russian Czech and Slovak patrols got into touch with the outposts of the 28th, and the migration was fixed for a certain night at a definite hour. Of course, everything had been fixed so that the Russian troops held their fire."

We fell to discussing the event excitedly. Exactly what had happened was easy to understand, even though Stepan's story had been scrappy. The 'Prague Children,' as the 28th Regiment were nicknamed, had been holding a section of the Line in the Carpathian Mountains. Unlike ourselves, they had been officered almost entirely by Czechs, whereas even our non-commissioned ranks were mostly German.

Now at the outbreak of war there had been settled in Russia about 100,000 Czechs, some of whom had become naturalized. From the beginning we knew that many of these Czechs were fighting with the Russian troops, but not until long afterwards did we learn that out of the Czech volunteers in Russia had been formed a Czech brigade, started with 1,000 men. The Russians had been thoroughly alive to the nature of the Czech problem in Austria and formed the Brigade with a view to increasing the difficulties of their enemies.

Thus it happened that Czechs were fighting in both of the opposing armies. Having the semblance of enemies, these troops were actually as brothers, waiting for the chance to help each other. Scattered as patrols along the length of the Front, the Russian Czechs constantly established touch with their countrymen in the Austrian lines. And in their dangerous work of encouraging and helping desertion they had sometimes been astonishingly successful, as in the case of the 28th Regiment.

After the defect of the 'Prague Children' unrest increased in our regiment. There was no longer any reasonable doubt that well over ninety per cent of the men wished to desert at the first favourable opportunity. The officers did not yet understand how deep the disaffection had gone, but they doubted the loyalty of many men, and so kept careful watch, making decisive steps more difficult for us. Most of our men were discreet in their resolve, of course with the notable exception of Danek. That Danek escaped court-martial still astonishes me. Perhaps he was more circumspect than his comrades supposed, talking freely only before those whom he was morally certain would not betray him. Soon, however, something happened which gave me worries far more personal than Danek's supposed indiscretions.

One night Stepan and I were sent on connecting patrol between two advanced posts close to the River Nida. As usual our minds were running upon thoughts of escape. We decided that the opportunity was too good to be lost, and that we would try our luck, at least endeavouring to find out whether or not there were any Czechs in the Russian trenches immediately opposite our own. We crept down to the river bank, and, cloaked by darkness, felt ourselves reasonably safe. Lying side by side, we shouted in suppressed voices. Nothing happened. We shouted again, louder, and again louder still. But no answer came. Disappointed, we returned to the post.

Two days later Lieutenant Stanislawski came to the dugout and called me out.

"Becvar, you are a fool," he began. "What quite do you think you are doing? You won't escape as Prosek did should they catch you shouting to the Russians. You of all people should not take such crazy risks. A certain non-commissioned officer has laid a charge with the Company Commander to the effect that you are spreading subversive propaganda amongst the troops. If that charge were proved, you know what would happen. You are marked down as politically suspect and now that martial law has been proclaimed you wouldn't stand a chance before a Court. Isn't all this enough that you must now give them yet another handle against you? Keep quiet, you fool. At best you are probably done for with the charge going up against you; I warn you that if you go on like this you won't last the week out."

He glanced round anxiously, and I was grateful to him for the risk he was running on my behalf. Suddenly he added:

"I spoke for you to the Major. Told him that really you are a good boy, and sensible. I asked him not to be hasty, but to watch you instead. Now, for God's sake don't let me down on that. The Major was for taking immediate action. If he had your life wouldn't be worth much at this minute. I managed to stop that, but he said: 'All right, I'll watch him, but in any case I shall send in his name.' So now you know just what is in store. Beware, and try to act in a sensible way for once."

The next few hours were anxious ones for me. I found out that Matula had told my section that I was likely to be court-martialled. The men began to avoid me, afraid for their own safety. I could not blame them, for to have been seen talking much to me might have meant sharing the end which everyone secretly thought was fast approaching me. Indeed, my respite could have lasted only a matter of days. And at the present time there are occasions when I still feel surprise at my escape from the firing squad. It was brought about two days after Stanislawski warned me by an event which shook the whole of Eastern Europe.

In May 1915 General August Von Mackensen launched his historic and masterly attack at Gorlice in western Galicia. This attack resulted in the great German break through, and in the disastrous mass retreat of the Russian forces. Back went the Russian 'steamroller,' back and back. The whole line was in retreat. Quickly we followed. First we crossed the Nida, now experiencing no difficulty in traversing the obstacle which had held us up so many months. Once across, we had to advance so rapidly to maintain touch with the enemy's rear guard that headquarters, left far behind, had no time in which to consider the matter of my court-martial This advance, I am convinced, alone saved me. We marched hard and fast for four days. Then the fighting began again, on, I remember, a glorious spring afternoon. Attack and counter-attack followed close upon each other, for several days and nights.

The Russian Army was clearly in a desperate position, and more than one of us began to wonder whether our hopes of escape were to be terminated by the untimely defeat of the people whom we were anxious to join. While the Austrian guns bombarded the enemy trenches continuously, the Russian artillery replied hardly at all, because the gunners were short of shells. Even the Russian infantry seemed to be saving ammunition, and relied mostly upon hand-to-hand bayonet fighting. How desperate and heroic their struggle was I witnessed one late afternoon. My platoon had been sent to occupy a low, advanced ridge, which overlooked to the right a narrow valley, and, on the far side, a wide plain. From our position we could see clearly the Austrian trenches across the valley,

and the battle that was in progress on the plain seemed very fierce. We saw the Austrian line attack, break under the Russian rifle-fire, and retreat precipitately to its former position.

Suddenly a large detachment of Cossack cavalry appeared from behind the Russian Line and charged across the plain at a terrific gallop. As they went forward a withering shrapnel fire burst in flames above them, showering death upon their heads. The flames in the sky grew thicker, lighting the twilight like a scene from Dante's 'Inferno.' Horses and men fell rapidly. Presently the Cossacks dismounted, and returned a hot fire from behind their recumbent horses. Again they mounted. The shrapnel bursts blazed more fiery red as the evening darkened. The charge went forward – hopelessly against the increasing shrapnel. Then at last, and very suddenly, they broke, and the remnant retreated in disorder behind the Russian lines.

All this happened in a few seconds. Lying at my side was Corporal Binner, our platoon leader, the hard-bitten fellow who had helped to tie Stepan up at the roadside on our journey to the trenches. He had been at the Front since the beginning of the War and had seen many terrible sights. Now, as the Cossacks were swept back, he got up on his knees, and, gazing silently with clasped hands, moved his lips in prayer. We returned to our company in gloomy mood, and in time to assist in repelling an attack of the Russian infantry.

In the afternoon of the following day a strange feeling came upon me. I became convinced that I must prepare myself for anything. It was a sultry day, yet I put on a woollen, knitted vest, and my great coat on top of all. Turning out my rucksack, I took the best things I possessed, including the iron ration of tinned meat, and slipped them into my pockets. I was convinced that this was to be my last day in the Austrian Army. I cannot explain the sensation; perhaps it was merely that I knew that for my life's sake I must get away to the Russians, and at once.

Suddenly it happened. From our left flank came the wild cheers of attacking Russians – 'Ura-Ura!' I looked out of my pit towards a spot some few hundred yards distant where the Line disappeared in a wood. Nothing was to be seen. The cheers came nearer, and we knew that the Russians had broken through behind the wood. The soldiers in our section looked round in excitement, and some started to shoot.

"Stop fire," I shouted, and the word was taken up along the Line.

Obviously the attack was to be pushed home, and in our section we had decided exactly what to do in such an event. And this was a particularly favourable chance, for the Russian attack was coming from our flank. Then they appeared on the edge of the wood. They were dressed in long coats, and in their high winter caps. As they advanced our soldiers stood up, their hands above their heads, and hurried down across no-man's-land.

When my moment came I hurled my Austrian rifle as far away as my strength allowed, and throwing up my hands like the rest, walked to meet the nearest advancing Russian.

"Nestriliat." This was the only Russian word I knew at the time, and it meant: 'Don't shoot.'

My particular Russian was a huge man, and he leaped at me with fixed bayonet. The sun glinted evilly on the steel, and for a moment of heart-racking anxiety I wondered whether in the heat of the charge he meant to thrust it into me. Perhaps he would notice my eye-glasses and mistake me for an officer. Then, with a fierce wave of the hand, he pointed to the Russian Line, shouting something which, no doubt, meant 'make haste.'

I stumbled forward, looking round for my friends, and soon came upon Stepan. His face was long, and he seemed to be in the depths of misery. As he ran, one hand pulled his rucksack, the other was held high upon his chest. I noticed that he was bleeding.

"What happened, Stepan? Come quickly. I will help you with your rucksack."

"I'm a damned unlucky devil," he shouted. "I stick my arms up to surrender to them, and they shoot me through the hand."

Perhaps I was hysterical, but I immediately wanted to laugh. Poor Stepan! He had escaped on many dangerous occasions, but in the very act of giving himself up he is hit in the hand.

“Hey! Gus, Stepan, wait, I am going to Russia, too,” came a shout from behind. It was Danek running towards us. As he drew level, he pointed to what had been the Austrian trench line. “See! That swine over there.”

Major Krolich stood on the parapet, waving his arms and bellowing incoherent oaths. Apparently he was so speechlessly angry that he literally could not move. It was as though he had become a paralytic. The Russian advance had swept past him and so he also was a prisoner. Beside him stood an officer, who, realizing that his superior was helpless, signed to a running soldier to help him carry the Major to safety. The man swore furiously and went on running.

Just then the Austrian batteries opened upon us. Either they imagined that the Russians were still in front of our lines, or they had received news of what had occurred and were doing their best to wipe us out. Shells burst all round us as we rushed forward up the hill where the Russians had their Line and jumped helter-skelter into the entrenchments. Here a few Russian snipers had been left. First of all we attended to Stepan’s wound, which proved to be slight, for the bullet had pierced the palm without touching a bone. Throughout this small operation, Danek held forth deliriously. “Thank God that this is goodbye to Austria,” he cried. “Now begins the real fight, the terrible fight that will crush Austria and free our people.” He was a strong man, but tears ran fast down his cheeks as he spoke. He was a man of deep and patriotic feeling.

The Austrian fire continued and as soon as we could we jumped out of the trenches to go to the rear. We ran several yards when the noise of a coming shell made us fling ourselves to the ground. The explosion came a few steps away.

Slowly I rose. Stepan stood nearby. But Danek lay still. We ran to him. He was dead. A shell fragment had shattered his head. For him there was to be no freedom after all.

When we reached a spot beyond the range of the Austrian guns, Cossacks rounded us up. They were mounted on small horses, and carried long, terrible lances. They took us to a farmhouse.

Late that evening the roll was called. The count numbered over 2,000 prisoners, mostly Czechs from the 8th Regiment.

Chapter II – The Gathering of the Legion

That is the fellow who tried to put you in front of the firing squad," said Stepan, nudging my arm and pointing.

In company with several thousands of fellow captives we were trying to kill time in as pleasant a way as the restrictions of the prisoners' camp at Lublin would permit. I looked in the direction my companion indicated and saw Corporal Binner, our former platoon leader.

So it was Binner who had informed against me to the Major. I had not been certain to whom I owed that courtesy. Well, good fortune had frustrated the ill intention, and now that danger had passed the incident should be forgotten. But Stepan did not see the matter quite in this light.

"Well?" he asked, "are you doing nothing about it? We belong to the Russian Army now, you know, or very soon shall do so."

I shrugged my shoulders and laughed.

"What can I do? Anyway, I bear him no grudge. Binner honestly believed that he was doing his duty. His cruelty is only the result of the tyrannic Austrian system under which he has been trained. It was his job to please his boss, and he did it by bullying us Czechs. Now he will live in a prisoners' camp, glad that his major was taken with him, because this makes him feel doubly satisfied that he has done his duty towards his Kaiser and Vaterland. He's not worth troubling about now, Stepan."

This was the last time that I saw Corporal Binner.

We had marched from the front into Lublin with songs on our lips, telling each other that for us the real fighting was now about to begin. Stepan was the happiest of us all, for now he had his elder brother with him. His brother had served in another company stationed at a nearby spot in the same front line, and Stepan wept when he found him among the prisoners behind the Russian trenches.

Stepan's brother had been a farmer before the war. He was a man of some experience, and smiled at our hot enthusiasms.

"With Slavs as our allies," we cried gaily, "we will fight the Austrians back into the Homeland and take once more in our own right the country which three hundred years ago was ruled by our own Bohemian kings."

"You wait," laughed Stepan's brother. "Just you talk to those Russian guards over there, and you will find, though you argue yourselves black in the face, that they still regard you as damned Austrian prisoners who ought to be put up against a wall and shot for killing brother Ivan, or cousin Peter. They will grudge you the very bread they are ordered to serve out. And as for the Russian Government –! Well, they can barely help themselves, and will be far too busy to care one way or the other about a few Czechs and Slovaks."

It was true. To the Russian soldier Czechs were like Germans and Hungarians, just prisoners to be herded together and kept out of mischief. They appreciated nothing of the eager fire that burned within us to take up arms beside them and in their cause. Had we talked to them of this they either would not have understood, or else they would have suspected some subtle trick. The realization of this unpleasant fact came as a hard blow to Stepan and I, and thousands more like us. Our hope of being allowed to join the Russians faded, and there loomed in our minds grim thoughts of Siberian internment camps. When eventually we were entrained for Smolensk *en route* for Moscow, the truth was made plain; we were not to be enlisted but distributed to concentration camps, in Western Russia. The fact that we were to remain in Russia and not to go to Siberia, as did most of the Germans, was the only concession that the Russians were prepared to admit to our Slavonic blood just then.

We learned afterwards that at the time when we were in Lublin the Russian Czech Legion was composed only of those Czechs and Slovaks who had resided in the country before the War. At last we realized finally that the Legion, or Druzina, as it was called, was forbidden to us, and our hearts were nearly broken. We could not then tell what tremendous significance it was to have for most of us in the not so distant future.

The Czech legions which had arisen by this time in France, Italy, and Russia were the result of a spontaneous desire on the part of Czechs and Slovaks resident in many countries to join together to fight for the Allies in the hope of recovering their long-lost independence as a sovereign State. No organised propaganda brought about this movement. It was simply a resurgence of national spirit inspired by appreciation of the fact that the one great opportunity of a century had unexpectedly presented itself. Russia affords an excellent example of what happened. In Moscow, Kiev, Warsaw, Petrograd, Rostov, Odessa, and Charkov the Czechs rose without there being any co-operation at the outset between their nationals in these cities. Apart from quickly suppressed revolts in Austria, the first tangible results of the spiritual reawakening of the Czech nation were found in these stirrings of sentiment in Russian cities. The Czechs of Moscow petitioned General Beljayev, the then Minister of War, to organize a Czech Druzina. As early as August 1914 this proposal was approved by the Russian Army Council. The Druzina when first levied was only one thousand strong, and on 9 October 1914 the men marched out of their quarters in Kiev to join the army of General Ivanov on the south-western front. Here they began the patrol work for which they ultimately became famous, and which produced such feats of strategy as the surrender of the 'Prague Children,' and, on other occasions, of regiments which came over even to their flags and music.

Many Czechs came into Russia from abroad shortly before the outbreak of war, and most of these were anxious to join the Brigade. In many cases they were acceptable to the authorities. Indeed, by the end of 1915 the Druzina mustered 1,600 men. There was one obstacle to their becoming soldiers, however, which Czechs often found difficulty in overcoming. Russia was extremely short in her munition factories of expert technicians, and there arose a great demand for Czech workmen who were known to be skilled. For instance, at the great factory at Taganrog no fewer than 1,700 Czechs were employed, indeed practically conscripted. Doubtless these men performed most useful work in the Russian cause, but they were dissatisfied, wishing to take an active part in the fighting. Later, many Czech prisoners from the Austrian Armies were used in work of this kind, but they also were not contented, resenting the mentality which refused to admit that Czechs hailing from enemy territory would be faithful and valuable allies. But at the time when the train was hurrying us towards Moscow we knew nothing whatever about any of these happenings.

Shortly before we reached Moscow from Smolensk, the Germans and Hungarians were separated from us and sent to distant Siberian camps. We Czechs were divided up for western areas. The section which I joined together with Stepan and his brother was despatched to Pokrov, a small place not far from Moscow. We were billeted in a house surrounded by high walls. After eagerly anticipating a welcome in Russia and immediate permission to fight with the Czar's troops against our German enemies, this treatment came as a devastating anti-climax. Desiring action, we now found ourselves compelled to fold our hands resignedly, and to tramp wearily back and forth while the gall of disappointment slowly poisoned our souls.

Stepan's brother was more philosophical than most of us. His peasant blood taught him to accept reverses of fortune with greater equanimity than men of city birth.

"Why fret?" he asked me. "We have done our best. Now we must wait patiently."

But I would not be comforted. Perhaps this was partly because I was in bad health. In the Austrian trenches we had often gone short of food. But the Russians had fed us generously upon the rich and seasoned viands of their country. My digestion, which had been undermined by privation, would not stand the strain. I was in despair. The inactivity drove me frantic, giving me far too much time to think of physical discomfort.

One morning it was announced that eighty men were needed for labouring work in a place called Poltava. It was not compulsory that I should go because I was of the so-called 'educated' soldiers, and so exempt. In the Austrian Army every man who had attained a stage of education enabling him to pass the matriculation examination was allowed to wear an armlet of black and yellow stripes, and it was from these soldiers that officers were normally chosen. The Russians recognized this small distinction and did not compel any man wearing the stripe to do labouring work, but being sick, and certainly most heartily tired of inactivity, I volunteered and was accepted. Eventually I found myself in charge of a party of fifteen men who were to work in a tile factory, just outside Poltava in Ukraina. Stepan preferred to join his brother in agricultural work, and so to my regret we parted. Had anyone told us at that time that at our next meeting we should be soldiers of a wandering and widely scattered army engaged in a life and death fight with Russians we should have laughed in utter unbelief. Good food and rich milk, then so abundant in the Russian countryside, soon cured my internal troubles, and I again began to take a keen interest in the life led in Poltava.

The moving spirit in our small group at the tile factory was a gay-tempered lad about twenty-five years old named Josef Fiala, a great singer of Czech folk songs, and a general favourite with his comrades. I soon found out that beneath his light manner Fiala concealed the stern resolution of an ardent patriot and a brave man. In the evenings Fiala harangued us all with quick flowing, passionate words, telling of the tradition and birthright of the Czechs and Slovaks, and of the great days in store when, by force of arms, we should again win a country of our own. Wild words they would have seemed to an outsider, but they brought much comfort and inspiration to us. Fiala was an enthusiast and perhaps he forgot sometimes that were the future he visualized to be achieved we should owe much to the help and goodwill of the Allies in whose cause we had not yet been permitted even to bear arms.

Had any of us wished to drift into an easy contentment with a well fed, comparatively easy lot, Fiala would not have permitted. He fiercely rebutted the arguments of the few who thought that Russia, in her then rotten financial and political position, was hardly the country in which our national movement would find firm roots. But such thoughts shrivelled in the minds that conceived them before the fiery enthusiasms of Fiala.

Fortunately for the Czechoslovaks there were many thousands of Fialas in Russia. Our comrade may be regarded as typical of many minor leaders, known and unknown. In thousands of prisoners' camps such devotees were to be found, fiercely proclaiming the beliefs that Fiala proclaimed, and burning themselves up in their enthusiasm for the ideals which were his guiding thoughts,

Part of Fiala's work was to drive into Poltava once a week to buy provisions. One evening on returning from his usual trip, he called to me.

"Here, Becvar, I've something to tell you. I had a curious experience in town today, I know you have had no success with the inquiries you have been making regarding the Czech troops in Russia, and the best means of getting into the Legion, so I thought I would try going straight to the Military Commandant and asking him whether I can enlist. Well, they nearly locked me up for my pains. To begin with they wouldn't let me anywhere near the Commandant's room, and when I explained to an officer that as a Czech I wanted to fight for Russia he said he had never heard of so scandalous a suggestion that a prisoner of war should be allowed to join the army. I argued that there were already Czech troops at the Front, and insisted that I should be allowed to see the Commandant. Then he became annoyed, telling me that if I did not clear out he would arrest me. So I came back. There was nothing else to do."

This, of course, was a foolish thing for Fiala to have done. He might have known that it would be most unlikely that the Commandant of the town would interview him, an Austrian prisoner, merely upon request. It was obvious to me that our difficulty lay in the fact that we had no contact with other and larger prisoners' camps which might be better supplied with information than ourselves.

As a move in this direction, I tried to establish touch with Czech prisoners working in Poltava, but I usually met them in ones and twos and could get no new facts from them.

In my spare time I studied Russian, a language which I do not find unduly difficult. Naturally enough, I was always on the lookout for opportunities to practise my new learning and was particularly pleased when one day I made the acquaintance of a Russian woman doctor, Olga Semonovna, who worked in a hospital near to the tile factory. Olga lived as a paying guest in the house of Ivan Petrovic, chief of the hospital supply department, and one day I received an invitation to go to tea at his house. I found them most charming and hospitable people and over the tea table Olga asked me to teach her German. Realizing that this would be a wonderful opportunity to improve my Russian, I accepted gladly, not guessing the extremely unpleasant consequences that this acquaintance was to cause me.

The owner of our tile factory was named Berger. He was German by birth, but had become a naturalized Russian. It is not surprising, therefore, that he often found himself in a quandary in the matter of allegiance. As usually happens, blood told, and he was a strong germanophile. In this he was not alone, for at that time, despite the fact that Russia was at war with Germany, there were thousands of people who openly expressed sympathy with the enemy cause. Perhaps because I was a prisoner who had fought in the Austrian trenches, Berger had conceived a liking for me. When he wished to go to Poltava he always chose me to drive him, and on the way we talked. Often he asked me of my experiences at the Front.

“I can’t understand how you fellows came to be captured,” he would say again and again. “I should have thought that men would just go on fighting, and that when pressed too hard they would retreat. But capture! I can’t understand it.”

We talked in German, and I, knowing his sympathy with the cause of the Central Powers, said nothing regarding my own feelings towards Austria, nor yet regarding the manner in which we had become prisoners. To have done so would have done no good to the Czech cause, and would most certainly have lost us our more or less favoured position. However, we were not to retain this for long, and the innocent cause of our coming trouble was Olga Semonovna.

Berger was at enmity with Ivan Petrovic. The dislike between the two men sprang from the fact that Ivan Petrovic lived with Berger’s divorced wife. Unfortunately, I learned this fact only after my acquaintance with Ivan Petrovic and Olga Semonovna had been established for a considerable time and after I had become a welcome guest. Berger soon learned of my visits, and was angry. But he said very little. Our drives to Poltava ceased, however, and I was given much harder work in the factory.

I had spoken quite openly to Ivan and Olga about the desire of the Czech prisoners to join the Russian armies. They were both good Russian patriots and Slavophiles. Then one day I happened to mention Fiala’s visit to the Town Commandant’s office. Ivan laughed heartily, but when he had overcome his merriment he offered his help in a practical way.

“The Commandant is a friend of mine,” he said, “and if you are such silly boys that you really want to go back to war, I will do what I can for you when I am next in Poltava.” Eventually, this intercession was to be of great assistance, but meanwhile another trouble arose which gave Berger his long-desired opening for revenge, and which resulted in our sudden departure from Poltava.

There arrived at the tile factory a new batch of prisoners in [the] charge of two German non-commissioned officers. From these men Berger learned of our anti-Austrian ideas. Immediately his petty mind showed him a way to retaliate upon me for the fancied slight I had put upon him. He began to favour the Germans instead of the Czechs, and I myself was dismissed from the work of overseeing the affairs of the group of prisoners originally placed under my charge. Poor Fiala suffered the effects of Berger’s dislike with me, for our employer knew that we were close friends. No opportunity of punishing us was lost. This state of affairs, gradually growing worse, continued for several weeks. Then one day in January 1916 a Russian policeman arrived unexpectedly and

demanded to see Fiala and myself. We found him brandishing his *knuta*, or whip.

"Come," he said gruffly, "you and your friend are to be my guests in Poltava for a space. You'll get less fresh air, and maybe your food won't be so good, but that can't be helped. You prisoners are too pampered, anyway."

Fiala looked meaningly at me.

"But why? What has happened, and what have we done?" I asked.

"You *are* prisoners, you know. Or had you forgotten that down here? It's just a change in arrangement, that's all. Now come along while I'm still in good humour."

We knew, of course, that this was Berger's work. He had laid information of some kind against us. So Fiala and I went into the military gaol in Poltava, and two more depressed men it would have been difficult to find in all Russia. But, happily, this phase of our captivity was not to last for long, a fact which we owed largely to the good offices of Ivan Petrovic. The Town Commandant, whom Fiala had vainly tried to interview, sent for us one day soon after our arrival. We saw at once that he was a shrewd man, this Commandant. Before him lay the letter which the policeman had been given by Berger. For a full minute he said nothing, sizing us up with experienced eyes. Suddenly:

"They say you won't work," he snapped, "that you malinger on any job you are given, and that you are no good for the hard labour of a tile factory. What have you to say?"

"That the charges are not true, sir," I replied.

"Meaning you want to work?"

"Yes, sir, I do, and so does my friend."

"Then what was your trouble? You are recommended in this letter for exemplary punishment."

"You see, sir, we are Czechs —" put in Fiala.

"Czechs?" interrupted the Commandant. "Are you of those who would prefer to be in the front line?"

"Yes, sir. As a matter of fact, Ivan Petrovic of the district hospital has been kind enough to make inquiries on our behalf in regard to the possibility of our joining the Czech Legion."

"Oh, yes, I remember. But you can't do it. I have had several similar applications. However, prisoners of war may not join the Russian Army. Your chance may come, but for the time being you are prisoners, and must behave as such." He seemed about to dismiss us, but instead he smiled and added briefly: "Perhaps I can at least put you in the right direction. I will see. Now, good luck to you."

Very shortly after this interview Fiala and I were released from prison and sent to the prisoners of war distributing camp in Poltava. Two days later we went south-west to Charkov, some fifty miles distant. The 'camp' in this place was no camp at all in the strict sense of the word; it was a great stone building, an old theatre which, through the exigencies of war, had been turned to a use as grim as any of the tragedies once enacted upon its stage. The place stank from over-population and under-ventilation. But, foul as it was, this theatre seemed to Fiala and myself a happy place, for here it was that we first heard that our countrymen were being organized into a self-contained fighting force within the framework of the Russian Armies.

On arrival at the camp, all prisoners had to sign a number of documents. When we had done what was necessary in this respect, the Russian clerk called to the guard.

"Show them," he said, "to the Slavonic Intelligentsia Compartment."

Fiala and I looked at each other in astonishment, wondering what kind of a joke was intended. But the clerk did not seem to have a particularly strong sense of humour, and his face remained solemn

as he turned to his next task. We marched into the theatre to be confronted with a strange sight. The stalls, balcony, boxes, and every corner were full of Austrian, German, and Turkish prisoners. On the large stage had been built of poles and planks a huge four story structure. Each floor formed a wide platform on which the bedding of many men was laid.

"Your suite is right on the top," said the guard grinning broadly. "There's no running water and service is not very regular, but you'll find there are a lot of fellows up there who make out well enough. Now then, lads, up you go."

He sent us climbing by a primitive and very dirty ladder. At last we stepped out upon the top platform. Here we found a number of men occupied in various pursuits. Several sprang up as we appeared.

"Welcome, friends," they cried. "Come right in. There are no ceremonies here. Sorry we can't offer you drinks."

It was a curious gathering that we now joined. Most of the prisoners were writing, or lying in a line side by side on the hard, wooden floor. Some had rolled their coats for cushions. A few were playing chess with home-made men and boards. Others had stripped themselves to the waists and were hunting for lice in their shirts.

"I hope you didn't find the climb to this delightful apartment too tiresome," said one with a friendly smile. "Some months ago we applied to Petrograd for an electric lift, but the Russian bureaucrat is a deplorably slow worker. By the way, I am Vukovic from Zagreb. Let me introduce my friends."

Solemnly we marched along the line of men, and as he gave each name Vukovic mentioned the profession of the person in question. It was a remarkable gathering. A professor of mathematics, a doctor of law, a bank clerk, a professor of philosophy, and so on.

Vukovic glanced with a smile at those of the company who held their shirts in their hands for examination. He explained rapidly:

"You see we chose the highest platform of all because we hoped optimistically that the lice would not care to climb the long stairway. Our professor of mathematics proved this with many figures. But, unhappily, he made a miscalculation somewhere or other as you can see for yourselves."

Some of these men had lived in this terrible place for many months. I asked why they did not volunteer for work in order to secure at least a modicum of release. The answer was always the same. "It's no good. We are not wanted. They think that professional men are not sufficiently hardened for rough work."

We soon became upon good terms with our new friends, taking the life as cheerfully as might be. The most interesting of our new acquaintances was a Czech university student named Necas, who seemed to be well informed concerning the development of the Czechoslovak movement in Russia. In some ways Necas was a mysterious person. He worked outside the camp during the day but always carefully avoided any questions upon the subject of just what he did, and we never found out how he was employed. Many were the nights when Fiala and I listened far into the night to his quiet talk concerning the beginnings of the Czech Druzina, the heroic work of the Czech patrols in the front line, and the achievements of such famous Czech leaders as Syrovy, Medek, and Klecanda, whose names had even been mentioned in the despatches of the Russian General Staff.

"Things are moving very slowly in the direction we want," Necas told us. "The Czech Brigade has been doing such good work on patrol that throughout the Russian Armies Commanders are applying for their services. And the General Staff of the Austrian Army has offered a reward of five thousand crowns for each Brigade officer who is caught. Nevertheless, St. Petersburg still withholds permission for Czech and Slovak prisoners to join the Druzina. The Brigade headquarters in Kiev receive thousands of applications from prisoners, but lack the authority to call them up. The trouble is not that the Russians do not trust us, but rather that St. Petersburg is a filthy hole, the breeding ground of corruption and intrigue, where pro-German and pro-Austrian influence works continually

for a patched up peace with the Central Powers. It stands to reason, therefore, that powerful opposition is presented to all proposals to enlist willing prisoners in the Russian forces. The corruption in the Government is a sickening business and disaster must come unless it is stopped. Think of the bravery of the Russian soldiers who captured all Galicia as far as Krakov, penetrated the terrible Carpathian Mountains into Hungary, with the bayonet as their chief weapon, for munitions of all kinds were deplorably short. Today these men are being sold, cheated by corruption in high places at the rear. In the front line they are short of even the primary necessities, while here in Charkov anything from caviare to champagne may be bought in the restaurants. One day the soldiers will find out. When they do, it will be the end of Russia as we know her now."

Necas went on to tell us that only a little time before the Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaievic, the finest Commander in the Russian Armies and the most popular man with the soldiers, had been dismissed from the Supreme Command because he was too good an officer and too ardent a patriot to suit the machinations of a certain clique of self-seeking traitors in St. Petersburg. The Czar had been made to assume the control of the armies in his stead. The poor Czar had no energy, and no initiative, and was entirely under the sway of the very people who were intriguing against his interests and those of the country. As Necas picturesquely stated the case: 'These traitors wash the floor with him as with a piece of old rag.'

The disastrous retreat of the Russian Armies in 1915 had done something to bring even the St. Petersburg authorities, with the notable exception of the unblushing self-seekers, to their senses. But the drift had been allowed to advance too far, and, as was soon to appear, nothing could avert the approaching disaster.

In the Duma, the parliament, there were many fine, progressive men, who were good friends to the Czechs, and who appreciated the advantages of allowing Slav prisoners to enlist if they so wished. Amongst the chief of these was Miliukov. Unfortunately, at the very time when their efforts were beginning to bear fruit Bulgaria joined the Central Powers. Bulgaria, a Slavonic country liberated by the sacrifice of Russian blood from Turkish rule, had turned her power not only against Slavonic brethren, but also against the friendly State which had given her liberty. Naturally, our enemies were able to make great capital out of this event, decrying the folly of all movements which sought Russian aid in freeing the Czechoslovaks.

"All these things work against us," explained Necas, "and for the time being you cannot join the Brigade. But our leaders will eventually win permission for us, even as Professor Masaryk is securing success for our cause in London and Paris. However, my advice to you is to get out of this camp just as soon as you can, for a solid organization of our countrymen is impossible here. The men come and go all the time; they never stay for long. Try to get to some place where there is a large community of Czech and Slovak prisoners, and you will find that they are in more or less constant touch with our headquarters in Kiev. Large factories, especially munition factories, are the best places for you."

Listening to Necas, we thanked the gods that we had been able to get away from so provincial a spot as Poltava, where we should never have learned anything about what was being done to organize the Czech movement. Fiala decided to write to the friends we had left behind in Poltava and to tell them to join us as soon as possible. As a result of this letter we were soon able to welcome in Poltava some of our old tile factory colleagues. Meanwhile, we had been following the advice of Necas, and watching for an opportunity to get moved to a job in some large factory.

It was the custom for employers needing workers, whether labourers or skilled artisans, to come to our camp and to look for them amongst the prisoners. All sorts of inquiries came in. Sometimes a farmer wanted assistance in his fields. Sometimes a builder needed bricklayers, or perhaps a woman, whose husband had been called to the colours, needed a man to do his work. Occasionally a mining company's clerk would come to look for prisoners to work in the mines. Some wanted one man only, others a small squad, and a few as many as two or three hundred prisoners.

At times it happened that the inquirers would take any prisoners who were offered to them. More often, however, much care was exercised in the choice. Farmers especially were extremely critical, and sometimes it was amusing to watch an old and hard-headed son of the soil testing the hands and muscles of some poor prisoner, for all the world as though he were a horse or a yoke-ox. Employers had to sign a document accepting all responsibility for the prisoner, who had to be properly guarded, fed, and supplied with one pair of boots a year. The papers signed, the farmer would shrug his shoulders as though he were saying: 'See what I do for the State,' call out: 'Come on *golubcik*' (darling), and tramp away importantly with his new assistant.

Fiala and I did not have long to wait for the jobs we wanted. One day there came to the camp from Ekaterinoslav a representative of Brianskie Zavody, one of the largest iron and steel works in Russia. He was anxious to find skilled workmen. Fiala offered himself as an assistant mechanic, and me as a draughtsman. Neither of us had any practical experience in this kind of work, but we both felt that Brianskie Zavody would be the place to find a really effective Czech organization. As things turned out, we were accepted, and so it happened that in the spring of the year 1916 we arrived at Ekaterinoslav in Ukraina.

We were astonished at the great number of prisoners of all nationalities employed at the great steel works, and delighted to find several hundreds of Czechs and Slovaks amongst them. Ours was a well-organized community, and we were received in very friendly manner. A paper in Czech was published fortnightly, and from this we learned much about what was being done, and what had already been done, to unite our people. Here at last was coherent expression of our aspirations and ideals.

A system had been arranged whereby any prisoner who wished to enlist could send his name to the headquarters of the Brigade in Kiev, where it would be entered on a roster. The would-be soldier was then told that he must wait for instructions to report for active service. This waiting became terribly wearisome.

Frequently we held meetings late into the night. The situation was discussed again and again from all possible angles, but every time we were forced back upon our only course of action – a letter to Kiev urging a prompt decision in the matter of our admission to the Army as soldiers. The answers which came we dubbed our 'patience and wait replies.' 'The admission of prisoners to the Legion,' they said, 'is under the consideration of the Russian Government, and a favourable decision is anticipated shortly. You should go on patiently meanwhile with your work in the factory, having in mind that such work renders good service to the Allied cause.'

We subscribed to headquarters in Kiev a portion of our weekly earnings, the accumulated sum to go towards the expenses of the Czech Brigade. As a matter of fact, we learned that such voluntary subscriptions were being sent regularly to Kiev from all parts of Russia, indeed from practically every place where there was a considerable community of Czechoslovak prisoners.

Our German and Austro-Hungarian fellow-prisoners watched the efforts of our community with hate and anger. There were several occasions when the building in which we held our meetings was fiercely attacked. Frequently clashes occurred, and then it was the task of our unfortunate guards to separate the combatants. Weeks and months passed by without the arrival of the long-expected summons from Kiev. News from the Front regarding further achievements of the Czech Druzina made us still more impatient. Convalescent Russian soldiers visited us to say what good fellows they had found our countrymen at the Front, and that they considered that we should be allowed to join them. Then in June 1916 articles began to appear in the Russian Press commenting upon the work of the Brigade in General Brusilov's successful advance. At this time the Brigade numbered over 6,000 officers and men.

Gradually reports such as these, and our own attitude of mind as it was shown every day, caused our guards to become steadily more friendly towards us. They began to see that we were sincere in our

desire to fight beside them, and tried to make life for us as comfortable as possible in the factory barracks.

One day news arrived that the Serbians were receiving Slavonic prisoners into their Army, and in due course Czechs and Slovaks were invited to join them. Some of our fellows who could not stand the strain of further waiting left us against our advice and enlisted with the Serbian troops. They would not listen to persuasion from our leaders.

"There is something wrong with our Kiev headquarters," they replied to all arguments. "If this is not so, why can't they get the permission we want when the Serbians can? We at all events are not going to wait here until the end of the War. After all, what does it matter where we fight the Austro-Germans provided we do fight them?"

Hardly any of these brave fellows lived to see the liberated homeland. Their Division was practically annihilated in the terrible fights in the Dobrudza after the collapse of Roumania.

At about this time our attention was drawn to the ominous internal situation in Russia, which we soon realized was breaking up gradually around us. I noticed that the workmen in the factory were becoming far more free in their speech than previously they had ever dared to be. They criticized the efficiency of the Government, roundly abused the factory management, while cases of disobedience became more and more frequent. News, seeping in by devious channels, concerning intrigues in St. Petersburg fomented the discontent. The reactionary methods of Premier Sturmer, and suicidal interference in State affairs of the Empress Alexandra, working side by side with her favourite, the monk Rasputin, roused the boldly outspoken criticisms of the Russian employees, even those of them who belonged to the middle class. I remember seeing the head of the department in which I worked seize his newspaper one morning and, tearing it to pieces, throw the fragments into the wastepaper basket with some of the bitterest words I had ever heard a Russian of his social position employ.

"I can read no more," he cried. "These swine in St. Petersburg will drive us all mad. The whole pack of them should be shot. They are selling the soldiers and the country to Germany. They are deliberately removing every honest Russian from the Government so that they may work out their dirty schemes unhampered. Rasputin, the dirty swindler, is the real ruler of Holy Russia. What an impasse! What a scandal! I dread what the end will be. But of one thing I am sure; it will be terrible."

As weeks passed, the atmosphere of unrest in the factory became steadily more noticeable. In the evenings in our barracks we discussed the alarming situation with growing anxiety. Rumours that Sturmer and the Rasputin clique feared revolution, and so were working fast for a separate peace with Germany, perturbed us greatly. And then one day the blow fell.

About the middle of March 1917 news spread that revolution had broken out in St. Petersburg. One disturbing report followed hard upon the heels of another. The regiments in the Capital had mutinied! The dreaded Cossacks had joined the revolutionaries! The Tsar had abdicated! A Soviet of workers was established in St. Petersburg! The Government was dissolved by force!

What was truth and what fabrication and exaggeration we could not tell. But rapidly the work in the factory became disorganized. Workmen began holding meetings in every department. Overjoyed at the news which depressed our spirits to the uttermost, they turned their attention to settling accounts with every boss and foreman whom they happened to dislike. The usual method adopted was to load the unfortunate chief upon a wheelbarrow, and, amidst loud shouts and swearing, push him in mock triumph through the factory gates, and dump him in the road without.

The organization of the town was equally badly dislocated. The outlook became blacker every day.

Taking advantage of the stoppage of work in the factory, and the slacked attention of our guards, Fiala and I went to Ekaterinoslav. We found that in every square in the city meetings were being held and inflammatory speeches made, but nowhere could we find unity of purpose or organized

resolve. The countryside was fast drifting into a state of anarchy.

"Away with the War," one speaker would cry. "Have we not wasted enough of our blood for the benefit of capitalists? We want peace, and we will have it."

But a short distance away another man would be crying: "Citizens, now that at last we have the ruling of the country in our own hands, shall we not show our strength to the enemy? Let us back up the Army to the full, and carry on the War until we win complete victory."

On our way back to the factory we wondered whose way would prove most acceptable to the people, and what would become of our own national movement. In a side street we witnessed a significant incident which disturbed us still more.

A carter was driving a heavily laden van up a steep hill, and the horses, becoming exhausted, stopped suddenly in the middle of the slope. The load was obviously too great for the animals' strength, but the driver lashed them mercilessly with his whip. Just then a policeman rode up and shouted at the carter to stop torturing his beasts. Long custom had taught the officer to expect almost abject servility in response to the smallest complaints, and it was clear that he was astonished at the immediate effect produced by his words. Instead of obeying the order, the carter shook his whip furiously and swore aloud.

"You —, you have nothing to say any more. Your time has gone for good. Clear out of my way, or I'll smash you as you deserve."

In the old days such a reply would have been utterly inconceivable. Now the constable looked round awkwardly to see if anyone had witnessed the incident, and, turning his horse, rode away without a word in reply to the insult that had been offered to his authority and to the uniform he wore. We watched this scene with amazement. "That," said Fiala solemnly as we passed on our way, "means that the Tsarist regime is finished."

Days passed and news came that a Provisional Government under Prince Lvov had been formed. Order was established once more in the factory, and it seemed likely that Russia would settle down under the new democratic regime without further disturbance. Miliukov, a well-known Slavophile and a good friend to our people, had become Minister of Foreign Affairs, and there seemed every likelihood that this appointment would have a favourable effect upon the status of Czechs and Slovaks in Russia. Very shortly the Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaievic was reappointed to the supreme command of the armies in the field, and the best type of Russian political leaders took office in the new Government. Now that true patriots were in control of the country's affairs it seemed that Russian democracy had won a lasting victory. We could not then know how illusory this impression was. Suddenly great news came to us from Kiev. We were asked to send a representative to a Czechoslovak Conference which was to meet on May 6. Our chairman, Kysela, was chosen to represent us, and when he returned to announce that the Russian authorities had given permission for the formation of a Czechoslovak Army Corps our barracks thundered with shouts and songs.

"Professor Masaryk is now in Russia," said Kysela. "He has come direct from London. All Czechoslovak movements in every country are to be linked under his leadership. That means that we shall get quick results. The first step in Russia is that all Czechoslovak prisoners are to be enlisted as rapidly as the organization at Kiev can handle their applications."

Just after we had heard Kysela's report, Fiala took me aside.

"Look here, Gus," he said, "I'm not going to wait here a day longer. You'll find that for those who wait until they are called there will still be endless delays. I'm going to Kiev on my own. How about you?"

We shook hands on the bargain, and told Kysela what we had resolved. Seeing that it would be useless to try to persuade us to wait for orders from headquarters, Kysela succeeded in arranging our transport to Kiev with the Town Commandant. In two days' time we were off on the last

journey we were to take as prisoners under a Russian guard. At the headquarters of the Legion we were received well, even though we were roundly scolded for our impatience, and, with ten other Czechs, were sent immediately to a small nearby town called Borispol, where the 2nd Division of the Legion was to be formed. The original Czech Brigade, still in the front line, constituted the 1st Division.

The train journey to Borispol was the happiest that we had ever had in Russia. At last we were free soldiers of the Legion, and the twelve of us marched proudly into the wide Borispol parade ground, surrounded on three sides by military barracks.

Russian military barracks are called *zemlanky*, and take a curious form. Deep pits are dug, each pit being about fifty yards long, twenty yards wide, and ten feet deep. As at Borispol, these pits are usually ranged round the parade ground, and each is covered with thatch supported on beams meeting in the centre to form a ridge like the roof of a house. Along the walls, and down the centre of each pit, bunks are built. Here the soldiers live and sleep. At Borispol there were ten of these *zemlanky*, and as one stood upon the parade ground all that could be seen of them were the thatched roofs sticking up above the ground.

Before leaving Kiev we had been told that more men would soon follow us, and our instructions were to prepare the barracks for their use. We set about our work with a will and soon the parade ground was freed from litter and fit for use. The barracks, however, were a very different proposition. When we arrived at the first *zemlanky* there awaited a surprise which was as unwelcome as it was disconcerting. We descended the short flight of steps and opened the door. Then with cries of disgust we stumbled back. The floor of the room was black with ravenous fleas. Using boiling water, and burning straw we made one *zemlanky* habitable after two days' hard work.

On the third day further volunteers arrived, and from then on hardly a day passed but further parties came in. Some joined us singly, others came in groups of several hundred men, their flags flying and bands playing. They were a weird and motley crowd. Some were dressed as civilians; some still wore their old Austrian uniforms; some were in rags grimed with coal or red-iron dust from the mines where they had worked. All newcomers were welcomed heartily, and Fiala and I were pleasantly excited when our comrades from Ekaterinoslav marched in. Here and there men who had not met since they left their native town in Bohemia might be seen embracing each other with tears in their eyes.

The Commissariat Department was soon organized under the direction of officers appointed to our garrison. Thus the 2nd Division was gradually built up. It was composed of the 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th Regiments. Fiala and I were enlisted in the 6th Regiment. In certain respects our organization was curious, for we were certainly not a military group in the ordinary sense of the term. Discipline was strict, but the relationship between officer and private was brotherly. That is to say, we called each other 'brother,' and when speaking to an officer the correct form of address was 'brother captain,' 'brother lieutenant,' as the case might be. And under all circumstances the second person singular, the intimate 'thou,' was used.

Meanwhile the state of Russia went from bad to worse. Even when Kerensky became Minister of War and, eventually, Prime Minister, the temporary Government remained more or less without power. The real rulers were the Petrograd 'Soviet of Workers,' in which body the radical Bolsheviks, as yet in the minority, were steadily gaining the upper hand by drawing the masses to their support through the use of clever propaganda. In the Army discipline was cracking. Kerensky made the mistake of being too precipitate in his endeavours to replace the old Tsarist regime with a democratic system. Into the Army he introduced 'Soldiers' Committees' with powers to overrule the orders of officers, and political meetings amongst the men were also allowed. The inevitable result was demoralization, and wholesale desertion.

In June 1917, Kerensky succeeded, largely by virtue of his great oratorical powers, in driving the troops on the Galician Front under General Brusilov to a final attack. The result was the famous

battle of Zborov, fought on July 2. In this fight the Czechoslovak Brigade broke the Austrian fortified line and captured nearly five thousand officers and men, twenty guns, and large quantities of ammunition and equipment.

The news of this achievement of our 1st Division came as an inspiration to the troops in Borispol. But even Brusilov's great victory failed to re-awaken the conscience of the Russian soldier. The advancing troops were not supported by the reserves, and the Russian Front Line collapsed. Thus the great victory of Zborov turned into a disorderly rout. Under these terrible circumstances, the Brigade had to retreat as best it could, some sections escaping only after fierce hand-to-hand fighting.

The chaos at the Front brought an order to our Division in Borispol. Two hundred and sixty soldiers and fourteen officers were sent to the Galician Front with instructions to collect as much as possible of the vast stores of arms and ammunition that the deserting Russian troops were leaving on and behind the battlefields. Reaching a place called Tarnopol, they found themselves in the midst of the disorderly Russian retreat. Troops poured from the Line in all directions. Field-guns, rifles, ammunition, stores, lay over the fields and roads in indescribable confusion. The rabble was being pressed by the advancing Germans. Hurriedly our men collected two rifles apiece, together with ammunition, and retreated, leaving behind them equipment sufficient to provide an army corps. They arrived back in Borispol after a month with very little to show for their efforts. But their experience adequately illustrates what was beginning to happen in all parts of the Russian lines. The proud armies of the Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaievic were melting under the effects of insidious propaganda, assisted by memories of many years of misrule and oppression. From the military point of view, Russia had ceased to count.

As the 2nd Division was gradually built up at Borispol the soldiers were given garrison duties to perform. Under the existing circumstances, these duties were most distasteful to us, for one of our principal tasks was to catch Russian deserters as they returned to their homes. It seemed futile to arrest individual men, because while sometimes we doubtless took soldiers who had acted as ringleaders in the mutinies that had been happening daily, the majority of our captives were simple fellows who had been led away from their duties by able talkers. Others were men who had no desire to desert, but saw the folly of trying to remain when their regiment melted around them. To have stayed under these circumstances would have served no useful purpose and certainly resulted in death or capture at the hands of the fast advancing enemy. However, it was impossible to sort the sheep from the goats in these respects. All soldiers we took had to be classed as deserters, and treated accordingly.

Many heart-rending scenes occurred as we caught these men and marched them away. I remember on one occasion we were followed down the street by a desperate woman whose returned husband we had been compelled to seize. She wrung her hands and wailed in misery, fearing that her man was on his way to face a firing squad.

"Brutes and villains," she cried. "What is it to you that my man has come back to me? Damned foreigners that you are, why must you interfere in Russian affairs?"

Her wild cries drew other women from their homes, women who were personally interested through fear for their own sons and husbands. They rushed along behind and beside us, flinging mud and stones, and crying down the wrath of Heaven upon the 'murdering Czechs.'

Soon we were surrounded by a howling mob, cursing, blaspheming, and weeping in a crescendo of misery and rage. The situation had become really ugly by the time we reached barracks, and never have I been so glad to escape from enemies as from that pitiable crowd of desperate women. Scenes of this kind were of almost daily occurrence until headquarters succeeded in arranging with the Russian authorities to free us from this distasteful duty. At this time the Czech Legion was still regarded as a part of the Russian Army, but it was understood between Russian headquarters and our own authorities that in future Czech soldiers should be used only against outside enemies.

Unhappily, as events turned out, this understanding was not long operative, for soon we were to be involved against our will in fierce strife with the Russians themselves. For the time being, however, the move was a great satisfaction to us.

Then one day 'Father' Masaryk himself came to us in Borispol. Masaryk, the coachman's son, idealist and practical man, was looked up to by us all as the only one of our leaders who could show us the way out of chaos into peace and happiness. We knew that he had been working disinterestedly for the unity of our people. Realizing at the beginning of the War that by staying at home he would never be able to do efficient work against the Habsburgs, he escaped from Austria and went to Paris and London. Thereafter, in France, England, Switzerland, and America he worked untiringly in the Czech cause, for a central organization for the Czechoslovak Revolutionary Movement. In collaboration with Dr. Beněs, he established in Paris the Czech Foreign Committee which, on 14 November 1915, had issued the famous Paris Manifesto, informing the world at large that the Czech nation was carrying on a revolutionary struggle against the Government of Austria. It is not necessary to discuss here all the difficulties and problems he encountered. It is sufficient to say that he strove to unite the Czechs in whatsoever country they might be, and to provide them with a striking organization through the medium of which their influence might be felt in the councils of Europe.

Masaryk was one of the few leaders who realized to the full the extent of the evils which were coming upon Russia, and he wished to gather his people together for their own protection. He therefore organized a great recruiting campaign, sending out no fewer than two hundred agents to the various camps scattered in all parts of the country. His visit to us in Borispol formed part of this organized propaganda campaign.

It was on 6 August 1917 that 'Father' Masaryk arrived. We had had full notice of his coming and had made suitable preparation. The *zemlanky* roofs were all decorated with coloured streamers and signs of welcome. We had the feeling that now at last there would be a strong direction in our affairs, that we were no longer forgotten in a foreign country. For some time our cheers prevented Masaryk from speaking. When at length he began he told us of what had been done, and something of how he proposed to approach the huge tasks that lay ahead. He ended with these words:

> "But beware, my dear boys, beware! Things in Russia are not entirely what they seem. Our difficulties are great. We must stand back to back. Truth always wins. And because our ideals are good, and because we are justified in what we seek, we must and shall win. Have no fear. But I repeat to you, be on guard, beware."

Better than any, Masaryk appreciated the full significance of the trend of events in Russia; better than any he foresaw the desperate struggle that lay ahead of the Czech Legion; better than any he knew the privations and sufferings through which we should have to pass. So his speech was full of encouragement and hope, for with greater conviction than any he knew that our cause must succeed.

Shortly after the Masaryk visit, the 2nd Division left Borispol, where the barracks did not offer sufficient accommodation to the steadily growing numbers. So our four regiments were distributed in towns lying along the railway running from Kiev to the East. My own regiment, the 6th, was placed in a provincial town called Piriatin. The 1st Division, following the battle of Zborov, had retreated from the abandoned Front Line into barracks near Kiev. Thus in the winter of 1917 the whole of the Czechoslovak Legion was concentrated in the Ukraina.

My colonel was named Cervinka. He was a great soldier, and had been in the Russian Guards as a captain, for, although he was a Czech, his family had been settled in Russia for many years. Indeed, his father had been a major-general in the Tsarist Army. To witness the complete break up of the great Russian military machine, which he had always regarded as invincible, was a sad experience, and he railed bitterly at Kerensky for his lack of firmness. We all knew that the Provisional Government could not stand, for there was no reason to suppose that the attitude of the peasants in the neighbourhood of Borispol and Piriatin was other than a sample of the behaviour of their kind in

all parts of Russia. They became more and more truculent in their demeanour and they showed very quickly that they interpreted the word 'liberty' to mean freedom to steal, fight, and murder. In short, as in the French Revolution, they were determined to use the Revolution as an excuse to do exactly what seemed good to them, and, since they were for the most part no more than ignorant children, whose better natures had been embittered by oppression, what they thought good was usually very bad indeed.

All this time trains were coming from the West carrying soldiers from the shattered Front. The one idea of every man was to get back to his village as quickly as possible. There was a special reason for this.

"They tell us the land is to be divided," they would cry from their seats on the roofs of coaches, from the footboards, from the buffers, from, indeed, any place where there was space to hold on. "So we must get home quickly, otherwise the best pieces will be gone."

"Yes," we would reply, "but what about the Germans? They are marching after you, and will take part of Russia away from you."

"Oh," would come the airy answer, "let them have it. Our Russia is so big that we shall not even notice the loss. There will still be plenty left for us."

It was useless arguing the matter with them. Their minds were set upon one thought only – 'We must not lose the opportunity offered by the Revolution.['] Each man went into the Revolution with the single-minded purpose of getting out of it for himself just as much as he could.

My company was billeted in a small village just outside Piriatin. The village stood upon the estate of a large landowner, who was still serving as an officer with the forces. His wife remained in charge of the estate. When we arrived the peasants had already divided the landowner's fields amongst themselves, and were about to rob and burn the living house and farm. Naturally we prevented them from doing this and so earned their hearty displeasure. They spent much time in cursing us, and in profitless swearing. Eventually they decided to put in a member of their local *soviet* to act as a kind of bailiff amongst us, making sure that we made away with none of the 'people's property.' This led to a most amusing situation.

There was on the farm a large flock of turkeys, counting several hundred birds. Despite the 'soviet control' this flock rapidly diminished because the 'controller' set the bad example of secretly helping himself to a number of the birds. Naturally, the lady owner felt that she had an equal right to steal her own birds. And eventually the Czech soldiers saw no valid reason for their remaining the only persons who were deprived of the pleasure of an occasional tasty meal. There were no turkeys left when eventually our company left the village.

During October it became abundantly obvious that the power of the moderate Socialists was waning, and that the previously weak Bolsheviks were gathering influence. A strong man was needed to unite Russia. Kerensky was not that man. Then on 8 November the hammer blow fell.

Fiala told me the news. He had a habit of being the first to hear things of importance.

"Well," he said, "it's happened. Kerensky's finished. Do you remember Masaryk's words? 'Beware,' he said. That old man sees far. Now it's a matter of the Czechs against the world."

"What do you mean?" I asked tensely. "Plain enough, isn't it? Lenin and Trotski have pulled off a *coup d'état*, and this time we're in for real revolution. We can't go West because of the Germans, and now that the Russian armies are breaking to pieces we'll be left alone in the midst of the Bolshevik ruin. Before long we'll be the only organized troops in the whole of the country. We must hold together, or we're finished."

From day to day the disorder grew. The hordes of soldiers who continued to stream back from the West were tired of the long war, and now sought victims upon whom to vent their anger and their hereditary sense of ill-usage. The first people to suffer at their hands were their own officers, in

whom they saw nothing but the cruel representatives of the heartless Tsarist regime. A few officers escaped, but most were mercilessly murdered. Then the men turned their attention to the rich families in towns and villages. These were robbed, and as often as not their houses burned. Absolute anarchy was the immediate outcome of the 'liberty' proclaimed by the political leaders.

Everywhere the Czech soldiers were assailed by the insidious Bolshevik theories which were soon to plunge the country into the depths of misery. We were alone in the midst of disruption. Yet somehow the Czech troops stood firm. They were not bolshevized. Only our utter faith in the brotherhood of the Legion saved us. There was a sort of freemasonry amongst us which held the divisions intact. It is true that we took from the Bolsheviks the idea of the Regimental Committee, but, fortunately for us, our committees, unlike the Russian, had no authority whatever in military matters, acting as intermediaries between officers and men only in regard to economic affairs. Later, these committees turned out to be essential in treating with the Bolsheviks, who would recognize the authority of no officer, be he lieutenant or general. I was myself elected to membership of our Regimental Committee.

When in January 1918 it became clear that the Bolsheviks would patch up a peace with the Germans, we were threatened with an even more difficult position than the one we already occupied. The signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was now merely a matter of time, and it was abundantly clear that the Czech Legion would be regarded as trespassing upon Russian soil. Professor Masaryk cleverly met this difficulty by arranging with the French Government for the Czechoslovak Army in Russia to be officially recognized as a constituent part of the autonomous Czechoslovak Army in France.

"Our cause," said Masaryk, "is to be the cause of the Allies." Thus it was decided that the Legion should make the best of its way to the Western Front in France, and the only route left open was via Siberia and Vladivostok.

But to leave Russia, even by this route, was not easy. The civil war raged everywhere. The turmoil was still further increased by the action of the Ukraina, the district in which we ourselves were located. Here a National Party Government declared independence from Russia proper. The result of this declaration was that a powerful Red Bolshevik Army soon headed towards Ukraina, and again the position of the Legion became extremely critical. The question of the hour was what attitude would the Bolsheviks adopt towards ourselves?

It was true that Masaryk had clearly stated that the Czechoslovaks would stand apart from Russia's internal feuds, that we were a neutral force interested neither in one cause nor the other, but anxious only to retreat from the country as soon as might be. But would the unruly Bolsheviks heed this categorical pronouncement?

Kiev, the capital city of Ukraina, was the first objective of the Bolshevik Army. Steadily they approached. It was decided to send a delegation to meet them, and to remind them of our neutral attitude. It was useless to send an officer on this mission. He would not have been heard. So representatives of our Regimental Committee were dispatched on this dangerous mission. Fortunate it was for us that we were well-armed and disciplined. The Bolsheviks bore no love towards us, and probably coveted our possessions, but the upshot was that they decided that they had enough troubles on their hands in subduing the country without tackling so well organized a force as the Legion, They received our committee with some show of courtesy, and it was agreed that we should be left alone in return for our neutrality. Hostages were exchanged in security of this agreement. But even so we did not trust the Red Army, and remained watchfully on our guard. Eventually their trains poured into Piriatin station, and, our company being on duty nearby, I had an opportunity to observe them closely.

A more motley, disreputable army it would be difficult to imagine. They wore any oddments of uniform they happened to have found or to have been able to steal. They were armed to the teeth,

rather after the fashion of the pirates of old times, some men being equipped with sword, revolver, dagger, and one or even two rifles.

As the trains stopped they would leap from the coaches, brandishing their weapons, and then run about shouting loudly. Their demeanour was ugly, and we were anxious lest they should break the agreement and attack us suddenly. Even the field-guns standing on the platform coaches were trained upon the town. Suddenly a panic broke out amongst them. They stumbled back into the coaches and their wild shouting ceased. They had noticed our lines surrounding the station, the men, with rifle in hand, moving gradually towards them. They understood that we meant to maintain the agreement and that we were not disposed to tolerate any nonsense in Piriatin. After this everything went smoothly. The Bolshevik trains stopped in the station for a short time only, and then passed on without disturbance. The men eyed us in none too friendly fashion. They envied our discipline, while affecting to despise it, for they knew its value in battle. But they left us alone as had been agreed, and so for a little longer we remained peacefully minding our own business in the midst of the Bolshevik hate. Unhappily, this state of affairs was not to last.

Hardly had our anxiety at the approach of the Reds been temporarily assuaged than we were faced with another and far more urgent peril. The Government of the Ukraina, having signed a separate peace with the Germans, now invited them to enter the country, and help in the establishment of the local anti-Bolshevik administration. The German armies at once advanced in three huge waves, one going south towards Odessa, the second in the direction of Kiev, and the third south-east from Minsk towards the important railway junction of Bachmach. The advance of the third of these armies created a perilous situation for the Legion, because if they were allowed to reach Bachmach before the 1st Division had had time to retreat, they would be able to cut off half our strength.

The 1st Division immediately began to retire. But their retreat was slow because there were no trains available for their use, and they were compelled to fight constant and fierce rearguard actions with the advancing Germans.

The 6th Regiment then suddenly received orders to occupy the vital junction of Bachmach as quickly as possible. Our instructions were to hold the station at all costs against the Germans until trains could be found for the 1st Division and it had been taken safely through Bachmach towards the East.

The clouds hung low as we entrained for our difficult task. Gloom overhung the countryside as though the wind and the rain mourned for the bloody struggle that was already in progress between the Bolsheviks and the Ukrainian ‘rebels.’ But there was joy in the faces of the soldiers of the 6th Regiment. At last we were to have the chance of action against our enemies, the Germans. For years we had stagnated, idle, and restless. Now our chance had come, and against the people whom we most wished to fight. We certainly got the action for which we craved, but it is possible that our spirits might not have been quite so high that day had we known as we entrained that for two solid years we were to eat, sleep, and fight in railway-carriages, that even the questionable comfort of the *zemlanky* was now a thing of the past.

A whisper passed from man to man. “Russia is finished. France and the Western Front is our next stop.” We argued the matter out in our carriage as we sped towards the battle.

“What is the good of our fighting the Germans?” asked one man. “With the Russian armies gone they’ll wipe us up in a week.”

“We’re not going to fight Germany in Russia, imbecile,” cut in another. “All we’ve to do is to hold them off while the First Division gets away. The Bolsheviks and their local wars have choked every other road out of Ukraina. If we don’t hold the junction the First Division’s sunk.”

We had also to do all we could towards securing trains for the retreating troops. They were then on the road from Kiev on foot, and were planning to strike the railway somewhere between Piriatin and Bachmach.

Our task was clear cut, and each man was resolved to do his part towards its accomplishment. 'We must show the First Division that we are up to their standard,' was what we told each other.

My train happened to be the advance guard of the Regiment. We stopped in a station a few miles out of Bachmach, and Captain Cehovsky got out to call up the junction to find out who was then in possession. There was no reply to his ring. Uncertain whether or not the Germans had stolen a march upon us and arrived first, Cehovsky ordered that the engine should be separated from the train and sent slowly down the line towards the junction. A section with two machine-guns manned the engine. As we approached Bachmach we heard rifle-fire.

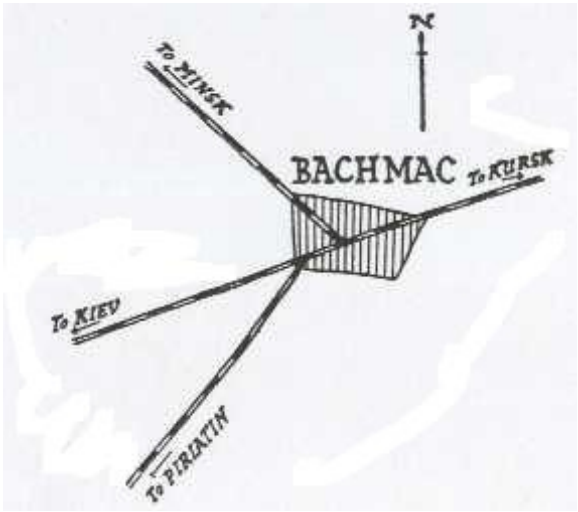
"Patrol forward," ordered Cehovsky.

Fiala volunteered, and I joined him. Together, we went forward slowly under cover of the railway embankment without meeting anyone. Presently we arrived at a spot from which there was a clear view of the station. What we saw was amazing. An engine with two carriages was leaving the station towards the West while a train of similar size was entering from the East. The soldiers in each train were firing at each other. A large red flag flew on the engine of the advancing train.

"They are Bolsheviks," said Fiala. "Come on we must ask them what is happening."

It appeared that small Ukrainian and Bolshevik detachments were fighting each other. The Bolsheviks knew nothing whatever about the advance of German troops, and seemed not a little alarmed at the news we brought them. Hurriedly we returned to report, and soon our train arrived in Bachmach and our men had occupied all strategical points. Cehovsky discussed the situation with the Bolsheviks, who gladly agreed to our occupation of Bachmach, and even offered to help us fight the Germans.

When more of our troops arrived, patrols were sent in all directions to discover the positions of the approaching Germans. At the same time parties were sent to nearby stations to commandeer any railway carriages that might be found to be held in readiness for the arrival of the 1st Division.



There were four main railway lines passing through Bachmach. Each had its own particular significance in regard to the safety of the Legion. These lines were the southern line by which we had arrived from Piriatin, the western from Kiev, the northern from Minsk, and the eastern from Kursk. The Germans approached by way of Kiev and Minsk. The eastern line towards Kursk was the one by which it was proposed to evacuate the Legion towards the east.

I myself took part in the fighting which soon occurred along the railway to Kiev, and so can describe only what happened on that front. But the fighting to the north in the direction of Minsk was of a similar nature, even though it was perhaps rather fiercer and lasted longer, indeed to the last moment of our retreat from Bachmach.

The days passed in small skirmishes with German scout detachments. Reports estimated the enemy advance guard arriving from Kiev at about one thousand men, a figure nearly five times greater than our own. This was followed on 9 March with the news that the advance troops of the 1st Division had reached the Piriatin railway line and begun to entrain. This was a great relief to us. But our task had barely begun. As it happened the main clash began the next day.

Early in the morning, when there was a slight mist on the ground, we observed from our trenches a patrol engine with two coaches advancing towards us. This train presented an astonishing spectacle. On the running-boards of the coaches, and on the roofs as well, men hung by their toes and fingertips. So thickly were they clustered that the trained seem to have lost all semblance of its normal appearance.

“Look,” cried Fiala, “those men are Russian soldiers coming home. The Germans must know perfectly well that we are here. Their game is to use the unfortunate Russians as a screen for themselves.”

We allowed the train to approach within a few hundred yards, and then fired a salvo above the heads of the men crowded on the carriage roofs. Immediately the train seemed to break into a thousand pieces. The Russians deluged from its sides, bolting for the open country like rabbits to their burrows. When this outer coating had been shed, heads shot out of the windows. These belonged to the Germans.

“Advance,” came the order. We leapt forward, hoping to catch the enemy before he had time to put his engine into reverse. As we ran we fired at the windows of the carriages. One man leapt upon the engine, to be shot immediately through the head. He fell backwards without a cry. Then the train started to move backwards, almost, as it were, from the tips of our grasping fingers. We were shooting at point-blank range and must have done much execution.

“Back to our own train,” came the order. Behind our trenches, which lay some miles out of Bachmach, we had an engine and coaches in which to retreat or advance as occasion required. Presently in the distance there appeared two long enemy trains. Soldiers leapt from the coaches and formed in long lines before advancing upon us. They were far too numerous for us to cope with, so we retired in our train for about two miles. Here we stopped, tore up a large section of the railway line, and retreated again, leaving a detachment behind to delay the Germans in the work of repair. But they could do no more than cause delay, and so again we were forced to destroy a strip of line and retire, harrying the enemy once more as he set about the work of reconstructing the line.

So the fight continued for hour after hour. Gradually we were forced back until we were within six miles of Bachmach junction. The situation was serious, for at their then rate of progress the Germans would achieve their objective before the 1st Division had had time to evacuate. Our orders were to hold on and retard the speed of the enemy advance at whatever cost.

We were preparing for yet another retreat when two relief companies arrived. These reinforcements quickly deployed into line, and we went forward to attack. This opportunity to advance instead of fall back was an inspiration to us after our weary rearguard action, and we pressed the Germans hotly, who, in their turn, were compelled to retire, leaving behind them many dead. But against their vastly superior numbers and heavy gun-fire we had no chance. Again we were forced to retreat towards Bachmach. The position had now become critical, for our left flank was nearing the Piriatin railway line, by which the trains of the 1st Division were coming. Indeed, the German guns were already shelling the line. If we were forced back behind the track the line of retreat from Piriatin would be cut and our comrades trapped.

It was now about three o’clock in the afternoon. The lines were drawn far out on either side of the railway, and we were retreating almost step by step, sinking above our ankles in the soft, glutinous mud of the wet fields. A long-drawn rearguard action is an extreme trial to even the strongest nerves, and it would be foolish to say that we were not under great strain. We no longer felt the

bounding confidence with which we had started the fight. We had realized that it was quite possible that we should fail in the task which had been set us. It was a tense moment.

Suddenly loud commands sounded behind us. Captain Krejci had arrived with three fresh companies and a machine-gun section. They brought one field gun, which went into action at once to the accompaniment of loud cheers from the weary men.

“Forward, brethren,” cried Krejci. “Forward, the 6th Regiment.”

Again we charged, clashing with the Germans in fierce hand-to-hand fighting. It was during this rush that Fiala fell, pierced through with a German bayonet. There was nothing I could do, for he died almost at once. So I lost a second friend.

For a time the German line resisted. Suddenly it began to break. A 1st Division’s train from Piriatin had appeared in the distance. The soldiers, who were leaning out of the windows, attracted by the firing, saw the urgency of our case, leaped to the ground, and charged the Germans from the flank. This fresh attack finally broke the spirit of the enemy. His orderly retreat changed into a panicky rout. Unfortunately, however, the coming of darkness prevented us from taking full advantage of our victory.

After this success the situation in the direction of Kiev eased considerably. Apparently the enemy had not anticipated determined resistance, and so had suffered a great surprise, from which he recovered only slowly. But pressure along the line from Minsk was very fierce, and much hard fighting took place.

For three days more the Legion had to meet and repulse heavy German attacks, while the trains of the 1st Division passed through Bachmach. During the night of 14 March the final engagement was fought. Then quietly, under the cover of darkness, the remaining detachments were withdrawn and rapidly entrained. Next day the German pincer movement closed on an empty station.

So we were forced towards the east. Now there could be no turning back. France was our goal. The great march of the Legion had begun.

Chapter III – Our Wanderings Begin

We left Bachmach with the satisfaction of knowing that we had succeeded with the first task that had been set us as members of the Legion. The whole of the Czechoslovak Army Corps was now safe in trains, distributed along the line travelling to the east, and more immediately to the towns of Kursk and Penza. We of the 6th Regiment, being the last to leave Bachmach, acted as rearguard. We had now resigned ourselves to the situation in Russia and to the fact that it would no longer be possible for Czech national plans to be developed in that country. Looking forward eagerly to the new adventure which, as we fondly supposed, lay ahead of us in France, we began to study French with diligence. Perhaps many of us would have spared ourselves the pains of this work had we then suspected that the Legion was destined never to reach the West as a fighting force.

At this time an order reached us from Regimental headquarters. Commissions had been granted to several soldiers, and I myself was promoted sergeant. These changes were necessitated by our losses at the battle of Bachmach, losses which, although considerable, were undoubtedly many fewer than those sustained by the enemy, who, as the attacking force, had naturally incurred heavy casualties.

The Russian railways were in an incredible state of muddle. Every town, almost every station, had set up its own small republic, and every local soviet, and each petty Bolshevik commander, issued orders which not infrequently directly conflicted with each other. The authorities at one station refused us permission to pass through, insisting that we must make a wide detour to the south, but when we took this route a southern station sent us back again, maintaining that the lines under its control were inextricably blocked. So our journey continued; sometimes we were received with courtesy, sometimes with threats. The difficulties of our position were further complicated by the events of the civil war that raged around us. The Bolsheviks were not yet masters of the whole country, and almost every day there were battles between their armies and the troops of opposing political parties.

Sometimes it was impossible for the Legion to avoid becoming involved in these local wars. For instance, late one afternoon our train arrived outside a small town called Balasov to find that a fierce fight was in progress. The troops engaged were Social Revolutionaries, followers of Kerensky, and a force of Bolsheviks. The Socialists held the station, the Bolsheviks the town, and we learned that the Bolsheviks were preparing for that night a decisive attack. With darkness the firing ceased, and our train steamed slowly into the station.

Immediately representatives of the Social Revolutionaries sought out Cehovsky, our Commander, and tried to persuade him to give help against the Bolsheviks. Since the Legion was maintaining a strictly neutral attitude, Cehovsky categorically refused this request, and proceeded to demand that there should be no fighting while our trains remained in the station. This forced armistice seemed to suit the plans of the Socialists, for shortly after this interview the station-master advised us that the line ahead was blocked, and that we must remain where we were, at any rate until the morning. Probably this was merely a device upon the part of the Socialists to keep the Czech troops upon the spot.

Having assured ourselves against a surprise from the Socialists, we now had to find a way of preventing the proposed Bolshevik attack, which, should it mature, must inevitably involve ourselves. Cehovsky decided to visit the Bolshevik leaders, and so made up a delegation with myself and two other soldiers.

The Bolshevik headquarters were accommodated in a fine house in the central square. Formerly the place had belonged to one of the wealthiest citizens of the town. An amazing clumsiness characterized the guards outside the headquarters' building. It was apparent that the Bolshevik troops consisted almost entirely of workmen and peasants who had been drilled for a day or two only. The soldiers on duty smoked as they pleased, and there was practically no military discipline as we understood the word.

In a large room on the first floor were the commanders whom we had come to interview. There was no uniformity whatever in the dress of these men. Those who had military costume were resplendent in the smart uniforms of former Tsarist officers, but in every case the 'pogony,' or epaulettes, bearing the distinguishing marks of rank, had been torn away. There were no visible distinctions, or marks of superiority, on any of the uniforms. Thus was the world shown that all members of the Bolshevik Army were equal 'comrades.'

The most amazing aspect of this room was the manner in which it had been turned into a carelessly kept armoury. There were revolvers on every table, revolvers and daggers had been laid down negligently on every window sill and upon the mantelpiece. In a corner rifles were stacked. From the belts of every man hung more revolvers. Three sabres hung on a peg, and the seats of many of the chairs were covered with a miscellaneous selection of arms.

For a moment we stared in astonishment, and perhaps the Bolsheviks thought that we were impressed, or even frightened. We ourselves were without weapons, but I do not recall feeling anxious on account of this warlike display. I did look at the many fine revolvers with a warm desire to possess one, for I had never owned a revolver in my life, the rifle having been my weapon.

"Sit down, comrades," said one of the Bolsheviks. "Let us have done quickly with this business. You must realize that we have a war upon our hands."

We explained our position as briefly as possible. But we could see that our hosts were not well satisfied. The Czech Legion was now the only properly-constituted fighting force in the whole of Russia, the only army that was worthy of the name, and the Bolsheviks would have been glad enough of our assistance. But we wished nothing of this sort, and continued bluntly. Cehovsky did the talking.

"We are not concerned with your affairs. All we want is to go East, and get out of your country for good. For all we care you can cut each other's throats for as long as you like, but let us through. We have come to give you plain warning. It is true that we have been ordered not to intervene in any way in your internal affairs, but, on the other hand, we cannot allow our lives or property to be hazarded by anybody else's actions."

To show a determined and a fearless front was the only way to deal successfully with the average Bolshevik commander. It was useless to reason, for this was invariably regarded as a sign of weakness. For a time our hosts looked as though they might cause trouble. But at length they decided that they had best leave us well alone. Surlily they gave us their decision. "All right," said their leader, "we will delay our attack on the station. But do not fail to go quickly. We can't have you here."

As if we wanted to stay! The more speedily we could get out of this Bolshevik muddle the better we should be pleased. The situation was ridiculous in the extreme. The Socialists wished to keep us in the station as long as possible, and the Bolsheviks to get rid of us quickly.

The Bolshevik commanders kept their word. No attack upon the station took place that night. Next morning we learned that the Socialists had given up the fight, and slipped away without waiting for daylight.

We left Balasov safely behind, but the delays and irritations of our journey continued. Scattered along the railway were hundreds of Bolshevik agents, who did everything in their power to seduce the Czech troops from allegiance to their officers. Some of these agents were themselves Czech, men who had been persuaded into the Bolshevik ranks from employment in factories. Thus our men were beset with all manner of blandishments, tempting offers, and promises. The Bolsheviks had need of us. They also feared us, thinking that the Legion, once it reached Siberia, would form a nucleus round which would gather all the anti-Bolshevik elements that still existed in Russian territory. Fortunately the Legionaries were far too loyal and hard-headed to be influenced by these approaches. The brotherhood of the Czechoslovak Legion was a thing at which to marvel. Nothing

could shake the confidence of the Legionary in himself and in his brothers. And so we were able to stand firm in the heart of the Bolshevik ruin, and for all practical purposes remain untouched by its doctrines.

Until this stage in our journey our numbers had been growing steadily. At every station and at every wayside stopping place groups of Czech and Slovak ex-prisoners awaited our trains and asked to be enlisted.

Very soon our Bachmach losses were made up, and when our train became so full that we could accept no more recruits, all fresh volunteers were directed to Penza, where Corps headquarters were arranging for the formation of new units.

By this time the Bolshevik Soviet Government had been transferred from Petrograd to Moscow. A representative of the Czechoslovak Committee, Professor Maxa, was in constant negotiation to secure quick and safe passage for the Legion through Siberia to Vladivostok. It was bad that we should be compelled to travel this distant and roundabout route to the Western Front, but that we should be constantly and unnecessarily delayed was exasperating in the extreme.

Professor Maxa did all he could to convince the Soviet Government that our one desire was to quit Russia as quickly as possible in order to participate in France in the war against the Central Powers. In proof of our good faith, he had already agreed to hand over to the Bolsheviks the best part of the artillery of the Legion in Kursk. But in a consideration of our position the Soviets appeared to be greatly influenced by the wishes of Germany. Especially was this the case when, following the conclusion of the Peace of Brest-Litovsk, Count Mirbach was sent to Moscow as German Ambassador. No doubt Mirbach carefully watched the movements of the Legion, deeming it contrary to the interests of his country that we should be allowed to carry out our plan of travelling to France. Mistrust of the intentions of the Bolsheviks grew in the minds of our soldiers, and the constant irritations to which they were subjected increased their dislike of the Russian authorities. Thus, when the details of an agreement arrived at between Maxa and the Soviet in Moscow became known, anger spread throughout the Legion.

It was at a station some distance to the west of Penza that a Legionary abruptly entered the coach in which my section was quartered. He used language which I need not repeat here.

“This is the latest,” he began at last. “We have had orders to proceed to Siberia without arms. Apparently the dear Bolsheviks do not like our being armed. They say that we have stolen weapons which are Russian property, and that we propose to take them out of the country when their own troops are improperly armed. Just as though we weren’t given them to fight the Germans, and would have used them for that purpose if the Russians hadn’t collapsed! So, if you please, orders have come from our National Committee in Moscow that we are to surrender all our arms to the Soviet as we pass through Penza. In return, the Bolsheviks have promised to allow us to reach Vladivostok unmolested. And the best of it is that our Committee must believe them! Moscow air has turned them crazy!”

For a minute no one spoke. The blow was too heavy for this news to register fully on our minds at once.

“Surrender all our arms!” exclaimed someone incredulously.

“Oh, we are to keep 168 rifles, I think it is, per train, and they’ve kindly thrown in one machine-gun, too. But what’s the odds? We can’t fight the Bolsheviks with that lot when they attack us, as attack they will.”

“It’s plain suicide!”

“Well, they’re not making me give up my rifle,” said one Legionary grimly. “This rifle belongs to me, and not to the Bolsheviks. I picked it up myself near Tarnopol after it had been thrown away by some deserting soldier. If I hadn’t done so the Germans would have it now. I used it at Bachmach, and it’s staying with me just so long as I’m alive in the Legion. I’m going to hide it, and a few other

things as well, out of the way of nosy Bolshevik Commissars who may come aboard to inspect the train."

The news that had been brought to us proved to be accurate, even if lacking in detail. The substance of the agreement into which Maxa had entered was:

1. That the Czechoslovak troops should proceed to the east, not as 'fighting units' but as 'groups of free citizens,' carrying only enough arms for self-defence.

2. That 168 rifles, with 300 rounds of ammunition for each rifle, and one machine-gun, with 1,200 rounds of ammunition, should be allowed to each train of 600 men.

3. That each train should hand over all arms other than those specified to the Bolsheviks at Penza.

The order to surrender arms was most unpopular with the troops and occasioned a great deal of discontent. When the Legion was being formed the greatest difficulty was experienced in securing the necessary arms. Apart from collecting arms from the battlefields when they had been heedlessly discarded by the fleeing Russian troops, we had had quantities from Ukrainian stocks, which, ultimately, were captured by the advancing German and Austrian armies. In fact, therefore, we had saved them from enemy hands. Now we were asked to surrender them at a time when we were faced with a journey of 6,000 miles across a vast country, unknown to us, and full of mystery and probable dangers.

We did not hate, or fear, the bad faith of the Bolsheviks. We had been comrades-in-arms with them, and had ourselves seen how shamefully they had been handled when, as soldiers of the old Tsarist armies, they had bravely risked their lives for the sake of Russia. No. We knew that their interests and their rights had been heedlessly sold, and we acknowledged that there had been due provocation for the Revolution. But, even though we sympathised with them and understood their points of view in most things, we could not now trust them in view of their seeming impotence in the hands of the Germans after the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Thus we felt that weapons and not agreements were the best guarantees of our future safety. We were willing to surrender our arms, but felt that this should be done only when we had reached Vladivostok. In this desperate situation many men hid rifles and hand-grenades in a multitude of ingenious caches, within the double walls of the coaches, underneath the sleeping benches, and even in the coal stoves when the fire had been temporarily extinguished.

Our train arrived at Penza on 18 April 1918. Glumly we detrained to stack arms upon the platforms, but were somewhat cheered when a quantity of the hidden material escaped the careful examination of the Bolshevik searchers. These dismal formalities complete, we returned to our coaches with the pitifully small armament which was still permitted to us by the Moscow agreement. Soon our anxiety regarding the wisdom of Professor Maxa's agreement was to receive sad justification.

After crossing the River Volga we arrived in Samara with badly-frayed tempers. The Legionaries were rapidly losing their patience with the Bolsheviks, who, something after the fashion of the Egyptians of old, seemed unwilling for us to stay, and at the same time to be reluctant to allow us to depart. Now had been added a crowning irritation. Our arms had been taken, and no soldier who lacks the means of self-defence is a happy man. We groused freely. Although we had our concealed stocks as well as our small official allowance, we knew that if things came to a show-down there were not nearly sufficient arms to go round amongst us. When, therefore, the Bolsheviks of Samara showed determination to delay us, and refuse the help we had been promised in return for our Penza sacrifice, the temper of the men became ugly.

"If the swine refuse us an engine, let's go and take one for ourselves."

"Yes, Tonda's right. It's useless telling us not to interfere in Russian internal affairs when this kind of thing happens. The time will come when we are forced to interfere, whether we wish or not."

“That time’s come now, lads. We are weakening our own position by being so damned moderate. We’re up against it, and we may as well recognize the fact. Sooner or later we’ve got to use force, and the sooner it comes now the better I’ll be pleased.”

Remarks of this kind were heard everywhere. Then we were told that a delegation was to be sent to interview the Bolshevik Committee. I was chosen as a member of this committee.

“We want an engine,” we announced bluntly as soon as we arrived in the committee room.

“You won’t get an engine unless you pay for it. And the payment we want is thirty rifles.” The Bolsheviks also had determined not to mince their words.

“By agreement in Moscow we are to be given free passage to Vladivostok. In return for this concession we surrendered our arms in Penza.”

“This is Samara and not Penza or Moscow,” replied a Bolshevik tersely. He was a heavily-built fellow, with drooping shoulders and a heavy jaw. His whole manner made it plain that one consideration only ruled his every action, and that consideration was self-interest. We saw that we were in a nasty position,

“But we have already told you that we have given up our arms.”

“Not the machine-gun and 168 rifles that each train was allowed to keep. You are lucky that we do not ask for the lot.”

“We need what we have to protect ourselves. That was understood by agreement.”

“What do we care about your agreements? Why should we trouble with you? Why should we care what becomes of you when you leave here? You are foreigners. You were once our prisoners. Then you had nothing. Now you have more than we ourselves. Your arms are ours, your clothes, your food, everything you have is ours. All we ask for is a few rifles and we mean to have them. It is our right.”

We were growing desperate. There was no arguing with these men who refused to recognize the pledged word of their Moscow headquarters, and whose only thought was of what they could snatch from other people, friend or enemy. We consulted amongst ourselves and tried again.

“We don’t want your things. We want nothing from you. All we wish is to go away. We will leave everything we have at Vladivostok. We still have nearly six thousand miles to go. Leave us something with which to protect ourselves on the journey.”

There was no hesitation over the reply.

“This is Samara. We don’t care what you arranged in Moscow, or what further arrangements you make in Siberia. This is Samara, and we in Samara need thirty rifles. Give them to us now, or we shall demand twice as many.”

We knew well that back in the trains the soldiers were growing more and more angry. Before we had left there had been shouts of “Seize an engine,” “We’re tired of argument, let’s have action.” Against these cries we remembered Masaryk’s strict instructions not to mix ourselves up in the internal affairs of Russia, and above all to avoid being drawn into conflict with the Bolsheviks. We consulted again, and decided to give way. The complacent grins with which the Soviet Committee received this decision made us wish heartily we could give them another answer.

When the men heard what had happened at the committee they were angry. They left Samara with set faces that boded ill for others who might try to blackmail us in the manner we had just experienced. Yet at Ufa, and again at Zlatoust, similar experiences awaited us. Wherever we arrived the story was the same.

“Give us rifles, or we shall not let you have the engines you need.”

Argument was always useless, and we realized that we were being subjected to a kind of danegeld. Like Alfred of England, we knew that repeated payments had the effect merely of putting off the day which must inevitably dawn. Opinion in the Legion was fast crystallizing. Because of the orders we had received, we had put out of our minds as much as possible fighting the Soviets, but now the time had come when our leaders could no longer ignore a remote possibility which threatened fast to become a certainty. It became more and more clear to everybody that if we were to reach Vladivostok we should be compelled to use force.

The officers were growing as anxious in regard to the situation as were the men, and we heard one day that the unconscionable demands of the local Soviets had caused the Commanders of the 1st and 2nd Divisions to unite in an urgent communication to headquarters and to the Czechoslovak National Committee in Moscow, saying that we could not afford to surrender more arms, and giving a plain warning that, in the opinion of the military, it might be necessary to use force in places where unreasonable difficulties were placed in our way.

But the National Committee, which actually was our highest authority in Russia, refused emphatically to consider this possibility, and emphasized once more that friendly relations with the Bolsheviks must be maintained at all costs.

Then at about the end of April the forward movement of the Legion trains was stopped entirely. The local Soviets at each station had scores of ready excuses, but simply refused to supply engines. At this time a few sections of the 1st Division were still west of Penza. From there, eastwards, spread out at wide intervals across the vast plains of Siberia, were units of the Legion, sometimes with stretches hundreds of miles long between each. Thus the trains of the Legion formed down the length of the six thousand miles of railway a number of small islands in the midst of the Bolshevik sea.

At the end of April my regiment was divided into two sections, one having arrived at Chelyabinsk and the other at Petropavlovsk, some five hundred miles further to the east. We had thus ceased to be the rearguard, having passed the troops of the 1st Division en route from Bachmac. Now the 6th Regiment was split yet again by the despatch of my own battalion to a place called Chulym, approximately four hundred miles east of Omsk. In this way it happened that when the real fighting began the Regiment was divided into three groups, covering in all a distance of over a thousand miles. Indeed, the whole Army Corps was in similar plight. Naturally enough, we all watched this wholesale distribution of our forces with the gravest anxiety. Every day the situation grew more tense.

To the above difficulties must be added the growing truculence of the local Soviets. Constant bargaining in the manner already described had reduced our stock of arms to a negligible quantity. Taking advantage of what they conceived to be our helplessness, the Bolsheviks became increasingly impudent and offensive to the Legion. Our requests for engines were put aside, ignored, or even curtly refused. Nevertheless, even though we were told that there were no engines available, trainloads of Austrian and German prisoners returning home from the huge Siberian prison camps passed us almost every day.

The Legionaries became more and more angry. “Look at them laughing at us,” men would mutter. “They know that we are stuck for lack of engines and that we are practically unarmed. They think we are trapped, and unless we do something about it they will be right.”

“The folly is incredible,” others would say. “Here are we struggling to reach France to help the Allies, and yet not only are we unable to move forward, but we actually have to permit fresh and thoroughly rested enemy soldiers to slip through our hands back to the Fatherland so that they may be ready to fight us when eventually we reach the Western Front.”

The anger of the troops was still further increased by news that the Moscow Soviet proposed to divide our forces still further. Word went round that those of our trains which were still west of Omsk were to be sent north to Archangel for embarkation, while those located east of this central

point were to proceed to Vladivostok. The significance of this move was plain to us all. The Soviet seemed to be more or less under the influence of Count Mirbach, the German Ambassador, who wished to prevent us from reaching France. What more likely, then, than a resolve to split the Legion into two powerless halves, each of which could be dealt with at leisure by the Bolshevik troops! The men were quick to grasp the position, Long and angry discussions were held in many a railway carriage, and the general opinion was that this new move must be frustrated at all costs,

"Don't you see what is happening?" the Legionaries argued. "If the National Council listens much longer to these Bolsheviks we shall be trapped in real earnest. We must tell the Council exactly where they get off, that we will not stand for this kind of treatment any longer. We must insist that the Conference of Legionaries, proposed so long ago, is called at once."

This Conference of Legionaries had been planned some months before to decide what action should be taken when the whole of our plans were disorganized by the break-up of the Russian Armies and the coming of the Revolution. It had been necessary to order a postponement, however, on account of the sudden evacuation which was forced upon us and also on account of the Bachmac fighting.

At last there came an order from headquarters calling the long-expected conference for early in May at the town of Chelyabinsk. In our battalion the delegates had been elected a month before the arrival of the order. I had been chosen to be one of them. Before leaving for Chelyabinsk on this mission, I resolved to sound the opinions of my brethren upon the various subjects which would come up for discussion. So I proceeded from carriage to carriage in an effort to sense the common viewpoint.

There was very little doubt as to what this viewpoint was. The Legionaries were shrewd. They perceived that the Bolsheviks must inevitably fear that the Czechs, whatever their present intentions might be, ultimately would not sail immediately on arrival at Vladivostok, but that they would listen to the lures of some 'white' general encountered in the neighbourhood of that town. From the Bolshevik point of view, therefore, it would be indiscreet to allow the Czech troops to come into touch with the Siberian White Forces. The soldiers believed, as a result of this reasoning, that the Bolsheviks would put every obstacle in the way of their march, no matter what promises had been, or might be, made in Moscow. Was not our inability to secure engines from the local Soviets a clear proof that this was the course in which events were shaping?

I found that the men had already discussed all angles of the subject, that they had made up their minds, and that they realised very thoroughly that, whatever decisions were taken at the approaching conference, the results must be momentous for us all.

"We are scattered," they argued. "A few have already reached Vladivostok. The rest of us are distributed perilously along six thousand miles of railway. Nevertheless, our position is not necessarily so precarious as it seems. While we hold the railway, Siberia is ours, and the Bolsheviks will have great difficulty in getting at us in force. We can afford to fight. Indeed, to fight our way through is the only chance for any of us. Where Bolsheviks already hold the line we must drive them away and link up with our brothers."

This was the opinion of one coach. The next would put much the same ideas into different words, perhaps stressing other points of importance.

"The Bolsheviks will never believe that we do not want to join with the White Armies. Therefore they will fight to prevent us from passing. We had far best take the initiative and strike first. Most of our arms have been taken. We must start fighting before the rest are filched from us, while we still have some means of seizing more equipment for ourselves."

The consensus of opinion was that the Legion stood in perilous case, and that, unless a determined stand was made at once, the Czechs might drift into a position in which they would run a serious risk of being wiped out completely. And so as I left coach after coach the last words I heard were:

“Gus, there is no help for it; we must fight our way through. If we don’t make up our minds to do this at once we are sunk.”

This resolve had been taken practically unanimously by all the Czech soldiers, although this fact did not become apparent until the Conference was actually in session. No doubt the bitter experiences of Bolshevik duplicity, the common lot during the past few months, had done much to crystallize the determination of the troops. They were tired of fruitless delays and of the constant double-dealing of the Soviets. They realised the peril of the course they chose, but unhesitatingly preferred the risk to the certainty of being gradually immobilized through fear of drastic action.

When our delegation arrived in Chelyabinsk we found that there was great excitement amongst our troops at the station. On 14 May an ugly incident had occurred which had led to the creation of a dangerous situation in the town. Among others, three trains had been standing in the station for some days prior to our arrival. Two of these belonged to the 6th Regiment. The third was filled, with the exception of the three last carriages, with civilian refugees returning to European Russia. The end coaches referred to were filled with returning Austrian prisoners of war. Both the refugees and the prisoners were very short of food, and the local Soviet did little to relieve them in this respect. Thus, when the Czech Legionaries gave them all that could be spared from their own supplies, they expressed themselves as extremely grateful.

Many friendships had sprung up, and when at last an engine arrived for the refugee train, a group of Legionaries gathered to say goodbye to their departing friends. The train was actually beginning to move slowly out of the station when suddenly a piece of iron was hurled from one of the prisoners’ coaches. The missile struck a Czech named Duchacek in the head. Duchacek collapsed, badly wounded.

Furious anger seized the friends of the victim of this malicious and entirely unprovoked attack. Leaping on the running-boards of the coaches, they succeeded in stopping the still slow-moving train. Other Czech troops came running, and when they heard what had happened they assisted in dragging the prisoners from their coaches, and only the strenuous efforts of officers saved the Austrians from being lynched on the spot.

The Legionaries had had previous experience of the lenience often extended by the Bolshevik authorities towards the Austrian and German prisoners, and so they now insisted that the matter should be investigated on the spot, and the identity of the aggressor established before the train was allowed to proceed on its way. The prisoners were, therefore, interrogated at once, and, frightened by the threatening attitude of the Czechs, they indicated the man who had thrown the piece of iron.

Fierce shouts broke out in the crowd, and a moment later the Legionaries had thrown themselves upon the culprit. It was useless for the officers to intervene. When, after a few minutes calm was restored, the Austrian’s limp body lay still upon the ground.

The name of the culprit was Malik, which is a pure Czech name, meaning ‘small finger.’ This was the irony of the tragic incident. The man was of Czech descent, but a renegade. What had turned him so violently against his blood brethren is not known, but it occasionally happened that by means of promises, bribery or force weak Czechs and Slovaks were seduced from their natural allegiance to become mere creatures of the Austrians. Doubtless Malik had been one of these, or at least the son of such a man who, perhaps, had been compelled to send the unfortunate lad to a German school where he had learned to forget his Czech ancestry. The Austrian habit of germanizing in this manner their Czech subjects, was one of the reasons which caused us to rise up against the Empire.

After Malik had been killed, the crowd calmed and allowed the remainder of the prisoners to be taken to the office of the Bolshevik Commissar where they were again interrogated. They all agreed that Malik was the man who had thrown the iron, and unanimously condemned the action, especially in view of the fact that during their stay in the station they had been shown the utmost

kindness by the Czechs. They further stated that Malik had boasted that he would kill a Czech before they left Chelyabinsk.

But the incident did not end here. The Bolshevik Soviet in the town, which was about two miles distant from the station, decided that proceedings must be taken against the soldiers who had killed the prisoner. They demanded that the ten Legionaries who had been placed as a guard round the prisoners should be sent to the Court for questioning. The Czech Commander agreed to this course and the Czechs concerned marched down to the town.

Hours passed, but the men did not return. Then came a report that they had been arrested. Immediately two Czech officers were sent to the Soviet to request the instant release of the detained men. These messengers were also arrested.

The excitement, which by this time had calmed, blazed up afresh. The troops were thoroughly roused and demanded prompt action. The Czech Commander did not hesitate. He decided to march into the town, and, by creating a military demonstration, compel the Soviet to surrender their captives. Forthwith, two battalions marched into Chelyabinsk, and occupied the more important streets and crossroads. Tension increased, and presently while changing guard a corporal of the first Company was fired upon and killed by a Bolshevik patrol. The Company advanced, disarmed the Bolsheviks, and seized a small warehouse containing rifles. The arms were distributed amongst our men.

Frightened by our determined action, the Bolshevik Commissar agreed to free the Legionaries provided the troops left the town at once. These terms were accepted, and the battalions returned to the station with their rescued brethren.

This was the state of affairs in Chelyabinsk when our delegation arrived. The atmosphere was tense, and thus the drastic decisions at which the Conference was shortly to arrive were precipitated at least in part by Bolshevik action.

During the preliminary meetings that were held on the first two days of the Conference the position of the Czechoslovak troops was discussed in general, and a unanimous decision recorded that any proposal to divert part of the Legion in the direction of Archangel should be emphatically refused. A telegram which arrived at this time, and which was sent from Moscow to the Chelyabinsk Soviet proposing that the Czech troops should be invited to enlist in the Red Army, caused us to be yet more suspicious of Bolshevik intentions.

The decisive meeting of the Conference took place on 23 May in a waiting room in the station. By this time, representatives of almost every regiment had gathered, some coming from quite near at hand and others from great distances. It would be fruitless to discuss the many speeches which were made and carefully considered by the delegates. Speaking generally, the representatives of the National Committee strenuously opposed any action which might lead to hostilities on the plea that our leaders in Moscow and in Paris wished at any cost to avoid war with the Bolsheviks. In direct contradistinction, however, the delegates who had come to voice the views of the troops were unanimous in insisting that those actually on the spot were in the best position to decide with judgment what was the best course to follow. In their opinion, we should decide at once to proceed to Vladivostok ‘if necessary by the use of force.’

During the ensuing arguments, first for one point of view and then for the other, a messenger entered the room abruptly and handed some papers to the Chairman, whispering excitedly the while.

A moment later the Chairman stood up and interrupted the discussion.

“Brethren,” he said gravely, “I feel that it is my duty to pass on to you the contents of two telegrams which our men have just intercepted. The first of these comes from Moscow, from the Commissar for the Red Army, Aralov. It is directed to all local Soviets throughout the length of the transcontinental railway. It says: ‘Hold up, disarm and dissolve all sections of the Czechoslovak Army Corps as a remainder of the Tsarist Regular Army. Form out of them troops for the Red

Army, and also working detachments.' The other telegram is from the Chelyabinsk Soviet to the Ekaterinburg Soviet asking for help in the work of disarming all Czechoslovak troops in Chelyabinsk."

These telegrams spoke for themselves, and showed clearly that the long-expected action against ourselves on the part of the Bolshevik authorities was about to take place. After the chairman's disclosure there could be no more hesitation, and a resolution 'To stop at once the further surrender of arms to the Bolshevik Soviets' was carried. It was further resolved to cable this decision immediately to the Soviet Government in Moscow. Yet another resolution entrusted all future business regarding the transportation of the Legion to a 'Temporary Special Committee' appointed by the Conference, and empowered this Committee to proceed with the work 'By our own order, even in the face of resistance by the Soviets.'

These various decisions meant that the old National Committee had been overthrown, and that the Legion was now in open conflict with the Soviets.

Arrangements were now made immediately to divide the Trans-Siberian Railway into sections. Over each section a commander was appointed. Czech officers of note were chosen to fill the posts thus created. Captain Cecek was given command of the troops which were still in the neighbourhoods of Penza and Samara. Captain Gaida assumed control of troops then stationed to the east of Omsk. Colonel Voicechovsky was appointed commander of the troops then present in the district of Chelyabinsk.

The decisions of the Conference were to be communicated as soon as possible to the troops along the railway, and I volunteered to assume this mission on behalf of my battalion, which was located somewhere in Captain Gaida's section. Late that night I set out eastwards to rejoin, wondering what adventures I might encounter before again seeing my brethren, for now that the Legions had officially declared against the Soviets there would be enemies at any and every point along the Line.

Chapter IV – The Terrible Death of Lieutenant Skorinsky

Considering the very uncertain state of the traffic, I was fortunate in catching a passenger train which left Chelyabinsk at about midnight. The train was packed with civilians and with soldiers returning joyfully home from the War.

There being no seats left, I settled myself as comfortably as might be on the floor in the corridor amongst sleeping passengers who lay huddled and sprawled at inconvenient angles. Soon I fell asleep myself, waking up at frequent intervals to swear in company with many others as some clumsy fellow in heavy boots struggled over us. The air was heavy and foul, and every one was thankful when at last the dawn showed through the windows.

No Siberian railway station would be complete without the ubiquitous small hut with its notice 'kypyatok,' written in large letters. Out of the wall of the hut projects a tap from which hot water may be drawn at any hour. Passengers make constant use of this service, and so at every small station at which we stopped travellers came tumbling out of the carriages with teapots in their hands to get their *kypyatok*, making sleep, after the very early morning, quite impossible for us unfortunate corridor passengers.

It was during the rush for *kypyatok* at one small wayside station that I was hailed by a huge Russian who gingerly held a steaming teapot.

"Hallo, brother Czech," he called. "Could you do with a cup of tea?" A broad smile accompanied the invitation, and I liked him on sight.

"Come on, then," he continued, and I followed him to a compartment which was already full to overflowing. Most of the men were dressed, like my host, in smart uniforms, and I soon realized that they were all Tsarist ex-officers returning home from the abandoned Russian Front. They had been fortunate to escape the wild revolutionary enthusiasms of their soldiers, a fact of which they were well aware. Although they retained their uniforms, they had carefully removed all marks of distinction, so that I could not tell from looking at each man what rank he had held in the old Army. At first our talk was reserved in the extreme. The country was riddled with spies and informers, and so the practice was to trust no one until you were reasonably sure that he was an honest man. After a while, however, distrust wore away, and we passed the time in exchanging experiences.

"I wish I could go with you fellows to France and fight the Germans there," remarked my host. "Not that I like the Allies. On the contrary, we Russians have nothing whatever for which to thank them. The Western nations have often made use of us, but never shown us real sympathy. Whenever they have sought our friendship it has always been because they needed our help to get them out of some trouble or other. Otherwise, they have always been careful to, see that Russia does not grow too strong."

"That's true enough," cut in another. "Even the yellow Japanese have always been nearer and more important to them than we White Russians. They take no trouble to know us in Western Europe. They think of the Russian just as a huge man with a long beard and a bottle of vodka in his hand. So why should we care for them?"

"Yes," proceeded my host. "Disorder, discontent, and instability are the conditions that they have always liked to see, and indeed actively encouraged, in Russia. Now out of their stupid policy has come bloodshed, revolution, and Bolshevism, and Russia can no longer help them in their hour of greatest need. But this is only the beginning of their troubles as well as ours."

"There is still time to put the whole sorry business right," remarked another officer. "If the Western Powers have the sense to give us help now, we can clean out our country again."

"If they have any sense, you say. Well, I doubt very much whether they will show it in regard to ourselves. They have their hands full with Germany and have no time, or interest for that matter, now that they have had all they can get, to look after us."

“You Czechs are hard fighters for the sake of your country,” said the speaker turning to me. “I had several of your boys with me at the Front Line, so I know. I hope from the bottom of my heart that you get your freedom. But if you do get it, remember never to trust the Western Powers too much. If they allow you independence it will be only because so doing happens to suit their own interests. Their main purpose will be to make Germany and Austria as weak as possible. Should they consider by any chance that your country stands in the way of their purpose, they will smash you like a matchbox and quite ruthlessly, and perhaps give you a kick or two in the pants for goodbye.”

“No,” agreed another man who had hitherto sat silent, “the Western peoples are no friends of the Slavs. They never will be. Perhaps our outlooks are too widely divided, and our interests as well. Whatever the cause may be, the fact remains that Russia is the only country which has helped other Slavonic nations unselfishly. Yes, friend Czech, Russia is your unselfish brother, and as long as you rely upon her you will be safe.”

“All this is looking very far ahead,” I remarked. “At present Russia is powerless, and Germany remains to be beaten before anyone can consider the problems of Czech independence.”

“Oh, Germany will be beaten all right,” said my host. “The Germans just can’t get away with it. You will find that the misery they have caused will not go unpunished. History has proved that again and again. As I said before, I wish I could go to France with you fellows, and help in the fight against them. Probably they think that they have beaten Russia. It may be that for the time being they have got us down, but they have not done it in a square fight as man to man. They have crushed us by dirty methods, by the use of unscrupulous intrigue, by bribery and by all manner of unsavoury subterfuge. And finally they were the means by which the Bolshevik poison has become disseminated through the country, sullying and perverting the mind of the average Russian, who is a decent, right-thinking fellow in the normal course of things. We hate the Germans for all this, and I am sure that time will show us the opportunity to repay the debt.”

Everyone in the compartment agreed with my host’s arguments. It was clear to me that their spirit had not been broken by the disaster of the Revolution. They cursed the Bolsheviks who had been the immediate cause of the break-up of the Army, and rendered Russia incapable of maintaining the War, but they did not give up hope. They still believed implicitly in the future of their country, and in that of the Slavonic nations generally.

The day passed quickly in lively discussions behind the closed door of the compartment, and when in the evening the train arrived in Omsk, the place where I had left my battalion a few days ago, I shook hands with my Russian friends and went to find my detachment. On my way along the train towards the station buildings I met in the darkness a Russian railwayman from whom I asked news of the Czech troops.

“There are no Czechs in Omsk,” he replied.

“But,” I cried, “when I left here a few days ago my battalion was quartered in a train standing in the station.”

“Ah, yes, but they went away two days back, towards the east. I do not know where they are now.”

“In that case, I replied, “I had better go to the station office to make inquiries.”

I turned away with this purpose in mind, but the man called me back. He looked round cautiously. Then he spoke in a low voice.

“If I were you,” he said, “I would not go to the station at all. It isn’t healthy there for Czech soldiers just at present.”

“But why?” I asked.

“I can’t tell you now. You had better go back to the train you have just left, and as quickly as possible. I am leaving on the train, too, as a guard. If you wish you can see me there when we have started.

His voice was so serious that I decided that it would be extremely foolish to disregard his words, which were obviously intended as a warning. After all, my battalion was somewhere to the east of Omsk, and the train I had left was to be the first to leave the station. So I returned to the compartment occupied by the Russian officers, who were surprised to see me again. I told them of my conversation with the railwayman, and then settled down somewhat nervously to wait.

Fortunately, the stop in Omsk was short, and presently we moved off towards the east.

Shortly I got up to find the guard, thinking it best not to talk with him in my friends' compartment lest he should turn out to be a spy. I had no difficulty in finding him.

"There is a panicky excitement and a strong anti-Czech feeling among the Reds in Omsk," he said. "It has arisen out of the recent incident in Chelyabinsk, where your Legionaries marched into the town against the Soviet. The Red Army soldiers in Omsk have been becoming very aggressive recently. Only yesterday I heard some of them discussing you Czechs and saying openly that they have had orders from Moscow to finish with you. Today they brought machine-guns to the station, and it certainly looks as though they are preparing a trap for Czech trains travelling east."

I was very grateful to the guard for the warning he had given me. He certainly saved me from serious trouble. As a general rule, the railway employees had no sympathy with the Bolshevik cause, and were always willing to be helpful to us. I returned to the compartment where the officers awaited me and told them my news.

"That's finished France for you," exclaimed one man when I had finished my report.

"What do you mean!" I objected. "Surely when the Bolsheviks realize that we are willing to fight if necessary they will be glad to pass us through to Vladivostok as quickly as they can?"

"Don't be foolish," replied the other. "You forget that from Penza to Vladivostok is six thousand miles, and even were your Legion to succeed in forcing its way to Vladivostok – and I am doubtful whether the feat is possible – the fight would occupy many months, more probably years. The Bolsheviks know this, and if only to please their German friends they will not let you go willingly. By the time you have fought your way to the east the War in Europe will be over, and then you might as well settle down here and marry a nice Siberian girl. It seems to me that from whatever angle you study the problem you fellows are trapped."

The speaker turned towards the man who had first invited me into the compartment. "What do you think, Colonel?" he asked.

The Colonel, who had been deep in thought, and silent, stirred out of his reverie.

"I think that if things continue moving this way I shan't see my family for a long time yet. As you know, my home is in Irkutsk, and if it comes to fighting I shall join up with the Czechs, and get through that way. If with the help of the Legion we can clear the Trans-Siberian railway of Bolsheviks, we shall be able to control the whole of Siberia ourselves."

"Hurrah," cried the officers. "We will all do the same. Long live Russia."

No one in our compartment slept that night. It was a nervous time for all of us. Whenever we stopped, I rushed out to inquire for my battalion, but could get no news. At dawn we drew up at a tiny station. The stop was unusually long. After a time we grew impatient and called the guard.

"We are a few miles out of Chulym station," he said. "We have to wait for the signal showing that the line is clear. But this long wait is most unusual. Indeed, we never stop at this small station at all in normal times."

Significant glances passed between us. Nobody said anything, but everyone felt the strain of uncertainty. At last the engine-driver received the signal for which he waited and we moved slowly forward. But a few miles only had been covered when the train slowed with a jerk. Rushing to the window we thrust our heads outside to see what was happening.

From the station, which could not have been more than two miles distant, came, clearly visible in the morning sun, groups of soldiers, running hard towards us. The train came to a grinding halt just in front of the approaching soldiers.

“They are Legionaries,” I cried joyfully. “Goodbye.” And I leapt from the train to race along the track. “Good luck, brother,” called the Russian officers.

As I came up with the Legionaries I saw that they were men from my battalion. When they recognized me they greeted me with loud cries which quickly became hurried instructions.

“Gus, you must go quickly to the station. Captain Cehovsky is inquiring anxiously for you. He wants to know what has been happening at Chelyabinsk. Things have been at sixes and sevens here. We have to go on to search this train and rout out any arms and also unfriendly faces.”

I ran on to Chulym station and soon found Cehovsky, our battalion commander. He was well over thirty and had been a barrister in Prague before the War. The uniform did not seem to have changed his professional outlook. He was always very anxious to be within the law and regulations. Immediately he saw me he grasped my arm.

“Becvar, come quickly to my coach. Tell me what has been happening and whether or not I have been doing right.”

In as few words as possible, I told him what had happened at the Chelyabinsk Conference, Cehovsky sighed with relief when I had completed my report.

“What you tell me explains everything,” he said. “Last night I received orders from Captain Gaida who is with his troops further up at Novo-Nikolaevsk, instructing me to seize at midnight, and disarm the Red garrison in Chulym. I was then to proceed back to Omsk, disarming on my way all Bolshevik troops. You can imagine how amazed I was when I received these instructions. But the constant bargaining with the Soviets had got me down at last, and so I carried out the first part of the order with great pleasure. Unfortunately the Red troops here had very little in the way of arms, just a few old rifles. So we were able to add very little to our rotten equipment.

“However, three companies are now ready to move towards Omsk, and I think it would be a good plan for you to tell them before they leave the details of the news from Chelyabinsk. It will put heart into them. After that you will stay here at the station on duty and await further instructions from me.”

Together we went down to the platform where the Legionaries were paraded, and I spoke to them as Cehovsky had asked.

The scene the men presented was a truly amazing one. In all there were about four hundred soldiers, and despite the fact that the arms which had just been taken from the Bolsheviks had already been distributed, there cannot have been more than forty rifles amongst them. The three hundred and sixty or so men who had not been able to get rifles had armed themselves mostly with stout sticks. They were indeed a motley crew, and, gazing upon their eager enthusiasm, it was heart-rending to recall the quantities of good arms we had been forced to surrender through the trickery and false dealing of local Soviets.

The men were worked up to a pitch of enthusiasm which boded excellently for their moral in the approaching struggle. The news I brought added the necessary steadying touch. They knew that in future their affairs were to be guided by determined men, who enjoyed the advantage of having an exact knowledge of the difficulties under which the Army had been labouring, and I watched their faces assume expressions of quiet confidence. Despite the deplorable lack of arms, the troops presented an inspiring sight. We knew also that down the Line for thousands of miles both to east and west of us, similar scenes must be in progress. At last the time had come when we could take steps to weld the Czech Legion into a united and powerful striking force. Gaily we thought that the worst days had passed, that now at last we could take up the road for France with some reasonable hope of arriving in the battle-line in good time.

When the companies had entrained and left for Omsk I reported for duty to Lieutenant Skorinsky, who was in charge of the station. He was a fine, strongly built man, a little older than myself, always with a bright smile in his large blue eyes. He was the commanding officer of my squad and we all liked him very much. I had not had much sleep during the journey from Chelyabinsk, but I could see that Skorinsky was in still greater need of rest. When I offered to release him he gladly accepted. At this station as elsewhere all the railway employees were anti-Bolshevik at least to the extent of being very ready to assist us in any way we asked. They seemed to be glad that the Bolsheviks had been thrown out. Throughout the day the platforms and waiting rooms were crowded with Russian civilians. These people had heard of the last night's happenings, and had come to see what manner of people they were who had dared to challenge the Bolshevik masters. They flocked in to the station riding in carriages or on horse-back from all parts of the wide steppe. They brought us flour, bread, meat, and other foods, and even offered us horses. There were none who did not try to do some good turn to us. Some were so sickened of Bolshevik manners that they besought us to arm them that they might help us in the fight against the common enemy. Useless was our explaining to them that we had taken over control of the railway for our own benefit, and that we were not even indirectly concerned in their internal politics.

"Oh, it's all right," they answered. "We're grateful to you for freeing us from the Bolshevik gangsters, and we shall now look after our own affairs. But meanwhile give us arms that we may fight beside you."

Skorinsky did not rest long. He soon came out and first of all made arrangements for sending back to Novo-Nikolaevsk the trains of returning German and Austrian prisoners which were then standing in the station. These trains, there were two of them, had arrived at Chulym station the previous night. The prisoners had arrived with smiling faces, playing improvised musical instruments, and throwing ironical remarks at the Legionaries. Now the smiles had disappeared from the poor fellows' faces. They had been told quietly but definitely that they would be sent back the way they had come, back to the concentration camps which they had left so joyfully; that just so long as the Legion could control the Siberian railway line it was no part of the Czechoslovak policy to allow the hundreds of thousands of enemy prisoners to return to the Fatherland to swell again the Kaiser's forces. In this respect the Czechoslovak troops in Siberia were, to do an important service to the Allied cause.

Late that night a message arrived from Captain Cehovsky ordering us to join the battalion, leaving only four men in the station to take charge. We entrained at once, and next morning caught up with the main body at the station of Barabinsk, a good seventy miles back to the west.

I happened to enter the station telegraph office at the very moment when Cehovsky was on the wire to the leader of the Bolshevik troops sent out from Omsk to attack us. The telegraphist, a Russian, was in the act of tapping out a message on his keys.

"Request you," dictated Cehovsky, "not to interfere with our trains evacuating from the west. If you do not comply, your position can be made untenable. Our troops are advancing on your back from the direction of Omsk, and we shall attack from the east."

For a time there was deep silence in the small room. Then the reply came clicking through. The Bolshevik Commander did not waste words.

"You are reaching for the sky. I order you to surrender at once and unconditionally."

While Cehovsky pondered this message, I watched the telegraphist and the other station officials who were present in the room. The poor telegraphist was trembling with fright, while the other Russians, deadly pale, gazed at Cehovsky with wide opened eyes. Their lives depended upon the message which would shortly be sent. If Cehovsky surrendered, they would certainly be put to death by the Bolsheviks for giving assistance to the Czechs. They were not kept in suspense for long.

“Send this,” said Cehovsky quietly. “ ‘The matter is settled. We shall attack at once.’ ”

As the last word fell from his lips a sigh of relief came from all the Russians.

Our position, as Cehovsky well knew, was most unsatisfactory. The Bolshevik force consisted of approximately two thousand four hundred men, all of whom were reasonably well armed. To oppose them I we had some five hundred men, and although rifles had been collected from several stations on the road back to our then position most of these weapons were very old non-repeaters. To weight the scales still more heavily against us, the Bolsheviks had an armoured train, fitted properly with machine-guns and a field-gun. We had not even one machine-gun. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that Cehovsky had tried to frighten the Bolsheviks into surrender.

Presently, a company which had been sent the previous day on advance patrol, reported that they had burnt a small bridge near Kastul station, an unimportant place about fifty miles to the west of Barabinsk. This had been done in order to prevent the passage of the Bolshevik armoured train. Further this company had dug in astride the railway line, and from their improvised position succeeded, by means of constant fire, in preventing the Bolsheviks from carrying out repairs. The Commander added, however, that the enemy were preparing an attack in force, and asked for immediate help.

Cehovsky wasted no time in hesitation. Turning from the telegraph office, he gave the order for the rest of the battalion to entrain at once and advance to Kastul. It was late in the afternoon when our train approached the station and the burned bridge. Some distance before we reached the latter, however, the Bolsheviks began to shell us, and it became necessary for the troops to advance on foot. The country was typical steppe land, as flat as a table, covered with long grass and interspersed with small birch woods and swamps. Under the Bolshevik shell-fire we crawled as quickly as possible through the grass into the fighting-line.

Our position did not seem to be a particularly happy one. As has already been mentioned, the line lay astride the railway with the damaged bridge some hundreds of yards to the front. Beyond the bridge stood the Bolshevik armoured train. This consisted of an engine and two timber trucks, one in front and the other behind. On the first of the trucks stood the field-gun, and several machine-guns, all thoroughly protected with sand-bags. In the middle distance loomed up the buildings and high water-tower of Kastul station.

Desultory fighting continued until dark, neither side having the advantage. Our rifles covered the bridge well enough to make it impossible for the enemy to undertake repairs. The Bolsheviks sprayed our line industriously with shells and machine-gun-fire, but fortunately for us their marksmanship was seldom particularly accurate.

To have advanced in daylight against the armoured train would have been sheer suicide. So we waited for night, and then crept forward slowly, trying to approach the enemy train unnoticed. We still had some hundred yards to go when, suspecting our approach, the Bolsheviks took fright, put their train into reverse and steamed away, not even stopping in the station. Swearing to each other at this failure, we advanced as far as Kastul. But after a short wait here Cehovsky decided that our original position behind the burned bridge was far safer and so ordered an immediate retreat.

The nights in May in the vast Siberian steppe are very short, and also extremely cold. The days are scorchingly hot, but with the setting of the sun the temperature sinks rapidly until, shortly before dawn, the cold becomes intense. The sudden change from heat to cold was very trying and uncomfortable. Every one of us needed rest badly, but the damp cold coming out of the swamps would not let us sleep.

We spent a miserable night, and when day returned were not particularly fresh to start the battle over again.

There was no doubt that the armoured train was merely an advance patrol, and we expected the main body of the enemy troops to arrive at any time. Every available man had been placed in our

Front Line. This meant that we should have no reserves upon which to call in case of emergency, and we anxiously awaited the events of the coming day.

Captain Cehovsky decided to adopt new tactics. He ordered Lieutenant Skorinsky to take his section upon a detour intended to circle the Bolshevik left flank, to try to reach the railway line on the far side of Kastul station, and tear up a portion of the track, thus preventing a second retreat of the armoured train. Judging from the experience of the previous night, the breaking of the line would create panic among the Bolshevik crew of the armoured train, a situation of which the Legionaries would know how to take good advantage. And once the armoured train had been liquidated, nobody could have stopped our advance.

I belonged to Lieutenant Skorinsky's section. We set out while it was still dark. We moved cautiously away from the railway line into the steppe until the many small clumps of birch woods screened our movements from possible observers on the railway. Then we proceeded parallel with the railway towards Kastul. Shortly after daylight had broken we heard coming from our left the noise of an approaching train, and at the same time firing started. Rifle, machine-gun fire, and the occasional explosion of shells from the field-gun, convinced us that once more there had started a battle similar to the one we had experienced upon the previous day. The sounds of this fight served as a guide to Skorinsky in planning the route of our detour. The Lieutenant marched ahead, speeding the movements of the party as much as possible, but we did not make good time, for the going was extremely difficult. Here and there we encountered swamps, which we had no time to circle. We waded through them, sometimes nearly to our knees in water, or leapt across precariously from grass hump to grass hump. The Russians call these small tussocks of grass 'cats,' because of their resemblance to the rounded back of a cat emerging from the water.

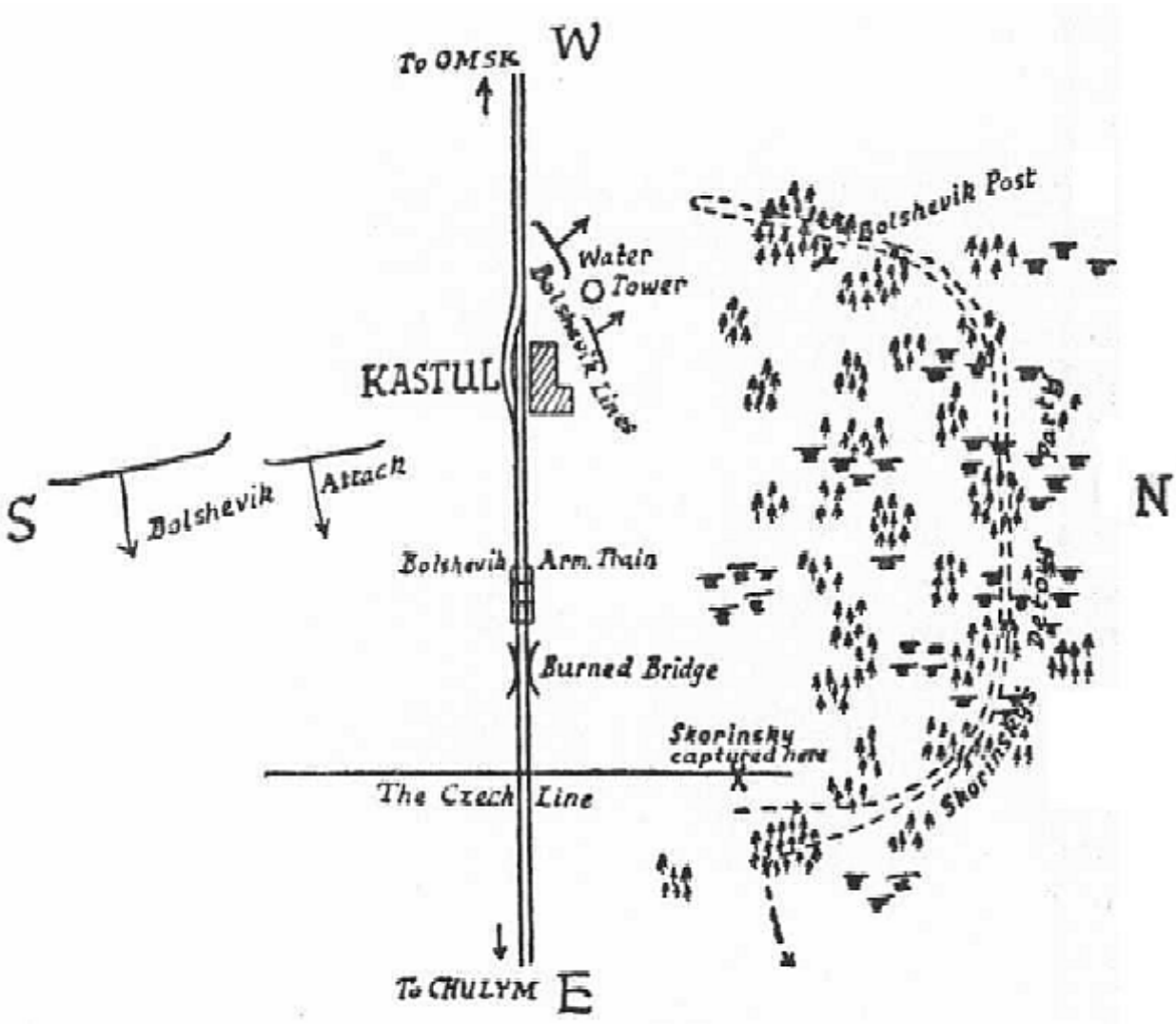
This hard going seriously sapped our strength, a fact causing us some anxiety, for we knew that we should need our full vigour on reaching our objective. The day grew warmer and warmer. No wind came to cool us. The air hung heavy and the sun burned. Skorinsky led us silently, anxiously listening to the sounds coming from the railway line. He went back and forth along the detachment here and there encouraging the soldiers, who, sweating and cursing, wrestled their way through the swampy country.

Presently the sounds of battle came from far behind on our left, and we knew that we must be well to the rear of the spot where the armoured train was standing. A little further, and Kastul station would also be behind us. Skorinsky presently turned towards the railway, and we proceeded with the utmost caution, throwing out scouts fan-wise before our line of march. We had tramped for some distance when suddenly our scouts stumbled upon a post of fifteen Bolsheviks.

We wanted to avoid noise, but under these circumstances hesitation would have been fatal. Hand-grenades thrown by the Legionaries exploded loudly, and the Bolshevik post was cleared. Brief as the skirmish was, it had been noisy, and we knew that our presence must have been betrayed. We pushed now forward as fast as we could to reach the railway as quickly as possible. But when we emerged from a screen of woodland, and were able to see exactly the position at which we had arrived, we realized that our efforts were completely in vain.

Kastul station, with its water tower, lay to our left, and the railway line lay a few hundred yards in front of us, so accurate had been our course, and so near had we arrived at the goal we sought. But the bursting grenades had given us away, and we were greeted with a fierce machine-gun fire from the water-tower. In the station itself and beyond it stood several trains, and as we gazed hundreds of men leaped from the coaches, deployed, and started to advance against us.

To have attacked a force of the strength of that arrayed against us would have been madness; to have remained where we were would have been suicide. For a short time we fired fiercely into the station, and then Skorinsky gave the command to retreat. The Bolsheviks, having no idea of our numbers, advanced with caution, and we were able to get safely away into the wooded country from which we had recently emerged.



BATTLE of KASTUL

We had no choice of action. The only thing to do was to return to Cehovsky and admit failure. So began the return journey. On our way out we had come far, through terrible swamp lands, through thick grass and woods, and all the time the sun had burned and fried us. But we were buoyed up with the thought of the deed we were about to perform, stirred ardently by the will to fulfil our task. This second journey over the same ground was a very different affair. Begun in a miserable mood, and at a time when we were all worn out with fatigue, the march was made with the men's heads drooping forward and their bodies bent.

At last, late in the afternoon, Skorinsky ordered a halt in the lee of a wood. We threw ourselves upon the ground exhausted, but with some feeling of security, for we knew that we must have reached a spot behind the Line which our Legionaries had occupied that morning and from which we had set out. Thus we thought more of rest than of our position.

Presently Skorinsky, who looked fresher than most of us, said that he would go to find Cehovsky.

"I'll take Corporal Kominek and go up the Line to report," he announced. "The rest of you wait here until I come back."

The two men tramped away, and we heard their footsteps fading. Then suddenly fierce cries, followed by shouts of urgent warning, followed by rifle shots, made us leap up in alarm. From the sounds it seemed that Skorinsky had run into an ambush. We stood irresolute, staring in the

direction in which our comrades had gone. Then we saw Corporal Kominek racing desperately towards us, blood streaming down his face.

"They've got Skorinsky," he panted. "There was just nothing I could do. We walked straight into them. They leapt up on all sides of us. Our fellows must have retreated."

What had happened was now obvious. Our main troops had been forced to retire. Captain Cehovsky had thought that we had been killed or captured, or else he had had no opportunity of warning our small detachment. The upshot was that we stood in no-man's-land, close to the Bolshevik Line, with no knowledge of how far away our friends might be. Luckily Kominek's wound was slight, the bullet had just touched his head. I crawled cautiously with him to the edge of the small wood towards the spot where Skorinsky was captured.

Heavy rifle fire directed towards ourselves confirmed Kominek's statement that strong enemy forces were occupying our old front line. "There is no chance to save Skorinsky," whispered Kominek, and I could see that the situation was hopeless. To have attacked the enemy would have been futile, for our party did not number more than thirty men. Almost certainly we should all have been wiped out. I could do nothing but order a retreat. There was no time to lose.

We moved off parallel with the railway as hurriedly and as silently as we could. Far into the night we marched, getting clear away from the Bolshevik pursuit. At last we were challenged by Czech outposts. Immediately I sought out Cehovsky to report. As I had anticipated would be the case, he had given up the flanking party for lost. He was delighted that most of us had escaped, but our talk was saddened by the loss of Lieutenant Skorinsky.

Cehovsky told me that the enemy had advanced in force a few hours after our party had left. They attacked his left flank, and, after a fierce encounter, he was compelled to order a hasty retreat of the whole line in order to avoid being completely surrounded, or at least driven from the railway line far out into the steppe.

Incited by the Kastul victory, the Bolsheviks lost no time in advancing. Next day their armoured train appeared in front of our new Line. Just so long as we had no field-gun or at least some machine-guns they had an enormous advantage over us, and we had no course other than to retreat slowly, tearing up the railway line again and again as we went, and delaying them as much as possible in effecting the necessary repairs. The most we could hope to do was to inflict considerable losses upon them.

One night I was at my post in the gradually retreating Line when a message was brought that Cehovsky wanted me.

"The position is extremely critical, Becvar," he began. "I have just been in touch with Gaida, asking for support, and received precious little satisfaction. I don't think he realizes just how tight our corner is. He replied laconically: 'No spare troops; must do for yourselves.' That's not good enough. The only thing we can do is to go to his headquarters in Novo-Nikolaevsk and put the position to him. I want you to come with me."

At the time we did not know that Gaida himself was in very tight straits. Actually he was being attacked fiercely from the east and the south at one and the same time. He had one field-gun only, and in order to convey the impression of strength was rushing this piece backwards and forwards between the two fronts. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that Gaida's temper was not of the best.

When we arrived in the morning at Novo-Nikolaevsk, Cehovsky left me outside the station building while he interviewed the Commander. Presently he came rushing out, looking extremely ruffled, and mopping his forehead with a grimy handkerchief.

"Let's get back, Becvar," he gasped. "That man's not human. He's just given me the worst ten minutes I have ever had. Cursed me for leaving my post, if you please, and then showed me clearly – without actually saying as much – that he's got a far harder job here than we have dreamed of so

far on our Front. The last thing he said was: 'Now get out. I'll send you a gun – somehow. But get out, and fight.' I got out – and as quickly as I could. So that's all there is to it."

So back we went, and arrived by noon to find that our battalion had been forced to retreat still further, leaving even the station Barabinsk behind. The line was now dug in on the bank of a narrow river, which offered some protection against an infantry attack. But the Bolshevik armoured train with its ever active gun set us at a disadvantage which even Gaida did not have to face. Rifle-fire was useless against the train, which advanced inexorably, no matter what we attempted against it. The men were in despair. If they could have got to grips with the enemy Line which stretched away on either side of the train they would have fought on cheerfully. It was their inability to do anything effective during the past few days save retreat and endure the gruelling fire from the field-gun which wore their nerve.

I joined the Line at the river, and, lying down in the long grass which covered the bank, watched the approach of the Bolshevik train. After some shelling, strong Bolshevik forces deployed on either side of the railway line and proceeded to advance across the flat steppe simultaneously with their armoured train. An order was passed along our line: 'Lie low and do not shoot. Let the Bolsheviks come as near as possible. The order for fire will then be given.'

The sky was cloudless and the noon sun shone brilliantly as we lay motionless in the grass and waited anxiously. Shell after shell passed over us, directed at the small station which lay some short distance behind our line. The Bolshevik advance was no more than two hundred yards distant when the order came, "Ready! Fire!" The first line must have suffered terribly from our volley, but other lines were advancing from the rear, and the armoured train turned a devastating fire upon us. 'This massed attack, backed by the fire from the train, must overwhelm us again,' was our anxious conviction.

Suddenly a loud report sounded behind us. Something heavy passed overhead. Then a shell exploded a few yards from the Bolshevik armoured train. A second shot followed immediately, banging into the train, and working tremendous havoc.

The effect of this unexpected intervention upon the spirits of our men was electrical. "Gaida's gun has arrived," shouted the Legionaries along the Line. Now we knew ourselves a match for far greater numbers than we could muster.

The end of the engagement came with astonishing speed. Unexpectedly the badly damaged Bolshevik train limped away, and the enemy soldiers, unable to face the determined charge which we now launched across the shallow river against them, turned and fled.

Quickly improvising a primitive armoured train, upon which we mounted Gaida's gun, we advanced rapidly, following the routed enemy through Barabinsk and on towards Omsk. Our advance was so rapid that at one station after a short fight we captured the rear guard of the Bolshevik troops. With them we took four field-guns and three hundred shells, twenty-four machine-guns. The prisoners, of whom there were more than two hundred, we passed at once to the civil authorities.

The spirits of the troops were now as high as they were previously depressed. Now we could return Gaida's gun with interest for its use. This we did immediately. Not until this stage of the proceedings was it generally known that with the gun which had saved us had come only half a dozen shells. Had these been ill-directed, or had the Bolsheviks chosen to face out our advance as they should have done, the gun which so greatly scared the enemy would have fired no more.

After this we pressed the Bolsheviks as far as the station of Tatarska. Throughout his retreat the enemy Commander had telephoned to Omsk at regular intervals in the hope of securing immediate support. But when he again got through from Tatarska he fell into an ingenious trap. The officer in Omsk to whom he spoke promised that fresh troops should be sent at once. The Bolshevik cheered his men with this news. Not until too late did he learn that he had spoken to a Czech officer, for

Omsk had just fallen to Legion troops advancing from the west. Troops came to him as had been promised, but they were men of the 3rd Battalion of the 6th Czechoslovak Regiment. Unexpectedly caught between two fires, the Bolsheviks surrendered or scattered into the steppe, leaving large stores of equipment upon the field. Thus on 10 June 1918, and after a fortnight's interval, our battalion again established contact with our Regimental headquarters. But this lasted for a few hours only. We were allowed time in Tatarska only, to exchange news with our brethren before being ordered to rejoin Gaida's troops in the east.

The news from the west was surprisingly good. We now held the railway between Chelyabinsk and Novo-Nikolaevsk. Captain Cecek had captured both Penza and Samara. Colonel Voicechovski was moving westwards from Chelyabinsk to clear the seven hundred miles of mountainous Ural country and join hands with Cecek. So after mutual congratulations we prepared to leave and answer Gaida's urgent call. But before we marched an event happened which made us wish heartily that we had been less merciful to the Bolsheviks whom we had just routed.

News came in from villagers living near the Line concerning the death of a Czech officer who had recently fallen a prisoner to the Bolsheviks. At once we thought of Lieutenant Skorinsky and pushed our inquiries. We asked the villagers to guide us to the spot where the officer had been buried. On opening the grave, which was extremely shallow, we found the naked body of poor Skorinsky, done to death in terrible fashion. He must have been tortured for hours before he died. His jaw was out of joint, and his cheeks and ears had been pierced with bayonets. Further, it was evident that he had been roasted over a fire. It is perhaps only fair to the Russian people to say that we ascertained, not only in this case, but also in others occurring later, that such torturings were usually performed by soldiers of other nationalities who had joined the Bolshevik troops.

Chapter V – Advance on Irkutsk

To tell of all the fights and skirmishes that followed hard upon the battle of Tatarska and the fall of Omsk would be to commit a series of repetitions, for now began a period of quick movement and rapid action. Gaida was a leader whose belief it was to strike at once, to strike often and with determination. In those days he seemed never to hesitate in his course of action. He was the soldiers' joy, a leader who knew his own mind, who moved and counter-moved without fear or thought of defeat. We soldiers learned to follow him with confidence and an implicit faith in the soundness of his foresight and judgment.

It was late on a warm June afternoon when our train moved slowly into Marinsk station. Here, we knew, was another hard nut for Gaida to crack. The men did not wait till the train had stopped, but jumped hurriedly out of the coaches to mix with the Legionaries of the 7th Regiment, who had been holding the Line at this spot for several weeks. There took place the usual scene that happened when we met brethren of another regiment – noisy hand-shakings, and mutual questionings for friends from the same home town.

Our battalion had had very little rest since the battle of Tatarska. It had been no easy task to force a path from Novo-Nikolaevsk to Marinsk, where a small detachment of Legionaries was caught between two Bolshevik forces. Day and night we pushed forward from one station to the other.

The trapped men were now rescued, but Gaida still could give no rest to his tired troops. Far to the east at Nizne-Udinsk was yet another Czech 'island,' the famous 2nd Division's shock-battalion sandwiched between strong Bolshevik Armies. The Commander of this isolated Czech force was Colonel Usakov, an experienced and able officer, who now found himself faced with a problem which taxed his ability to the utmost. On the one hand, he had to hold off powerful Bolshevik attacks from the direction of Irkutsk, and on the other to push desperately against superior numbers towards Krasnoyarsk with the purpose of linking up with Gaida's men. But well as he was doing his work, it was clear that he could not much longer maintain his position. This was the situation when we arrived in Marinsk. It explained the haste with which we had been breaking eastwards through the densely wooded country, and also the terrific push which Gaida now ordered us to undertake.

The Bolshevik Lines confronting us at Marinsk lay immediately to the east of the town. Between the strongly entrenched enemy position and our own ran the River Kiji, A frontal attack, if not quite hopeless, would at least have been extremely costly. Moreover, the particular Bolsheviks with whom we were faced consisted largely of German and Hungarian prisoners of war, who, despairing of release from their internment camps, had volunteered for service in the Red Armies. Thus in this case we had to deal with trained and courageous soldiers, soldiers moreover who were moved with a particular hatred of all Czechs and Slovaks, whom they regarded as traitors to the Habsburg Empire. It behoved us, therefore, to be cautious not to underestimate the fighting abilities of our present adversaries.

I was walking along the platform when someone hailed me loudly.

"Hey! How goes it, brother Czech?"

I swung round and was amazed to see two of the Russian officers with whom I had travelled from Chelyabinsk.

"How the devil did you get here?" I exclaimed, noting with interest that their uniforms had lost most of their previous smartness. Now they showed ample marks of the battlefield's mud and dirt.

"Where did you expect to see us? Should we be playing with the kids at home?" they cried joyfully as we shook hands.

"Where is the Colonel?" I asked. "How is he?"

"Oh, he's our squad leader now. Come and see him. He's not far off."

They led me to a train standing on a siding. This train belonged to a regiment known as the 'Barnaul,' which had been formed shortly after the fall of Novo-Nikolaevsk, and consisted of Russian officers all of whom had held commissions under the Tsarist regime. The officers enlisted voluntarily as private soldiers, and so it happened that a colonel occupied the post of squad leader. They all were remarkably good fellows, and ardent patriots. The Barnaul Regiment was to play a daring part in the strenuous fighting which lay ahead round the shores of Lake Baikal.

"Well," cried the Colonel, leaping down from his carriage, "are you fellows still thinking about France?"

"Of course," I replied laughing, "the first thousand miles from Chelyabinsk has been taken quickly. Soon we shall have the railway in our hands right the way back to Penza. Then the 1st Division will come to the east. After that it will be just a walk-over to Vladivostok."

He smiled at my enthusiasm, but I could see that he did not entirely agree with me.

"Yes, it has been marvellous so far," he admitted. "Your boys are like fire, and your Gaida like an electric dynamo. But don't you forget that the worst part is still to come. You know that my home is near Irkutsk. Well, there is mountainous country in that part, and Lake Baikal with its many railway tunnels will be a real nut to crack. We shall certainly have a job to get through. However, we all have courage and ideals to fight for, and after all that's the main thing."

For a while we talked of our experiences, and then someone suggested a football match – Russians against Czechs. A suitable field was found behind the station, and in the fast diminishing evening light we played a noisy game. The War and the enemy were forgotten. We enjoyed the play tremendously, but had we known just what Gaida held in reserve for us, we might have chosen to rest instead. As events turned out we had no sooner retired to our respective trains, looking forward to a sound night's sleep, than we were routed out to take part in an extensive flanking movement, designed to turn the left wing of the Bolshevik forces.

So a body of more than a thousand Legionaries, together with officers from the Barnaul Regiment, fell in, and marched away southwards through the deep darkness of the night for many weary miles. When we learned that Gaida himself was leading us we knew that ourselves, and not the troops who had stayed behind to hold the Line on the railway, were to bear the brunt of the coming fight. We also knew that there was no hope whatever of rest for many hours to come, not until the Bolshevik position had been assaulted, and carried, and perhaps not even then.

The seventeen mile night march upon which we were now engaged was livened for many of us by the humour and good-natured badinage of an American named William Duncan. Duncan was a member of the American Y.M.C.A. He had joined the Czech forces at Samara, and had been appointed to our battalion. Everyone liked Duncan. He was a good fellow in all sense of the word, and a courageous one. He had taken part in the fighting near Kastul station, and had taken his share of the risk with the rest of us, though it was his custom never to carry weapons of greater significance than an ordinary walking-stick and a camera. It was Duncan who, a short distance behind the fighting line at Kastul, slept between two dead men 'for the sake of warmth,' as he himself put it. I have often heard him tell the story, and have always laughed afresh at its grim humour.

"I was shockingly tired and cold that night," he would begin. "Your shallow trench offered no cover where a bloke could snatch a bit of sleep. It was pitch dark, and I walked back along the railway line till I came across an empty train. I climbed into the first coach, stretching out my hands in the dark. I began to feel around. Presently I felt two men, and since there was a little room between them, I thought they would not mind if I came in the middle. It seemed that if they kept me warm I should be able to return at least some of the hospitality. But the hospitality was all on my side. When I woke up in the morning the two fellows were still fast asleep. Even the noise of bursting shells up in the fighting line did not wake them. They will get into trouble, I thought, if they are missed. So I sat up and took hold of one man s shoulder. My idea was to wake him up. But then I

leapt with shock. Both men were dead. They had been killed the previous day, and the bodies put on the train to be buried later."

Duncan was a curious fellow. In his own way he was quite fearless. When out marching with us he often chose to walk ahead when the troops stopped to rest. His idea was to find a spot from which he could enjoy alone the many beauties of the countryside. Presently, when we were again on the move, we would see him waving to us from far ahead, his stick making gay circles in the air for all the world as though we were out for a country ramble in the fields near his home.

"Hey, Duncan! Don't you realize that this is war?" I would shout at him. "This is enemy country, man. Keep back with us."

But he would only laugh, and, as luck would have it, he had many a narrow escape, but never came upon serious harm.

At dawn we came upon the Kiji River, at a spot where Gaida had expected to find a ferry. But no ferry was there. The boat had been destroyed by the Bolsheviks. However, after a short time we found several rowing boats, craft similar to those used for pleasure purposes upon the Thames. Our hopes of a rapid crossing sank low when we considered the size of these boats and the number of men who would have to cross in them. Nevertheless, the crossing began at once.

Awaiting one's turn in the boats was not at all pleasant. We knew that at any moment the Bolsheviks might detect our presence and surprise us at a disadvantage. They would be able to do great execution with fire from the far bank. Our discomfort from a purely physical point of view was also acute. The country was swampy and the day cold. Shivering, we lay silently in the morning mist amidst the reeds which thickly covered the river bank. No fires could be allowed, and so we were unable to make tea. And so during this weary wait we had to content ourselves with Russian black bread and salted bacon. This represented the day's meal.

After the lapse of about two hours came the turn of my section. The crossing was exciting. My own boat was so overloaded that the water came within an inch of the gunwale. We sat extremely still. Lower down the river we saw horses swimming across, their riders holding fast by the animals' tails.

When we reached the far bank, we ran quickly through the swamp lands and through a wood to the crest of a nearby ridge where Gaida was assembling the troops. After this we did not wait long, perhaps another half-hour. Then Gaida marched, leaving orders for the rest of the men to follow as soon as possible.

The sun had risen high by this time. Marching through the hilly and heavily wooded country was hot work. We grew tired in the heat. But the sound of heavy gun-fire away on our left cheered us, for its message was that our brethren in Marinsk were doing all they could to draw the full attention of the enemy upon themselves.

Shortly after midday a scout galloped in to report, and Gaida immediately rode with him to the top of a hill in front of us. Before we ourselves reached the top Gaida was back amongst us, and we all knew from his expression that our work was about to start. We deployed into line, rapid orders were given to the various leaders, and we advanced over the crest of the ridge.

Before us lay a wonderful sweep of country. Right ahead, and about three miles distant, lay the railway line with Bolshevik trains moving along it. Away to our left front, and near to the railway, was a small Siberian village. Beyond this constant explosions indicated where lay the Marinsk Front. The Bolsheviks seemed to be completely confident in the strength of their position, for so far as we could perceive from our vantage-point there was no indication whatsoever that the enemy had foreseen the possibility of an attack from the particular angle that we had selected.

Soon after we had passed the ridge, however, we were met with fierce rifle-fire coming from the direction of the railway line, and particularly from the village. The country was open, and to have hesitated would have been madness. We ran forward rapidly, stopping occasionally only to return

the enemy's fire. Undoubtedly the Bolsheviks had been taken by surprise, and the resistance of the detachments which opposed us very soon crumbled. They fled in confusion towards their trains, but the trains did not wait for them, starting a hasty retreat before their running comrades could arrive.

Then the situation changed. When we were about five hundred yards from the railway, a Bolshevik armoured train appeared suddenly from the direction of Marinsk. Stopping immediately before us, it opened a fierce fire upon our lines. Our position was extremely uncomfortable, particularly so in view of the fact that the section on our left was now also exposed to heavy machine-gun fire coming from the village.

We rapidly dug ourselves in, leaving our right flank the task of advancing towards the railway with the purpose of damaging the line in front of the armoured train and cutting off its retreat. This move scared the train crew, who proceeded to make off as fast as their engine would take them. With the support of reinforcements who now arrived, we rushed the railway line, driving those Bolsheviks who were left alive into the woods on the far side of the track.

This task accomplished, we directed a fierce attack upon the village, which was soon taken and its defenders thrown into precipitate flight. The whole Bolshevik line was completely broken. So rapid was the rout that the enemy had not had time to remove a field kitchen, complete with hot food, which fell in the village into our hands as a most welcome surprise. The battle was over and we sat down round the kitchen, enjoying a wonderful hot meal of first class Russian soup, followed by excellent boiled beef.

Exhausted as we were, this unexpected refreshment soon restored our usual spirits, and we prepared to return to our train in Marinsk station. We thought that now, at all events, we deserved a sound night's rest. We had defeated the enemy completely, a defeat which, as we heard afterwards, resulted in the capture of six hundred prisoners, and cost the enemy two hundred killed, besides a great number of wounded. But Gaida decided that we had not yet done enough. When he appeared in the village his orders to our battalion were far too explicit to be pleasant.

"The enemy must not be allowed to recover after this defeat," he said. "We must pursue him as fast as we can. For the sake of Usakov and his hard-pressed battalion you must push forward at once. I will send your trains after you just as soon as the line has been repaired."

And so again we marched eastward along the railway. Far into the night we marched until, dead tired, we reached a small station, where finally we were allowed to rest. Early next morning we were again on the march. All day we advanced, occasionally stopping to disperse some small enemy detachment or to take prisoners. The Bolsheviks were still retreating in utter disorder.

Here the Legionaries advanced in two columns, one following the railway track and the other upon the Great Moscow Road, which parallels the line across Siberia. The country was densely wooded, dense virgin forests stretching far away on either hand. The trees brought the comfort of shade, however, and the great heat did not oppress us so much as at Marinsk.

During the next two days our advance slowed considerably, partly because of the exhaustion from which most of us suffered, but mainly on account of the stiffer resistance which the Bolsheviks now began to offer. Soon we began to feel some anxiety in regard to our isolated position. We were now very far ahead of the main body, and our armoured train had not yet arrived. Obviously, the railway bridge across the Kiji took longer to repair than had been anticipated. We also knew that the important Siberian town of Krasnoyarsk, which lay far ahead on our line of march, was a great Bolshevik stronghold. Further, we had not expected the enemy to recover so soon from his defeat at Marinsk.

Towards the evening of the third day we captured another station after a short engagement. To our surprise, however, we noticed that the enemy did not follow the normal procedure on such occasions. Instead of retreating from the station along the line as we had expected them to do, the Bolsheviks dispersed north and south into the forests. When we learned the reason for this

unexpected move we were overjoyed.

Several railwaymen came running to us from the station, waving their hands in sign of friendship.

“Krasnoyarsk is in Czech hands,” they shouted.

We could hardly believe our ears. But the news was true. The Krasnoyarsk Bolsheviks had thought their position at Marinsk impregnable, and when they heard that their troops at this place had been routed they fell into panic. Usakov, operating against Krasnoyarsk from the east, was quick to take advantage of this favourable development. He renewed his attack, and the defence of the town crumbled before the fierce onset of the wildly-excited Czechoslovak troops. The railway was passing under our control more readily than we had dared to hope.

The fall of Krasnoyarsk meant that the Trans-Siberian Railway was now in Czech hands from Chelyabinsk to Nizne-Udinsk, a distance of nearly two thousand miles. Now there were no more Czechoslovak ‘islands’ left to the east. From Nizne-Udinsk to Vladivostok the line was held by the Bolsheviks, through whom we knew that we should have to fight our way. But in Vladivostok itself there were quartered some sections of the Legion which had passed through Siberia without trouble before difficulties with the Soviets had arisen. We hoped that these troops were now advancing westwards to meet us and to help in seizing the eastern portion of the railway.

Rejoicings on a grand scale took place in Krasnoyarsk. Commander Usakov’s battalion had put up a magnificent performance considering the vastly superior numbers with which they were opposed. Doubtless their success was in part attributable to the genius of Usakov, who was appointed Gaida’s Chief of Staff in recognition of his achievement. It was a tragic and serious loss of our Army when, a little later, Usakov met his death on the shores of Lake Baikal.

We stopped in Krasnoyarsk for a few hours only, proceeding almost immediately to Nizne-Udinsk, where Bolshevik forces from Irkutsk were concentrated in great numbers. They were powerfully armed, having armoured cars in addition to the normal field equipment. We arrived in the afternoon of 24 June, just in time to turn the tide in a battle which was then in progress.

Fiercely the Bolsheviks had attacked the small detachment which Usakov had left to guard the advance Line. Constant fighting had exhausted the men holding the left wing along the Great Moscow Road, and there was great danger that the enemy, supported by armoured cars, would break through. No sooner had our train stopped than we were ordered to advance at the double to the support of the menaced flank. So great was the need that even cooks were turned out for the Front Line.

As we approached the scene of the fighting we were amazed at the condition of the wounded who were returning for treatment. Quite apart from injuries received in the normal course of battle, they were in a terrible state. Their faces were blotched and swollen in the most grotesque fashion, their eyes and noses being barely distinguishable.

Mosquitoes! I have suffered from mosquitoes in many places and in varying degrees of intensity, but never before or since have I met a more virulent species than inhabited the surroundings of this small Siberian town. The Russian inhabitants, watching us pass, noticed our misery, and as we rushed on through the town towards the fighting line many of them ran into their houses, returning with bottles filled with a black liquid, which they told us to rub upon our faces and hands.

These people were well disposed towards us, obviously vastly preferring our company to that of the Bolsheviks, who held strong positions in woods on the far side of a river. Gratefully accepting the black bottles, we spread liberal quantities of the liquid upon every exposed portion of our bodies. The effect was ludicrous. From white troops we were turned on the instant into an army of niggers. So we went into battle. Whether or not the Bolsheviks were alarmed at the spectacle we presented, the fact remains that we overcame their resistance, drove off the armoured cars, and were prevented from following up our advantage immediately only by the coming of a terrible storm, which temporarily immobilized the troops.

On this occasion the enemy did not retreat in disorder after one reverse, as had been our experience of them in previous battles. Instead, they fell back slowly, offering stiff resistance at every station, however small. Our advance was made doubly difficult by reason of the densely wooded and swampy nature of the country that lay on either side of the railway. In many places these dense forests, called in Russian *taiga*, stretch far to the north and south. As we advanced through these forests we came upon strange birds and animals on every side. Bears we saw also, and some of our soldiers succeeded in catching one youngster, which they took with them to the train. They built for 'Mischa,' as they called him, a wooden cage beneath one of the coaches. Here Mischa lived, and he travelled with us throughout the campaign, until, indeed, we arrived in Vladivostok. Mischa became our mascot.

The flanking movements which I have described, and which Gaida frequently used with great success, sometimes ended in our own discomfiture. This happened now at the battle of Seberta. On this occasion I was not a member of the flanking force, perhaps very fortunately for myself. Seberta is a station lying between Nizne-Udinsk and Irkutsk in the midst of dense forests. It is a place of no importance, but its name will always be remembered by men of the Legion.

Frontal advance along the railway in face of the fierce resistance of the enemy soon proved too costly. Gaida therefore decided to employ again the enveloping movement. He ordered a section from the Shock Battalion, supported by a strong party of Cossack Cavalry under the command of Lieutenant Marek, to make a long detour to the south. They were instructed to reach the railway line again near the station of Seberta, and immediately in the rear of the Bolshevik troops. A long distance lay between them and their destination, which, in a direct line, was twenty miles from their starting point, and the route they had to follow was perhaps twice as far.

The march through the ancient forest was extremely difficult, and it was not until early in the afternoon of the second day that they reached a small village near to the station they sought. At this spot Marek divided his party. The Cossacks were sent on with instructions to damage the line at a spot some two miles distant so that the Seberta Bolsheviks would be cut off from help to the east. To the Shock Battalion was allotted the task of attacking the station.

Either the Legionaries were not sufficiently cautious, or else the enemy, having learnt their lesson from numerous previous catastrophes, such as the debacle at Marinsk, were more than usually alert, for the movement of our troops was detected. The enemy leader was subtle. He did not attack immediately his scouts informed him of what was in the wind. Instead, he marshalled his trains in a long line in the station and placed his troops behind them. The trains and the station buildings thus afforded excellent cover to the Bolsheviks.

Not a movement was seen as the Legionaries advanced upon the station in a long line, and they marched straight into the trap. The enemy met them with a devastating fire. In the first volley they were decimated. Those who were left quickly returned the fire, but the position was impossible. The Legionaries lay on a plain in the open, while the Bolsheviks were safely hidden behind their coaches and the railway embankment.

Lieutenant Marek realized that under these circumstances hesitation would mean utter disaster. Ordering the attack, he leapt up to lead it, but was immediately hit in the forehead. Down went the Legionaries again. Catastrophe seemed imminent. There was no way out of the trap. They could move neither forward nor backward. It was merely a matter of a short time before every man would be picked off at leisure by the enemy snipers.

Suddenly wild shouts sounded from the far side of the railway line, and on the flank of the Bolshevik position. Out of the forest came the Cossacks, charging down upon the enemy. They had been puzzled by the heavy firing at the station and, having successfully performed the task upon which they had been sent, had returned at top speed in search of their comrades. One glance at the position in Seberta station was enough to show them that their fears had been justified and that they had arrived in the nick of time.

Carnage and confusion followed. The Bolsheviks fought hard, and the Cossacks did not have everything their own way by any means. But the enemy, pressed now from two sides, could not hold his position for long. Sporadic fighting continued for a while, and then suddenly the Bolsheviks raced for the forests, leaving their dead and wounded lying where they had fallen.

Terribly weakened by heavy casualties, and lacking the leadership of a brave commander, the Legionaries decided that they could not hold the station against the enemy, who they knew would be retreating before the advance of the main body of our troops. They therefore decided, after having hurriedly buried their dead brethren, to follow the shattered Bolsheviks into the woods.

When, later, we arrived in Seberta station from the west we found the battlefield deserted. Corpses lay everywhere. The station building had been badly damaged by hand-grenades. In one room I entered the furniture had been smashed to matchwood, and lay strewn about the floor together with dead Bolsheviks. On the platforms bodies lay at all angles, most of them with terrible wounds inflicted by Cossack sabres. The station yard, and the fields in the immediate neighbourhood, had their record of death in the shape of mutilated corpses and the grim litter of battle.

We moved aghast amidst these scenes of horror. It was easy to read from the wreckage just what had happened. There must be survivors, and these, we guessed, would have gone to the woods. So buglers were sent out to sound Czech calls and gradually collect the scattered Legionaries, who, doubtless, would be waiting anxiously for just such an indication of our arrival. In due course they came in, and confirmed our reading of the catastrophe.

Hitherto Gaida's and Usakov's joint abilities had succeeded in sweeping all resistance from our path. But now came a time when the problems which they had so far been set were as nothing to those that lay ahead. Near at hand was Lake Baikal. The railway passed along the southern shores of this lake, passing *en route* through a series of thirty-nine tunnels, which were strongly held by the Bolsheviks. To throw the enemy out of this powerfully fortified region would be difficult, but to prevent him in his retreat from destroying these vital tunnels might be entirely beyond our power. The tunnel area stretched for about one hundred and thirty miles, and, were the enemy successful in destroying even a few of the laboriously constructed passes through the living rock, our scattered armies would be trapped in the heart of Asia. The work of preventing this catastrophe was the task of Gaida and his followers. At all costs the Baikal tunnels had to be saved.

Gaida's strategy was to provoke a decisive action before the enemy had retreated as far as Baikal. He thought he perceived a chance of doing this in the neighbourhood of Polovina station. A few miles beyond this station a deep river passes beneath the railway line. On the farther bank of this river the Bolsheviks had built a strong trench system, obviously with the intention of putting up a determined resistance to our passage. This was just what Gaida had hoped they would do. The moment it was clear how events were shaping, a strong detachment was sent to circle the enemy's left flank and to attack his main force from the rear.

Crossing the river at a spot deep in the country and far from the railway line, we marched steadily in terrible heat, over hills and through valleys. Eventually we arrived. But the movement was a failure, at least in so far as our purpose of provoking a general engagement was concerned. This time the Bolsheviks were not to be caught napping. They were very wide awake, particularly upon their flanks. Indeed, they knew as much about our encircling movement as we did ourselves. So at the last moment they blew up the bridge over the river to prevent rapid pursuit, and retreated under our very noses.

It was clear enough now that the enemy were relying upon the strong defences prepared at Lake Baikal, and that they would refuse battle until we reached that area. They even abandoned Irkutsk, an important town of some eighty thousand inhabitants, which lies on the line about forty miles from the shores of Lake Baikal.

Leaving a party to repair the Polovina bridge and to bring on our trains when they had finished, we continued the advance on foot. Some troops were sent to follow the enemy along the railway line,

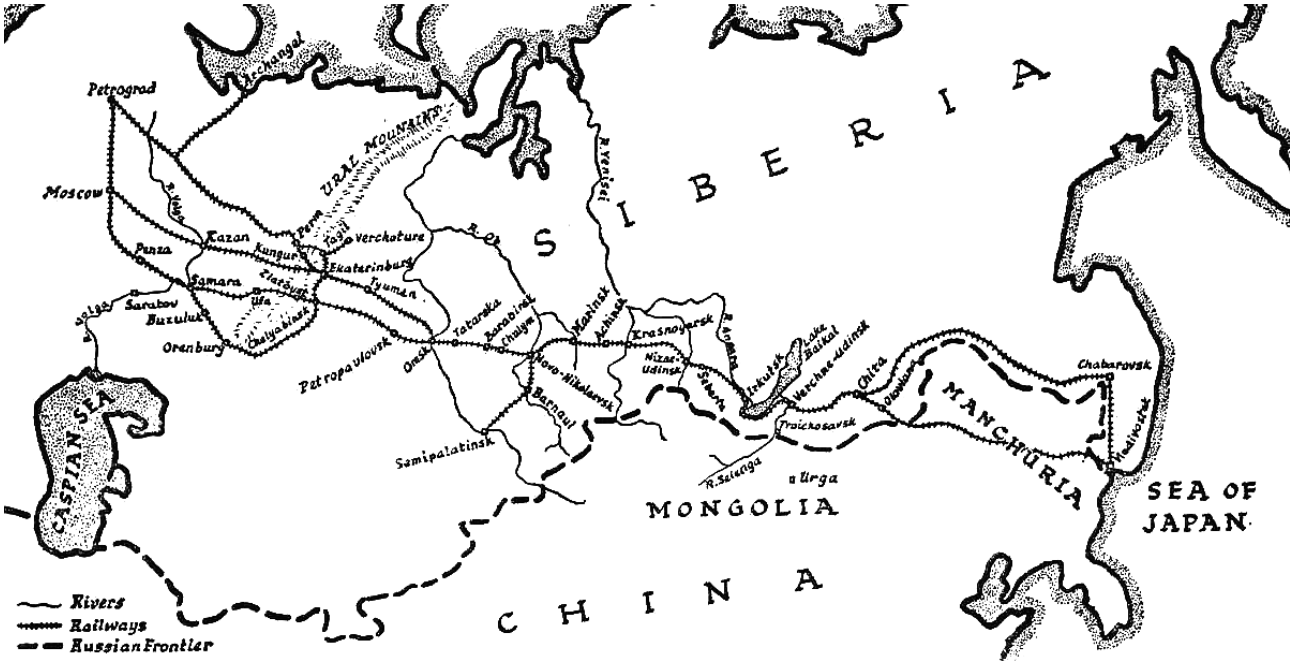
but the main body marched upon Irkutsk by the old road along which political exiles had tramped under Cossack guards during the days of the Tsars.

We marched into Irkutsk on 12 July. We were given a marvellous reception, the people doing all they could to show their pleasure at our arrival amongst them. This pleasure was genuine enough. The people of Irkutsk were democratically minded, and did not relish the prospect of falling under the sway of the Bolsheviks, of whose excesses in European Russia they had already heard many rumours, and of whose oppressions, as manifested by local exponents of their creed, they had had unpleasant experience.

Many speeches were delivered in our honour, and, to my great disgust I was chosen as one of those who had to try to make suitable replies. By this time, incidentally, I had been promoted to the rank of 2nd lieutenant. I did my best in somewhat halting Russian, a language in which I had now gained sufficient proficiency to make myself reasonably intelligible. I began by thanking the people for the wonderful reception they had given us, saying how much we appreciated their goodwill. These remarks went down well, but when I proceeded to warn them that we had no intention of interfering in any way in the internal affairs of their country, that any fighting we had done had been undertaken solely to secure our passage to Vladivostok, and that therefore we could not be relied upon to stay in the neighbourhood of Irkutsk, they were less pleased. After this announcement much of the joy occasioned by our arrival evaporated.

Our vanguard had entered Irkutsk early in the morning. By the end of the day our elation at having gained possession of this important town so easily had turned to grave alarm and anxiety. Gaida learned that the retreating Bolsheviks had carried with them a load of high explosive with which they proposed, should they find themselves hard pressed, to blow up the more important of the tunnels that pierced the high mountains skirting the southern shores of Baikal.

We all realized that this intelligence was of the greatest importance to the safety of the Legion. Suddenly our position had become precarious in the extreme. Something must be done, and that at once, to prevent the Bolsheviks from carrying out their design. The train carrying the explosive must be captured or destroyed, otherwise the escape of the seventy thousand Czechoslovaks scattered along the railway between Baikal and Penza would be jeopardized, perhaps made utterly impossible.

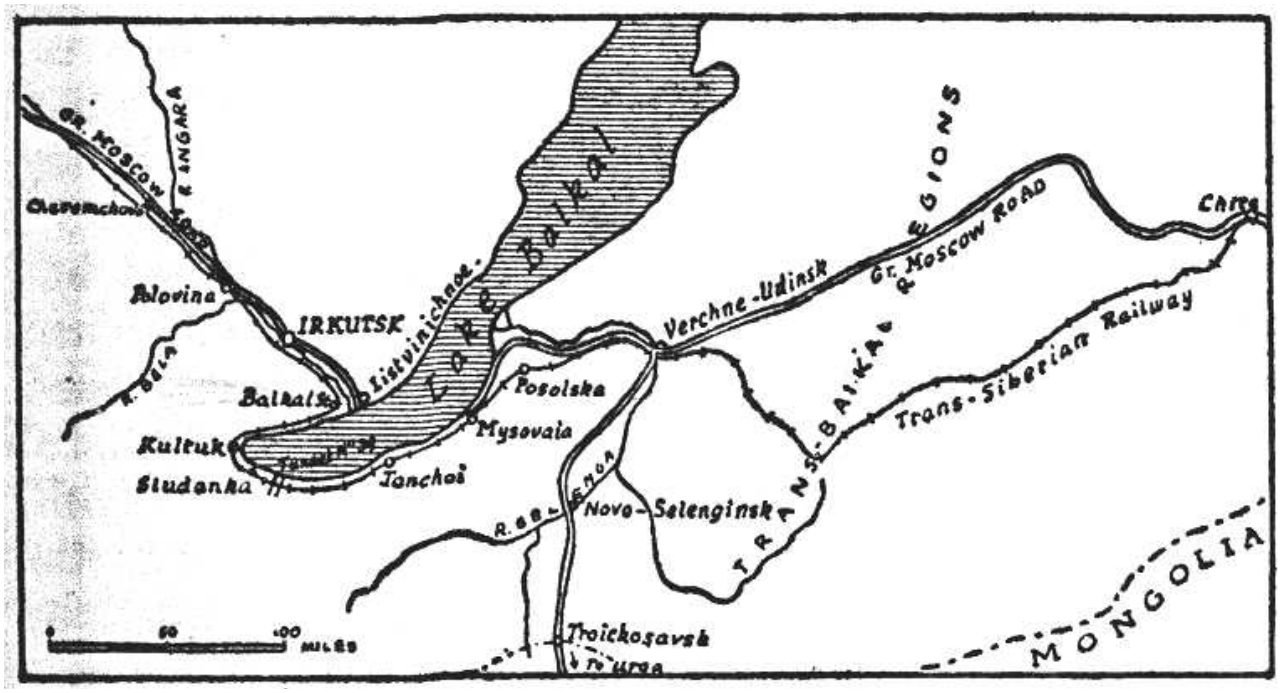


Chapter VI – The Tunnels of Baikal

In July the country near Lake Baikal is magnificent. It offers an ideal setting for the pleasure of those who wish to enjoy Nature's beauties. On the other hand, its structure is of a nature which constitutes a terrible menace to soldiers whose lives depend upon its successful conquest.

Irkutsk stands upon the River Angara, the wide and deep outflow of Baikal Lake. A typical Siberian town, with low wooden houses, it is an important terminus on the road to the Far East and lies at the wider end of a beautiful valley down which the Angara flows. This valley is about forty-five miles long, and narrows gradually as it approaches the lake shores. At the spot where it reaches Baikal it has become so narrow that it has the appearance of a huge gate through which the lake waters rush to form the Angara.

On one side of the river winds the Great Moscow Road, while on the opposite shore runs the Trans-Siberian Railway. To allow both road and rail to pass through the 'gate' the engineers found it necessary to blast a way through the living rock.



Before the Trans-Siberian Railway was built all trade from Russia to Eastern Siberia passed through Irkutsk by way of the Moscow Road, which reaches Lake Baikal at the port of Listvinichnoe, where the journey was continued by means of boats across the lake. Today, on the other side of the Angara 'gate' stands Baikal railway station, seeming to crouch timidly beneath huge, overhanging rocks. This station played an extremely important part in our Siberian campaign, for it is placed at the approach to the tunnel system on the southern shore of the lake.

Gaida decided to send spies from the Barnaul Regiment into the Bolshevik camp. These men, although anti-Bolshevik, were themselves Russian, and so succeeded in passing within the enemy lines. One by one they returned with the news upon which Gaida based his plan of campaign. They reported that the Bolsheviks had taken the train of explosives to Baikal station, and that it stood in a siding with the lake upon one side and the high rocks upon the other. The Bolsheviks, they added, had determined to go to any lengths in preventing us from passing this strong point, but that they wished to delay the expedient of blowing up all or some of the thirty-nine Baikal tunnels until all other means had been tried and found useless. The ruined tunnels would offer a sure barrier to the passage of troops, but once they had been destroyed Siberia would have been divided into two distinct portions so far as trade was concerned, for the principal channel of communication would have been cut. The blockage would be an extreme inconvenience to the Bolsheviks themselves, and

so naturally they wished to avoid such drastic action if they could achieve the downfall of the Czechoslovaks by some other means.

In this hesitation on the part of the enemy Gaida perceived his opportunity. Again employing encircling tactics, he would try to cut the railway line and the enemy's retreat at some point on the Baikal shore, and thus compel the Bolshevik troops to surrender without having time or reason to blow up the tunnels. Some miles beyond Baikal station lay the small town of Kultuk, situated upon the railway and close by the lake shore. This was the spot which Gaida chose for his important movement. Most of the tunnels lay on the stretch of railway joining the stations of Baikal and Kultuk, and it was on this stretch that we hoped to trap the Bolshevik forces.

"You must capture Kultuk at all costs, and quickly, before the enemy make up their minds about the tunnels," said Gaida to the Commander of the flanking party. "But if you succeed in cutting the line and holding Kultuk, we shall have saved the best part of the tunnel system."

The column left under cover of darkness, accompanied by several local Russians who were to act as guides. By dawn they had penetrated far into the mountains and virgin forests, where they had excellent chances of avoiding observation. Their progress was slow, and extremely difficult. They were still laboriously breaking their way through the formidable country, when an incident occurred which settled the tunnel problem in a different way.

Simultaneously with the Kultuk expedition, Gaida planned an advance from Irkutsk towards the lake through the Angara valley. He ordered the Barnaul Regiment to proceed over the hills, parallel with and close to the railway, towards Baikal station, and at the same time sent a detachment of Legionaries by way of the Great Moscow Road to attack the port of Listvinichnoe. Our armoured train would cover from the railway one flank of each of these expeditions.

My company, under the command of Lieutenant Krasa, formed the main body of the force which was sent against Listvinichnoe. At daybreak we were already on the march. We could not help being very excited, for again and again we had heard the praises of Lake Baikal, its beauties and its magnificence, sung in Russian songs and told in wild poems that touched the heart. The Siberians spoke of the lake only in words expressive of the deepest love and admiration. Now we were to see these wonders for ourselves. Doubtless thousands of Russian colonists had approached this spot in much the same mood, tramping the same great road along which we marched.

Many of the Legionaries were rough soldiers, but all felt the romance of the Moscow Road as we marched towards the Baikal. Free immigrants and convicted exiles in search of new homes in the vast Transbaikal regions, gold prospectors in high hopes of easy wealth, peasants wishing no more than humble homes in the fertile valleys of the Selenga River, hunters lured by stories of the rich furs to be had in the north, soldiers marching to build fortresses on the far Pacific coast, all had passed by this ancient route. As we penetrated into the Angara valley the scenery in the morning sun became overwhelmingly magnificent.

Steep, densely wooded slopes towered above us on both sides of the valley. On our right hand the swift waters of the wide Angara flowed towards Irkutsk, now left far behind us. Away on the farther shore we could see the winding railway line, and there the armoured train, creeping slowly forward, was definitely a disturbing element to the impressive background of Nature's beauty.

However, we had to maintain a sense of keen expectancy, for we knew that we might clash with the enemy at any moment.

Towards evening we sent scouts across the river in boats to inquire of the armoured train crew regarding the progress of the Barnaul Regiment. The news they brought back was highly satisfactory. The 'Officers' Regiment was experiencing extreme difficulty owing to the nature of the country through which it was advancing. Nevertheless, progress was being made steadily, if slowly.

We spent the night in a small village, moving off at dawn. We proceeded now with the utmost caution, searching the country in front of our advancing column for any ambush which the enemy might have prepared for us. Towards noon we had reached a spot a few miles from Listvinichnoe when fierce rifle-fire suddenly broke the deep silence of the valley. Our advance guard had come into touch with the enemy's outposts.

Knowing that at least a thousand Bolsheviks were collected at the small lakeside town, we decided that it would be madness to advance to the attack down the narrow track along which we had so far advanced. Even if we succeeded in forcing a path to the 'gate' we must inevitably be held up there indefinitely. Therefore Lieutenant Krasa gave the order to abandon the road and break country to the left with the purpose of coming down upon Listvinichnoe from the mountains.

Leaving behind twenty men to hold the road, we began a laborious climb under the guidance of a local hunter who volunteered for the job. Once on top of the steep slope the going became easier, and we pressed forward through dense forest for several hours. At length we emerged upon a ridge from which an unforgettable panorama was suddenly spread before our wondering gaze. Baikal lay at our feet. Stretching some fifty miles across, and hundreds of miles away to our left, surrounded as far as we could see by lofty mountains which sweep steeply to its shores, the Baikal Lake glittered before us like a gigantic mirror. The mountain slopes covered with dense, dark woods formed a contrasting background to this most magnificent picture.

Far beneath lay Port Listvinichnoe. Two steamers, with smoking stacks, lay at the wharf. Still farther to the right the Angara flowed out of the lake, and on the more distant shore of the river Baikal station in its rocky setting was clearly visible. We stared silently at the indescribable loveliness of the view. Men drew their breath quickly, but few broke the silence.

Suddenly there came a crashing explosion which seemed to shake the very hills. The sound came from the direction of Baikal station. The air trembled, and our ears sang, and the sound and its many echoes went crashing through the mountains like thunder, gradually growing less and less as it faded away in the distance. A huge column of thick, black smoke rose from the place where, until a moment before, we had seen the station. The smoke rose and spread in leisurely fashion, masking a long stretch of the shore.

Our amazed exclamations and speculations upon the cause of this vast explosion were interrupted by an urgent order from Krasa.

"Rapid fire into the port," he cried.

We poured lead down into the little town as fast as we could use our rifles, taking especial notice of the steamers, upon which we could see that soldiers were now rushing.

"Advance," shouted Krasa, "the Bolsheviks are running."

Down the slope we went, helter-skelter. Hours had been needed to climb to the ridge, but we went down in under half an hour. We neither walked nor ran. The slope was far too steep to allow of such orthodox use; we slid on our backs or rolled for a great part of the way. Once at the bottom, we formed Line, and doubled through the village towards the docks. We arrived too late. The Bolshevik steamers were already moving away across the smooth surface of the lake. We fired a few volleys, and had to content ourselves with that. However, we had some booty, for the Bolsheviks had not had enough time to destroy the shipping in the docks. We captured five small vessels, the engines of which had been slightly damaged by the fugitives, but which were still sufficiently serviceable.

We learned little about the explosion from the local people. All they knew was that the station had been destroyed, and that the ruins were now occupied by our troops. Krasa decided to find out for himself exactly what had happened, and asked me to accompany him. A local fisherman provided a rowing boat in which we crossed the Angara. When we had climbed the shore on the far side of the river a terrible sight opened before us.

Baikal station had practically vanished. The spot where it had stood was now an ugly wound. The railway lines had been torn up and twisted into fantastic shapes, most of the buildings had been levelled with the ground, and the few which had not completely disappeared were little better than smouldering heaps of masonry. The framework of shattered coaches, thrown about at all angles, showed that several trains had been standing in the station at the time of the disaster. Worst sight of all, portions of human bodies were scattered amidst the wreckage. The spectacle was terrible.

"How did it happen?" we asked an officer of the Barnaul Regiment, which occupied the now desolate station.

"We advanced through the hills, parallel with yourselves, but on the other side of the railway, as you already know," he replied. "Eventually we managed to reach the top of the huge rocks over there. As you see, they look down directly upon the station yard. Then we opened fire on the enemy trains, and some of our shots apparently penetrated the dynamite coach. This is the result." He swung his arm dramatically towards the wreckage about us. "We were very nearly swept from our position by the blast of the explosion. But fortunately we were just able to hold tight." He did not wish to admit that he had been badly shaken by his experience, but after a minute he asked with an anxious smile: "By the way, have you fellows got anything to smoke?"

Needless to say, the troops were triumphant. The tunnels had been saved, and the road to Vladivostok secured from a serious danger.

Suddenly somebody shouted loudly: "Gaida is here." A group of officers, headed by Captain Gaida, was approaching. We saluted the Commander, and Krasa reported the capture of Listvinichnoe, mentioning that we had found boats in the harbour.

"We shall need those vessels," replied Gaida quietly. "And now, brother Krasa," he continued energetically, "I want you to return to Listvinichnoe. You will leave in charge of the village only those men who do not belong to your company. Your own men bring over here, and join the troops who are now preparing to pursue the enemy along the railway line. Our encircling troops are now well on their way, and are probably nearing Kultuk. We must take advantage of the Bolshevik disorder to drive them out of the tunnels from this end. The rails will be repaired here during the night, and the armoured train will be with you in the morning. I thank you, brother Krasa."

Gaida shook hands with us. We saluted and moved off.

"Say, Krasa," I objected when we were again in the rowing boat, "why the devil didn't you tell Gaida that our men are utterly worn out and must have a couple of days' rest. You know perfectly well that it's true."

"Maybe, but you know as well as I do that that would be the worst thing you could say to Gaida. In his view a Legionary must never be tired, or at least never too tired to do another job of work should it be necessary. He never admits tiredness himself, you know. In any case, we shan't be able to get far tonight, and if the armoured train can get through in the morning so also can our own train. You'll see that it'll arrive with a hot meal ready; Gaida'll see to that."

We had marched only a few miles beyond Baikal station with the front line troops, who were pressing the retreating enemy. We settled down on the lake shore for the night. Early in the morning the armoured train passed. We had barely stopped waving our caps to the crew when troop trains began to arrive one after the other. At the nearest station we were picked up by one of the passing trains and carried on towards Kultuk.

As we passed slowly through tunnel after tunnel we were interested to see the holes which the Bolsheviks had prepared for the reception of the dynamite. It was evident that everything had been prepared for wholesale destruction in the event of our pressure becoming too strong. We realized that our task was to thrust the enemy out of the tunnel district before he could secure further supplies of explosive.

The position in front of Kultuk turned out to be very difficult from the point of view of our troops. We had only one road of advance, the narrow railway line, for on our left was the lake and upon our right the steep slopes of the wooded mountains. Very often these slopes became precipitous rocks. Only our encircling troops could win the day for us, and the Bolsheviks were well aware of this fact. Therefore they sent strong forces to meet our troops in the hills above Kultuk. A strong resistance was put up, and Gaida had soon to send further reinforcements from Irkutsk. Only after five days of fierce fighting did we succeed in capturing Kultuk. Two synchronized attacks, one along the railway and another in the hills, at last overcame the enemy opposition. Our losses were great, but small in comparison with those of the Bolsheviks, who suffered badly.

Now our armoured train sped after the retreating enemy, who were greatly shaken by their defeat. Beyond Kultuk lay a station named Sludanka, important to us because on the further side of it was the last of the Baikal tunnels, the thirty-ninth. We hoped that our luck would hold, and that we should save the last tunnel also. Gaida kept up a stream of urgent and encouraging orders to our armoured train. “Shoot and advance.” “Why are you stopping? Advance!” “There must be no hesitation now. Forward!” At dusk the armoured train captured Sludanka.

I was exhausted that night, and flung myself down fully dressed beside Krasa, who was equally weary. We lay upon the hard planks of a railway van as gratefully as if they were a feather bed, and fell asleep immediately. How long I had slept I do not know, when a scraping sound awoke me. Someone was opening the door of the van.

“Is Lieutenant Krasa there?” cried a voice.

“What do you want?” asked Krasa sleepily.

“Gaida’s orders! You are to send a section of ten men under an officer to the armoured train right away. The train’s guard has to be changed.

That, thought I, is a perfectly rotten job for somebody. It means acting as advance patrol in front of the armoured train during tomorrow’s attack. I lay so still that I almost stopped breathing. Who would Krasa choose? What a fool I had been to lie down next to him. Anxiously I waited, as, probably, did several others in the van.

“Gus! I say, Gus!”

I did not move, pretending to be fast asleep. “Hey, Gus! Get up there.” Krasa’s hand shook my shoulder.

“Yes, brother Krasa,” I muttered as though I had just stirred from a deep sleep.

“I want you to take ten men out of your section, Gus, and go to relieve the guard on the armoured train. They’re Gaida’s orders.”

“Right,” I said, and with a restrained sigh slipped off the plank.

Jumping out of the van, I found an officer waiting for me.

“Sorry, brother, to wake you up,” he began, “but the party on the armoured train are even worse off than you. They’re completely dead beat, and must be relieved.”

Waking the ten men who were to accompany me was no easy task, but at last I had them turned out, grumbling and swearing at the disturbance of their rest. We followed the officer out of Sludanka station, stumbling along in the darkness over the rails. He led us to the armoured train, where I reported to the Commander and received my instructions. Until dawn we were allowed to sleep inside the train, squeezed between the machine-gunners and their guns.

The sun was not yet up, and there was very little light in consequence when we started our advance next morning. First of all I agreed with the train Commander the usual signals used for passing orders at a distance – ‘stop,’ ‘go,’ ‘fast,’ ‘slow,’ ‘shoot,’ and so on. The task of my squad was to comb the country near to and upon either side of the line immediately in front of the advancing

armoured train. When a bend occurred in the track before us it was our job to creep ahead and investigate, and then signal in appropriate manner to the train crew. Along this particular stretch of shore the railway line bent constantly like a snake, and so our progress was necessarily very slow. In short, the task of the advance guard was no sinecure.

Cautiously we pressed forward, constantly on the watch for signs of the enemy. As it happened, however, things were unusually quiet. From the Bolshevik side there came no shot nor sound. Presently the sun came out, and with the silvery lake upon our left, and the beautiful forests on the slopes to our right, we could have had a grand time had it not been for the circumstances of our march. Only the occasional crack of our field-gun, firing at something which had attracted the gunner's attention, as suspicious, disturbed the peace of the morning.

This, we guessed, was much too good to last. And we were right. Suddenly a loud bang sounded from somewhere ahead. The echoes rolled loudly through the hills. 'The tunnel has gone,' we thought at once, but nobody dared to express in words his painful emotion. We rushed forward with less caution than we had so far used, and our train followed close behind. Soon we saw a column of smoke and dust rising high into the clear air. When eventually we arrived at the scene of the explosion our hearts sank low indeed. There was no tunnel any more. The rails just ran into a mass of rock and huge stones. It was as though a giant hand had seized a portion of the hillside and thrown it down to form an impenetrable wall across the railway track, a wall that sloped down from the high mountain on the right towards the shore of the lake. We climbed up this slope and walked along the roof of the tunnel until we reached the far end. There was the railway in front of us again, but no sign whatever of the Bolsheviks. Having successfully blown up the final tunnel in the series, they had beaten a hasty retreat.

The armoured train was now useless. The commander left it standing some distance down the line and walked up to learn the extent of the damage that the Bolsheviks had done. Nobody smiled, for all of us realized that this event had done great harm to our cause. For the Legion to advance without repairing the tunnel would be to invite destruction, for on that narrow lakeside trail we could not do without the support of our armoured train.

The first few days of this enforced halt were spent by my company in Sludanka station, where we were the guard in charge. After this we were sent back to a spot near Baikal station to carry out the work of protecting the tunnels against sabotage at the hands of enemy agents, and the railway line against attacks from the lake, of which the Bolsheviks, being in possession of all the large boats, were complete masters.

It was at about this time that I met again my old friend Charles Kovar, whom I have already mentioned as a school chum in Brno days. I was on duty in Baikal station when my arm was caught violently, and someone exclaimed: "I can barely believe my eyes, Gus! So you're here, too."

Next moment we were embracing each other enthusiastically. I had had no news of Charlie since that day, which now seemed to be so long ago, when I had seen him off for the Austrian Front, and had listened to his whispered resolve to escape across the lines to the Russian forces. Quickly I found an officer willing to take over my spell of duty and release me to go for a stroll with Charlie along the shore of the lake. It turned out that Charlie had joined the Legion at about the same time as I, and had now become an officer in the 7th Regiment. For a long time we exchanged experiences, and then we began to discuss the present situation of our troops, and Gaida's probable plans for the future. In this connection, Charlie had some interesting news to impart.

"An attack on a grand scale across the water is in preparation," he said. "The steamers you captured at Listvinichnoe are not strong enough to permit field-guns to be fired from them, so we have collected a number of large barges from the Angara River and these are being strengthened to serve the purpose instead. When everything is ready, the plan is to tow the barges across the lake behind the small steamers. My company is amongst the troops chosen for this work. Where or when we shall strike, I do not know. Everything is being kept secret. As regards time, however, it will almost

certainly be immediately after the thirty-ninth tunnel has been repaired sufficiently to let our armoured train through. Gaida is wise in waiting, for by following this course he will be able to support our water expedition with a frontal attack. I believe Usakov is to command our party, so there are sure to be real fireworks."

Work on the tunnel was pushed at high pressure, under the personal direction of Gaida. Day and night the task of clearing the debris continued without pause. At the end of three weeks' hard work just sufficient space had been cleared for the coaches of a train to squeeze by, and then my battalion was ordered to return to the Front Line. All soldiers were ordered out of the trains, and told to march through the tunnel ahead. The empty train followed through very slowly. Once on the other side, we entrained again and proceeded towards the station of Tanchoi. Our Front Line troops had fought their way to this spot during the last three weeks under most difficult circumstances. Here the advance broke down against the well-prepared resistance of the enemy.

The Bolsheviks were entrenched strongly in front of this station, and not even our newly arrived armoured train could shell them out of their fortified nests. Scouts reported that some sixty Bolshevik troop trains were gathered on the comparatively short stretch of line between Tanchoi and the next large station, which was called Mysovaia. It appeared, therefore, that a very powerful Bolshevik force had been massed to stop our advance. It was at this juncture that Gaida allowed the men to know something of his purpose.

The specially prepared barges were to cross the lake after dark from Listvinichnoe. They were to carry a body of troops under Usakov, and to make land at the town of Posolska, far to the rear of the Bolshevik positions. On the same night a battalion was to march into the mountains, perform a short flanking movement, and attack Tanchoi station from the side. The remainder of our troops, including my company, were to be prepared to deliver a frontal attack along the railway line early in the morning.

Everything proceeded according to plan. Usakov, under cover of a particularly dark night, crossed the lake undetected, and captured Posolska in the dawn. More than this, taking advantage of an early morning mist, the men left on board the barges managed to approach Mysovaia, where the largest of the enemy steamers was docked, and, with a well-aimed shot, set the vessel on fire. Through this daring achievement the Bolsheviks were deprived of their best boat and our frontal attack was relieved from fear of any serious menace from the lake.

In the early morning on the same day, the flanking party and our troops on the railway delivered their attacks simultaneously to the accompaniment of wild shouts and fierce 'hurrahs.' The Bolsheviks had not expected this determined assault from many points, and were mystified. But they did not lose their heads. Diverting part of their forces to meet the flank attack, they came to grips with us at once.

The enemy fought hard and well. We pressed them ever harder from the front, and they were exposed to a devastating fire from the flank. But they were giving us as good as they received, directing a terrific fire upon our armoured train and forcing it to retire more than once. Throughout the morning our progress had been very slow. Towards noon we suddenly noticed a group of enemy soldiers running back from their line. Others followed. Then the whole Front retreated. The news of Usakov's success in their rear finally broke the enemy's spirit. We redoubled our efforts. Then the retreat turned into a positive rout. The Bolsheviks were given no time or opportunity to use their trains. They were driven in a panic-stricken mass along the line towards Posolska. There Usakov awaited them.

We heard afterwards from some of Usakov's Legionaries that the fight at Posolska was little more than a massacre. The Bolsheviks, crushed together on the narrow railway line, approached Usakov's position in so dense a mass that there was no need for our men to take aim. Rifle and machine-gun fire raked the driven mob until they scattered into the hills.

The defeat of the enemy was utterly disastrous. All his trains were abandoned. Arms and equipment of all kinds were scattered on the battlefield, and along the railway line, marking the course of the headlong rout. The dead and wounded were numbered in hundreds, and amongst the former we found Colonel Usakov. One of our best officers, a real hero, Usakov performed his task with the greatest possible efficiency and success. He paid for his victory with his life. Our triumph was darkened by this sad and irreparable loss. I was worried about the safety of my friend Charles Kovar, who had been amongst Usakov's troops, and was delighted to meet him in Posolska.

The enemy never recovered from this disaster at Lake Baikal, and, following a few insignificant fights, we reached Verchne-Udinsk without trouble on 24 August 1918.

We had now been fighting almost without intermission for three months. The troops were thoroughly exhausted, but the time had not yet arrived when the energetic Gaida felt that he could permit them a proper rest. He had orders to fight his way eastward until he established contact with the fourteen hundred Czechoslovaks who had reached Vladivostok unopposed before the righting started, and who were now gradually forcing a way westwards to meet us. Gaida's line of action was clear. No matter how weary the troops might be, he must continue the struggle until the whole of the Trans-Siberian Railway fell into our hands.

"Just another small effort is needed," he told us cheerfully. "Then we shall join hands with the Vladivostok troops who are moving fast towards us."

However, before he could push forward safely from Verchne-Udinsk Gaida had to secure his right flank which might be threatened at any time by a large force of Bolsheviks under two leaders named Lavrov and Karandashwilli. These troops had fled southwards after the rout at Posolska, through the mountains to the Mongolian border. They could not be allowed to remain in our rear, able to attack our communications at leisure. It was necessary to destroy or disperse them. Therefore, Gaida detached certain Czechoslovak and Russian troops from our main body, ordering them to proceed southwards as far as Troickosavsk, a town on the Mongolian border and nearly two hundred miles distant from the railway line. My battalion was detailed to take part in this expedition, and without delay we marched on 27 August.

A wide and deep river, the Selenga, flows from Mongolia through Verchne-Udinsk into Lake Baikal. Beside this river winds an ancient road, coming from Urga, the capital of Mongolia. Along this way for many centuries has passed the trade of China and Siberia. There were only three boats available for our use. These, unfortunately, were unable to accommodate the entire expedition, and so it was arranged that the Russian troops should travel the first half of the journey by river, while the Legion marched. At the halfway point the position was to be reversed.

The country through which we marched was extremely interesting, and not mountainous. Barren land, interspersed with outcrops of huge rocks, alternated with fertile pastures, which were principally located in the river valley. On the top of almost every hill stood a small chapel, built by the Buriats, a Mongolian tribe, which inhabit this country. The Buriats are a good-hearted people whose chief occupation is cattle breeding. With Bolshevik ideas they had no sympathy. Indeed, they had suffered greatly through the Bolshevik disregard of private property, and lost large numbers of their cattle. It was not surprising, therefore, that towards us they were very friendly. Often they brought to us Bolshevik soldiers whom they had found wandering following the Posolska battle. They also told us that the enemy troops we wished to catch were retreating fast towards the Mongolian border.

This expedition was a welcome change from the life we had recently been leading, but there were many discomforts of an unexpected nature to be faced. Often and often we had grumbled at the scant hospitality afforded by our railway coaches, but we would gladly have exchanged them for some of the lodgings with which we were now provided.

I shall never forget one village of some dozen Buriat huts in which we stayed during the course of our march. There was, of course, little or no accommodation for so large a company, but the

officers were allotted a small hut which happened to be a shade less dirty than its neighbours. There was no thought of taking off our clothes. We lay on the floor 'all standing.' The last man to come in put out the light, and we proceeded to settle ourselves for sleep. The hope was vain. Hardly was the room dark than we felt small drops falling upon us from the ceiling. There was no sound of rain, however, and we could see no cracks or holes in the fabric of the hut. Someone struck a light, and we all got up to investigate.

Next moment we were jammed in the doorway, struggling to get out. The place was alive with bugs of a particularly unpleasant species.

The Buriat owner, hearing the noise of our stampede, came out of his room, and we angrily asked him what he had to say for himself. He looked surprised, and not a little hurt, that we made so much disturbance, and proceeded to explain to us in broken Russian that amongst his people the bug was regarded as a holy creature, a kind of household god. He lived quite happily with his curious lares and penates, apparently with a minimum of discomfort. We did not know whether to laugh at the fellow or to throw him out.

Before we could decide how to accommodate ourselves for the night, another startling incident occurred. A Legionary was brought in to see the battalion doctor. He had been collecting straw for his bed, and while taking an armful from a stack had been bitten by a snake. His arm had begun to swell. The doctor examined him, and tried to learn from the Buriat what kind of snakes were to be found in his country and to what extent they were poisonous. The old man immediately volunteered to cure the soldier.

"All right," said our doctor. "Let's see what they do in these cases."

"Must have snake," muttered the Buriat. "Find snake."

Fortunately the snake came out of the stack and was killed by the soldiers who went to search. Meanwhile the Buriat had fetched a pot of curious-looking paste from another room.

We all gathered round the injured soldier, eagerly watching to see what the Buriat would do. Seizing the body of the snake, the old man cut off the head. Then he asked the soldier to stretch out his arm. When this had been done he solemnly placed the snake's head upon the wound. Now, mixing his paste and muttering charms and incantations, he was about to smear the mess upon the arm. But here the doctor intervened. To see his profession treated in this manner was apparently too much for him.

"Get away, he said sharply to the poor old Buriat, who gazed in amazement at this foolish interruption.

Giving the Legionary an injection, the doctor ordered him to be taken as quickly as possible to the hospital at Novo-Selenginsk, a town some few miles further on our road. With bugs inside the huts and snakes outside there was little sleep for us that night, and we were glad to march away with the first light next morning. When we reached the town the doctor immediately made inquiries at the hospital for the welfare of his patient. He returned smiling.

"Everything is all right. The man is out of danger," he said. "The Russian surgeon told me that we should have allowed the Buriat to apply his paste, despite the charms that went with it. He said the stuff is an excellent and reliable remedy for snakebite." We could now understand the astonishment of the old Buriat at our refusal to allow him to help our comrade.

Novo-Selenginsk marked the half of our journey to the Mongolian frontier, and so here we boarded the boats and proceeded by river. The Bolsheviks offered no resistance to our advance. They hoped to find a refuge in Mongolia, but when they reached Troickosavsk they learned that the frontier had been closed, and was guarded by Mongolian troops. Somewhat to our surprise, they surrendered unconditionally. On our arrival the whole population of the town, headed by the mayor, came out to give us a hearty welcome, with many speeches, plenty of music, flowers and endless smiles. Even the Mongolian cavalry came over to form a guard of honour.

We stayed for a few days in the large Russian barracks, where, in Tsarist days, a strong garrison was always maintained. During our stay we made a special excursion to the nearest Mongolian town, a pleasure trip for which we received special permission from the authorities.

Our Bolshevik prisoners consisted mostly of Germans and Hungarians who had volunteered for the Russian forces when they found that the Legion made it impossible for them to return direct to their homelands. We sent them back under guard to Verchne-Udinsk.

Eventually we said goodbye to friendly Troickosavsk, and set out for Verchne-Udinsk, where we arrived on 11 September. We were delighted to hear that Gaida had succeeded in breaking the enemy's final resistance, and that at Oloviana, a station near the Manchurian border, had met the Legionaries advancing from Vladivostok. Thus at last the whole of the Trans-Siberian Railway from Penza to Vladivostok was in Czechoslovak hands, and the road to France was wide open. Now, we said, we have done with fighting the Bolsheviks. How little we knew the future. Had we but known it, the most dramatic moment of the campaign was now hard upon us.

It was on 22 September that the blow fell. Charlie Kovar was the officer in charge at Verchne-Udinsk station and I went over to tell him the story of our recent expedition to the south. I thought that my friend looked unusually solemn that morning.

"Well, Charlie, we've been halfway round the world," I said as we sat down in his room. "The other half will be easy now that the way to Vladivostok is clear."

Charlie stared at me for a full minute without saying a word. Then he spoke slowly:

"Vladivostok be damned." Then more quietly:

"Why, Gus, don't you know? We're not going to France at all. New orders have come through, and they are that we must return west to the Ural Mountains to reinforce the Line which our troops are holding there against the Bolsheviks."

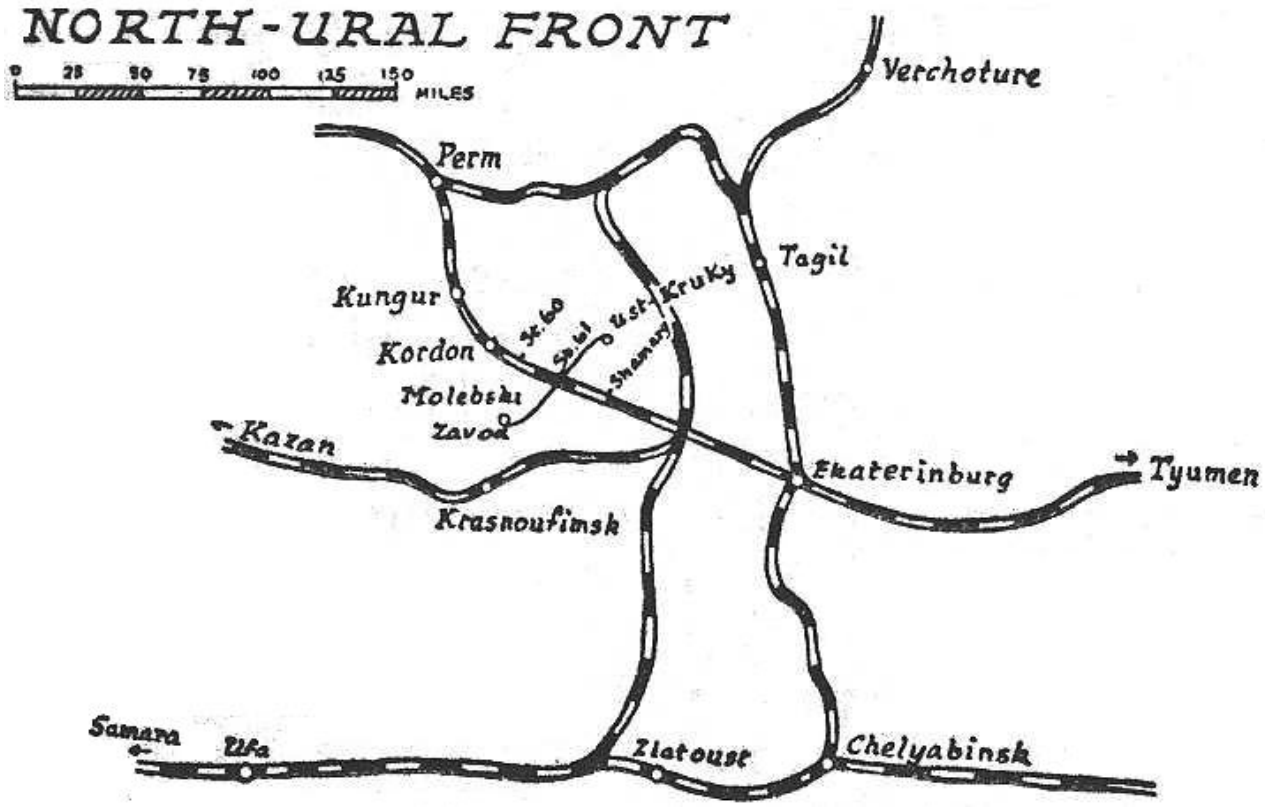
We sat staring at each other for a long time. But neither of us spoke.

Chapter VII – Blücher's Red Cossacks

The battalion's train seemed to go mad. It raced back across the Trans-Siberian line like a scared horse. Amidst the rattle of the coaches and the roar of the wheels, we held tight to our wooden planks, expecting that the train would go to pieces, or that the engine would jump the metals, at any minute. For days and nights we sped towards the west.

Faster, and ever faster. We had three thousand miles to cover, and even the Russian railway officials seemed determined to speed our passage.

"Legionaries for the Urals?" station-masters would cry. "Oh yes, then hurry. *Kypyatok* is ready for the boys' tea, and a fresh engine is waiting." And presently we would be off again, bumping over the rails at breakneck speed, racing by places which we had not thought to see again. Through the thirty-nine tunnels by Baikal Lake we rushed, and through the newly built station. As we went, we pointed out to each other the woods near which we had fought, and the road on which we had marched so short a time ago. We joked about the fights, and about the hardships we had suffered. The soldier very soon forgets the less pleasant aspects of his experiences. But when we passed through Seberta station a sudden silence fell upon us. Here the memories were too poignant to be forgotten quickly. At last we reached Chulym and Kastul, scenes of our first fights, and eventually reached Omsk.



Beyond Omsk our train turned into country which was new to us. This time our way lay to the north-west, by the line leading to Ekaterinburg, the famous mining town of the Urals, where the Bolsheviks savagely did to death the Tsar and his family. Here, to our great pleasure, the train slowed. There were long gradients to be climbed, amidst densely wooded valleys. The freshness of mountain air revived our tired bodies, and the rich green beauty of the vast forests restored our spirits. Nevertheless, we did not feel entirely at home in this countryside. True, the hills, forests, and occasional swamps, were similar to those we had seen again and again in the east round Marinsk and Irkutsk, but there was a difference which we found difficulty in locating. Probably the truth of the matter was that we were unhappy at thought of the disappointment we had suffered. To have fought and struggled to the east, merely to be sent back to the west in the very hour when we thought we had won our purpose, was hard, and few of us could prevent feeling an occasional

twinge of resentment at our lot. We experienced little enthusiasm for the coming fighting. In the east we went into action gladly because we believed that by so doing we were opening the road to France. But here we were once more in the west, again in the midst of the Russian turmoil. Why should this be when it had been planned that we were to leave Russia for good?

Our only information on this score had been the scanty facts given in the Headquarters Orders. 'In accordance with a decision of the Allied Governments,' ran one of them, 'the Czechoslovak Army Corps is to form the advance guard of the Allied Armies for the purpose of re-establishing an anti-German front line in Russia.' This was all. However, talk was useless, and we comforted ourselves by trying to believe that the fellows at headquarters were in the best position to know what was the most sensible and useful course for us to follow.

Colonel Krejci, Commander of the 6th Regiment, was pleased to see us when we reached the North Ural Front Line on 1 October. His joy was caused – it looked to us – not so much by a desire to give us a hearty welcome as by relief at receiving a reinforcement for his hard-pressed troops. We saw at once that the men of our regiment who had remained on the Western Front when we went east had experienced a very hot time. They had been fighting incessantly for five months, without rest, and their ranks had shrunk constantly, there having been no fresh drafts available to fill the gaps caused by casualties. They looked extremely tired, and a little shaken.

The enemy, on the other hand, not only greatly outnumbered the Czechoslovak forces, but were able constantly to put fresh troops into the Line. Behind them was the huge reservoir of manpower represented by Russia in Europe. Gradually the fighting line, which originally had been restricted to a narrow belt on either side of the railway, had spread in both directions deeper and deeper into the country, until the Legionaries found themselves unable to man it properly. The Siberians were busily engaged in organizing the administration of their newly-freed country, and had not yet prepared an army that was capable of taking up the fight against the Bolsheviks on its own account. Apart from the original detachments of volunteers, some Cossacks, and a few half-trained levies, there were no Russian soldiers yet in the lines we held. The Siberian Government in Omsk had been urged again and again by our authorities to build up their own army and system of defences, but apparently they did not feel the urgency of the situation while the Czechoslovak troops were willing to bear the brunt of the fighting on their behalf.

"I am very glad indeed to welcome you," said Colonel Krejci to a gathering of officers on the afternoon of our arrival. "There are some things I must tell you. I am sorry to say that you will not find conditions here as favourable as they were in the east. Here you will have to meet a more or less regular Red Army, and, moreover, an army which is in vastly superior numbers. For the past seven days the Bolsheviks have been pressing hard upon our flanks, and, for the first time during our campaign on this front, we have been compelled to retreat. This reverse has put the enemy in very high spirits. It is up to you to give the Bolsheviks a strong dose of cooling powder. Early tomorrow morning you will go into action for the first time on this front, and your allotted task is to recapture Shamary station and the bridge over the River Sylva by executing a flanking movement. I wish you good luck."

At dawn the battalion entered the Ural forest for the first time, determined not to bring shame upon its achievements in the east. By the afternoon we penetrated deep into the enemy's rear and attacked the station with a wild rush. Colonel Krejci was right in saying that we should probably take the Bolsheviks by surprise. They had been advancing for a week, and did not expect an attack. We attained our objective together with three hundred prisoners.

"Well done," said Krejci, "and now we must get the next important junction called station 61."

Similar tactics were planned for the capture of this strong point, and nearly a thousand Legionaries, including my battalion, were picked out for the enterprise. It was still dark when we crossed the river and plunged into the forest on the northern side of the railway line. The progress through the thick undergrowth was slow, becoming more difficult still the further we penetrated. The only way

in which to make any progress was for the men to march in Indian file, climbing laboriously over dead trees lying across our path, wading through streams and swamps, and thrusting aside branches and clinging brambles.

It was virgin forest, quiet and majestic, and in such grand surroundings our aspirations and puny endeavours seemed to us foolishly unimportant. We marched the whole morning and at noon we stopped for rest, everyone dropping down at the spot where he stood.

I had barely finished a frugal meal when orders came for me to relieve the advance guard with my section. If it was difficult to struggle along an already trodden path as one of a file, it was three times as hard to break the way at the head of the advance. My job was to see that the march maintained a straight course, and at the same time to pick out the easiest routes.

Presently we reached a spot which, according to our calculations, should place station 61 upon our left, and I received orders to watch for a road running across our line of march, connecting the station with a village to the north. Silently we pressed forward, occasionally startled by the loud cry of some bird or animal. Suddenly a faint rumbling sound came to us from some spot on our left Front. Almost at the same time the undergrowth became much thinner. Obviously we had reached the road, and the sound we had heard had been caused by some heavy vehicle coming from the direction of the station. Advancing cautiously with my section, I sent a runner back to report.

The forest continued to the edge of the road, and from concealment we watched the slow approach of six transport wagons, accompanied by a guard of four Bolshevik cavalrymen. Perhaps one of my men made an indiscreet movement, for suddenly one of the enemy horsemen pointed towards us and shouted loudly, at the same time wheeling his horse to gallop away. Under a ragged volley he and two of his comrades went down. However, the fourth man, who had been riding behind the transport, succeeded in escaping. This was most unfortunate from our point of view because it was certain that he would warn the troops in the station and the immediate neighbourhood that they were about to be attacked. The wagon drivers, who had run into the forest at the first shot, were merely peasants, and we did not worry about them, for they would probably hide in the woods all night before recovering from their shock.

When Captain Morel, our Commander, arrived with the main body he decided that we must attack at once. We could not take with us the captured wagons and their loads of shells, so they were placed side by side, the horses unharnessed and driven away into the woods, and around the wagons a large fire was built. The explosions of the heated shells were heard throughout the battle which now followed.

Our fighting line was thrown out upon either side of the road facing in the direction of station 61, and we moved forward as quickly as possible. To attack through dense forest where men can see for only a few yards about them is an unpleasant sensation. Further, our Legionaries loved to work independently. The result was that each man began to run forward as fast as he could with the obvious intention of getting clear of the trees.

“Halt at the edge of the forest,” I shouted, as I ran with my section on the left flank. The men followed this course.

The position which confronted us when we eventually reached the open ground was serious enough to give the most impetuous pause. The forest ended immediately at the foot of a steep, grass-covered hill shaped in the form of a cone. Not a tree or bush offered cover for attacking troops. The road was now on our right, and wound away from us round the foot of the hill. The station was situated behind this terrible cone-like hill upon the summit of which the Bolsheviks were dug in securely. And, as we had expected would be the case, the enemy had had plenty of time to organize their defence following the warning of our approach delivered by the escaped cavalryman.

The Legionaries on our right flank were not faced with this formidable obstacle, and I watched them advancing. We could not leave the hill uncaptured in their backs. Something had to be done

without hesitation. So we waited long enough only to take breath and then attacked. We were met with a fierce rifle-fire directed down upon us from the summit of the hill. But we dared not stop. Pressing up the slope, we returned the fire and yelled our 'hurrah' war-cry, which by this time the Bolsheviks had good reason to know well. Luck was with us. Barely had we scaled half the slope when the enemy fire ceased.

From the Bolshevik trenches there waved white handkerchiefs and caps. The garrison had surrendered.

Young Russians, compulsorily enlisted by the Bolsheviks and having no desire to sacrifice their lives for a cause in which they were little interested, formed the major portion of the enemy troops who manned the hill. Only a few Commissars, in face of the fact that their followers would not back them, fought to the end which was now inevitable. They were marked out from the other soldiers by their black uniforms. They were brave men.

Over the summit of the hill we swept. Down in the valley and beyond a small wood stood station 61. Obviously the news of our presence had already reached the Bolshevik Front Line by the railway, for their armoured train approached us fiercely shelling the top of the hill. Advancing down the slope, we soon reached the wood, and shortly afterwards the railway, but the armoured train was gone. The sounds of a hot engagement came from our right flank, where our troops were meeting stiff resistance, and, as we heard afterwards, suffering heavy losses before driving the enemy from his positions.

When I reached the railway I had with me some forty men from various companies. The slopes on the far side of the valley were covered with dense forest. We swung to our left, to face the station buildings. A sudden and fierce burst of fire greeted our advance, and at once the two Legionaries upon my right and left went down, but I remained untouched. This was very different fighting from that we had experienced in the east. Here the enemy did not disperse in disorder immediately we had broken their line. Instead resistance was maintained to the last minute, and full advantage taken of every available scrap of cover. We managed to force a way through a wood, and reach a spot from which we could throw hand-grenades into the station. Then to the sound of a thundering 'hurrah' the boys swept on in a determined bayonet attack. The bulk of the Bolshevik defenders would not face cold steel. They bolted across the railway line for the forest, leaving a few black Commissars to die holding their position to the last.

It was now growing dark. Leaving a few men with the wounded in the station, I marched back along the railway with the remainder to find the main body of our troops. By the time we established touch with them it was pitch dark and we had some difficulty in reforming our line across the railway line with our backs to the station. Then, thoroughly exhausted and shivering in the damp cold, we lay down to rest. No fires could be allowed, and we had a very modest meal of bread and cold sausage.

Towards midnight we were ordered to retire upon the station, for, contrary to our expectations, the armoured train had not arrived from Shamary to our support. What had actually happened was that the Bolsheviks had succeeded in damaging the line so extensively that the train could not pass. Thus we were isolated at station 61, and our position had become extremely risky. The station was also an important road junction, one road going south to a place called Molebski Zavod, and the other north to Ust-Kruky, both strongly held Bolshevik positions. The danger of our situation was increased by the fact that our wounded, of whom there were many, would necessarily hamper rapid movement.

Under these dangerous circumstances, Captain Morel decided that we must abandon the position which we had won after much loss of life and great effort, and march back along the line to Shamary. As it happened this retreat turned out to be an error of judgment for which we were to pay dearly at a later date.

In their retreat the Bolsheviks had taken most of the rolling stock from the station, but they had left behind them two large flat trucks used for transporting timber. These trucks we loaded, one with wounded Legionaries, and the other with captured rifles and machine-guns. The wounded Bolsheviks had been attended by our doctor, and left in the waiting room of the station with bowls of water at their sides.

This was a sad retreat. In complete darkness we marched along the single railway track. Half the Legion troops marched in front, followed closely by the prisoners who had the task of pushing the two trucks. The rearguard was made up of the remaining Legion men. At dawn we reached Shamary, exhausted and dispirited.

Next day the evil effects of our retreat were manifest. The Bolsheviks, interpreting the withdrawal from station 61 as a dear indication that we were numerically weak, advanced rapidly from Ust-Kruky against our right flank with the purpose of seizing Shamary station. They were driven back, but soon showed that they were not discouraged.

On the second day after our return from station 61 I was sent with my section to one of the two posts which had been established on the hills some four miles to the north of Shamary. These posts were placed upon neighbouring hills and their duty was to guard our right flank. The officer of the guard whom I relieved painted the situation to me in rosy colours. Standing on the top of our hill, he indicated the front with a wave of his arm.

“You see that long hill immediately to our front? Well, early this morning we noticed a couple of Bolshevik cavalrymen over there. They were scouts. Not another sign or whisper of the enemy have we seen in twenty-four hours. They were thoroughly licked the other day, and you needn’t expect a peep out of them. You’re on to a soft job for once, boy.”

“Where are the twenty Russian cavalrymen attached to this post?” I asked.

“Oh, them! I sent them chasing after those two Bolsheviks we saw. Had to keep them busy somehow, or they’d be getting too fat and lazy. They’re not back yet. Now over yonder on your left is our second post. They’re connected direct with Shamary by field telephone. So if you have anything to report just get into touch with them. I think that’s all you need know. Oh, by the way, over there,” and he indicated a small house standing nearby, “is a farm. They’re decent people and will be glad to make you tea any time you like.”

A little later I reconnoitred the position which I found to be excellent from the point of view of an observation post, but untenable by a small force such as mine against a determined attack. On the other hand the position was vital to our grasp on Shamary.

The opposite hill, where the Bolshevik scouts had been seen, was separated from us by a narrow valley, thickly wooded. These woods spread up our own hill, offering excellent cover to an advancing enemy, to within two hundred yards of the summit. I had thirty men and one machine-gun at my disposal to hold a post needing a garrison of six times that number, and so did not feel too comfortable. However, there might not be an attack, and if there were we should have to do our best. Quiet reigned, but I watched anxiously for the Russian cavalry detachment which should have returned by this time. I knew that we were faced at this spot by the best troops that the Bolsheviks could muster on our front. They were the Red Cossacks, commanded by Blücher, the celebrated leader who, at a much later date, was to become Commander-in-Chief of the Bolshevik Army in the Far East.

Blücher had made a name for himself in the fighting which he had conducted against our 1st Division in the neighbourhood of Orenburg in the South Urals. His troops had established a reputation as courageous and tenacious fighters. This was the leader and these the men who now threatened our weakly held post. I made up my mind that the situation demanded the greatest caution, and remained watchful.

At about four o'clock in the afternoon we saw a detachment of cavalry galloping along the crest of the opposing ridge. Suddenly they wheeled, and down the slope they came towards us. I counted eighteen through my field-glasses. Our Russians were returning, with two men missing. The report they made on their arrival was perturbing. A strong force of Red Cossacks, with a battery of field-guns, was advancing upon Shamary. Indeed, a detachment had been hot on the heels of our cavalry, and had taken toll of the lives of two men. The cavalry captain had hardly finished his report when the Bolsheviks appeared on the opposite hill and took up their position on the summit. Bullets which now began to whistle over our heads made it clear that the enemy were well informed concerning our position.

I sent a report to the neighbouring post, and asked them to telephone to Shamary for reinforcements. Meanwhile, my thirty Legionaries and eighteen Russians returned the enemy fire as vigorously as they were able. I prayed that the Bolsheviks were not informed regarding the strength of our post, and that they would not dare to attack in the darkness which now approached.

While the light lasted I could see the Bolsheviks digging themselves in. Their rifle-fire continued without, however, doing harm to us. With the object of discouraging them from launching an attack during the night we constantly changed the position of our solitary machine-gun, hoping that by so doing we might be able to convince the enemy that we had several at our disposal. After a while I received a message from Shamary, via our companion post. I was instructed to hold my hill at all costs. The message added that support would arrive early in the morning.

That night there was no thought of sleep amongst us. We anxiously searched the sky for sign of dawn. With it came the promised reinforcement – consisting of one company of the Russian Siberian Army, comprising two officers and about one hundred boys, of whom few looked more than sixteen years old. Taking the officers aside, I asked them plainly what they thought I could do with this party of schoolboys. Both officers were good fellows, and did their utmost to persuade me that their 'men' were good soldiers who would stick bravely to their posts.

"If you have any doubts," they finished, "mix them with your own Legionaries. This will give them added confidence, and make them absolutely reliable."

I decided that I could not afford to weaken a vital portion of the Line by dispersing my men, so eventually the Siberian lads were put at the centre of the ridge between the Legionaries and the Russian cavalrymen, who had placed their horses at the rear and joined the defence. Five of my own men volunteered to lie amongst the Siberian boys at suitable intervals. This course at least assured the correct passing of messages down the Line.

With the coming of light, firing began again. We saw that a strong force of Bolsheviks had assembled, their line stretching along the summit of the hill until the left flank disappeared into a wood.

Suddenly flashes came from the Bolshevik position. At the same moment shells started to whistle over our heads. Looking through my field-glasses, I presently detected two field-guns placed upon the very crown of the hill. Fire was being directed over our heads into Shamary station. 'This will wake them up at headquarters,' we thought gleefully, 'Maybe now they'll realize that the situation deserves more consideration than a reinforcement of one hundred children.'

Shell after shell went over, and I was able to see that they were making havoc in the station. No doubt the Bolshevik fire was directed from a suitable observation post. However, so had we in our neighbouring post which was connected by telephone with headquarters. So it was not long before a quick-firing battery began to reply to the enemy guns. A few rounds were enough to check directions. Then our shells went down on the Bolshevik battery like wasps.

There could be no better spot from which to see this show than our hill. The elevation, and our position midway between the contesting batteries, enabled us to see the effect of shots in the station

and upon the enemy hilltop. We enjoyed the exciting show to the full. Presently the Bolshevik guns were silenced.

But soon we realized that this duel between the guns was actually no more than a side-show in the main Bolshevik advance.

“Look! They’re advancing down the slope,” went up a cry.

Watching the opposite hill through my glasses, I saw that on that portion of the slope which was covered with undergrowth men were leaping cautiously from bush to bush. The advance was slow, but steady. Obviously the enemy wished to advance as close to our line as possible without being detected, and with as few losses as possible.

I had placed the Legionaries upon the left flank because the protection of our line of communication with our adjacent post was the most vital spot in our defences. It appeared that the enemy’s plan was to break our line at this very place. Here the edge of the wood was no more than one hundred yards away on the slope below us, and if the Bolsheviks succeeded in making an attack in force from this wood our position would be hopeless. Thus we watched the enemy’s slow advance with anxiety, firing at the least sign of movement on the hill opposite. Then suddenly the cavalrymen sent a message that Bolshevik detachments were moving forward in an effort to encircle our right flank. The Commander of the Russians asked urgently for the machine-gun. I went myself to examine the position, and realized at once that the enemy must almost certainly succeed in his encircling movement,

I was about to send a really desperate request for aid, when a message came through that Captain Vana, with two companies, was then on the way to our assistance. This was excellent news, for I knew Vana as one of our best officers, and the fact that he was sent to our support proved that headquarters realized the serious nature of our position. Vana arrived shortly before noon, and I explained the situation to him, placing myself under his orders.

Vana brought the unexpected news that the 5th Regiment had been sent into the wood to attack Blücher’s forces from the flank, and, if possible, to cut his retreat to Ust-Kruky. I passed this news to the men in the Line, bringing them much encouragement by so doing. Vana made his dispositions, and then we all waited expectantly for further developments.

The advance of the Bolsheviks was persistent and ominous. We could see them down in the valley beneath our hill, and wondered with trembling hearts how many had already reached the fringe of the wood beneath us. We expected at any moment to see a wave of men plunge from this cover to attack. Our nerves were badly strained by this trying waiting.

Suddenly a terrific’ hurrah’ sounded from the woods on our left. ‘The Bolshevik attack’ was our first thought. But a moment later we realized that the noise was occasioned by a fierce bayonet attack which was being delivered by the boys of the 5th Regiment. We had expected them to emerge somewhere to the rear of the enemy, instead they came out upon the Bolsheviks advancing down the slope to attack our position. They caught the enemy utterly by surprise and at a tremendous disadvantage as he crept through the bushes, his attention concentrated upon avoiding our fire. Hardly a Cossack escaped.

Later, when we advanced over the battlefield, we discovered what an unpleasant surprise the enemy had prepared for us. In the wood in front of our section alone there were no fewer than fifteen machine-guns.

Meanwhile the 5th Regiment had turned up the slope of the hill occupied by the Bolsheviks. Our line moved behind them, and it was gratifying to notice that the Siberian boys showed fine discipline, maintaining the line in excellent order. We advanced as far as the summit of the enemy hill where they had left their two shattered field-guns. During the advance, I was pleased to come across several old friends from the 5th Regiment. The meeting was profitable for me because my friends were so overjoyed to see me that they packed my pockets full with American ‘Helmet’

cigarettes, which they had brought from the Far East, for the 5th Regiment had formed part of the body of troops stationed until comparatively recently in Vladivostok. This was a luxury smoke for us because we had long had to content ourselves with the lowest grades of Russian tobacco.

In Shamary, two days later, we were surprised to find Gaida once more in our midst. He had been promoted to the rank of General, and had been appointed Commander-in-Chief on the north Ural Front.

"Good old Gaida," exclaimed the Legionaries of our battalion. "Now we're for it! Let's hope he realizes that we're not the fresh men he drove so hard out east!" Indeed, they were not fresh men. There were few who did not show marked signs of exhaustion.

On the second day after Gaida's arrival, our battalion was again on the march. 'Station 61 must be taken again, and this time held firmly,' was the General's order. In the twilight of a very cold morning we found Gaida waiting on horseback near the railway bridge across the Sylva River. He wished to see us off personally. Into the thick forest we went as on the previous occasion, but this time we followed a different path, knowing that in all probability the enemy would have the old route strongly held. As a result we lost our way. That night we spent in a cold, but wonderfully soft bed – the thick, green moss of the virgin forest. But getting up next morning and trying to stand upon numbed feet was an unhappy experience.

Next day saw the usual fierce action, the usual casualties causing further gaps in our already attenuated strength, and the usual weariness of body and spirit at the end of a hard day's fighting. During the days that followed the tireless energy of Gaida drove us hard. In fights at Ust-Kruky, Molebski Zavod, and Kordon station more Legionaries received wounds or met their deaths. Our ranks grew thinner and thinner, for there were no replacements to fill the gaps.

Finally on 15 October Gaida decided that the 6th Regiment was too exhausted to carry on without rest. Consequently, we were relieved by the 8th Regiment, which had formed part of the Vladivostok troops and so were fresher than ourselves. We were in happy mood as our train steamed back to Ekaterinburg, despite the goodbye given to us unexpectedly by the Bolsheviks. As our train was about to start a Bolshevik aeroplane appeared, and when eventually we drew out four more gaps had been made in our ranks.

Chapter VIII – British Troops In The Urals

Ekaterinburg lies in beautiful surroundings in the heart of the Ural forests. At the time of our arrival, the little town rang with the careless life which is characteristic of all places a short but safe distance from a fighting line.

We felt like men emerging from a jungle, where many months of arduous toil had been passed, into an ordered and civilized world. The Legionaries spent their time in repairing and replacing equipment, and in improving the appointments of the railway carriages in which they had lived already for eight months. Since it seemed almost certain that they would have to continue this mode of existence, they determined to add as many small comforts as possible to their improvised homes.

The severe Siberian winter was approaching, and it was very necessary to increase the warmth of the coaches. In their normal state, the walls were far too thin to protect the occupants adequately against the bitter frosts which must be anticipated. An ingenious means was followed to overcome this difficulty. A second layer of planks was added to the sides of each coach in such a fashion that an open space was left between. Ashes were filled into the opening. It was surprising what cosy homes were achieved in this manner.

News that came from the south Ural Front was not encouraging. The 1st Division, fighting in this sector, had had to deal since May with a powerful army, backed by the steadily improving organization of the Central Moscow Government. During an arduous campaign, towns such as Penza, Syzran, Simbirsk, Kazan, Samara, all large towns, had been captured. On the whole the work had been even more trying than that which we had had to perform, for towns like those mentioned were naturally harder and more costly to seize than railway stations and villages.

“Stand firm. The Allies are sending troops to your assistance,” the men of the 1st Division had been told again and again. “An army corps of Japanese troops is on the way; the vanguard of the British contingent is already in Omsk; America will not permit Japan to enter Siberia alone, and so has decided to send forces as well.”

These were the words upon which we had built, and still built our hope. If we stood firm for the Allies, and for the time being pulled their chestnuts from the fire, they would send powerful aid to save us from the burning. Our shock was great, therefore, when we learned the truth behind these promises. The facts were that the Japanese had occupied Far Eastern Siberia, but solely for their own selfish purposes, that the British had sent one huge naval gun from Vladivostok, but had omitted to include with it the very necessary shells, that the only Americans we were likely to see were the Y.M.C.A. ‘uncles’ with their chocolates and cane fruits. I must not forget to mention, however, that there was in fact one detachment of Allied troops which eventually had the heart to come as far as our fighting line. This was a small body of the Middlesex Regiment. However, I will discuss this later.

The exhausted and decimated 1st Division could no longer withstand the steadily increasing pressure of the Bolshevik Armies. One position had had to be abandoned after another. At the end of October, the eight hundred miles long Ural Front stretched from Verchoturie and Tagil in the north, through Kordon, and Buzuluk to Orenburg in the south. All the large towns of the Volga, which had been captured at such great loss of lives and effort, had been lost. Colonel Svec, the heroic Commander of the 1st Division, an officer who had been with the first Czech volunteers in 1914 in Galicia, and had fought ever since with his men, shot himself one day in his coach. The Allies, he felt, had let us down, and in his then nervous condition he could not survive the disappointment.

However, the retreat on the southern Front was not disorderly. On the contrary, the Bolsheviks had to fight hard for every mile gained, and at the end of October it seemed as though the positions then held by the 1st Division would be maintained. If only the Siberians could speed up the organization of their army! This was now our sole hope, and our principal thought. We were ready to hold the

line until the Siberians were prepared to take over, provided they could make their arrangements with reasonable speed. At this time, it is true, there were more Siberian troops in the fighting line, but their numbers were still entirely inadequate.

At rest in Ekaterinburg, we were not immune from the feelings of depression and ill-usage which were gradually taking possession of the Legion. Indeed we had more time to ponder what we considered to be our wrongs than when undergoing the stress and tension of the fighting line.

There was one house in the town which continually drew our curiosity. Actually it stood just outside the town on the road to the station. It seemed an attractive and happy little residence. But within its walls had recently taken place an historic tragedy. In its basement the ex-Tsar and Tsaritza in company with their daughters and son had been callously shot dead. The bodies of the victims had been taken at night deep into the surrounding woods and there burned, so that no trace should be left of the House of Romanoff.

These murders had taken place a few days only before the Legion captured Ekaterinburg.

Our period of rest did not last long. At night on 22 October the bugles suddenly sounded the alarm. All men of the 6th Regiment were ordered back into their trains, and shortly after midnight we were again on the move northwards. An urgent message had arrived from the Siberian troops in charge of the Tagil sector that their defence was rapidly crumbling before a fierce Bolshevik onslaught.

Our train sped through country already covered with the first snows of winter, and at dawn on the second day we found ourselves on the march behind the right flank of the endangered line. Soon we plunged into forest again, but this time we had to make our way under conditions far more difficult than we had hitherto encountered. Snow was soon beaten into a muddy slush, and again and again we waded through pools of icy water. The march had to be fast, and we had hardly any rest, for the position at the Front Line was perilous.

It was late in the afternoon, and darkness had already fallen when we arrived at the village of Balakino. A battle was at that moment in progress, a strong force of Bolsheviks having fiercely attacked the Siberian garrison. The enemy was advancing with great confidence, and had already forced a way to the first houses of the village. We rushed forward and clashed with them in a fierce encounter, loudly shouting our warcry: “hurrah! hurrah!” The effect upon the Bolsheviks was astonishing. Suddenly a cry went up.

“The Czechs are here, the Czechs are here,” they yelled.

A sudden panic set in, and they bolted for the rear, leaving four machine-guns behind them, and many casualties. Strange as it seems, there were no losses whatever on our side.

We stayed overnight in the village, and in the early morning advanced on a nearby mining town called Laya, from which the Bolsheviks had a few days ago driven the Siberian troops. As we neared the place, we deployed upon either side of the road in the usual manner. Our advance was difficult, for snow lay deep in the woods. In all our minds a firm resolve was set, a resolve at least partly inspired by the terrible climatic conditions, for apart from the difficulties caused by the snow the frost was sharp. “We must get the town,” we said to each other. “Failure would mean a shocking night of exposure in the woods. Come, brethren, Laya must be ours at all costs.”

As we emerged from the forest we were met by an intense and sustained fire from the outskirts of the town, which in shape resembled a long sausage. Supported by a battery of field-guns the Bolsheviks put up a strong resistance, but by nightfall the town was in our hands. Next morning I felt sick and feverish. Wading through snow and ice-water for two days in thin boots had given me a bad chill. Commander Krasa noticed that I looked ill.

“You’re pale, Gus,” he said. “But you’ll have to stick to it for a bit, my lad. You can’t have the luxury of being unwell here. When we get back to Ekaterinburg we’ll cure you with a good dose of vodka.”

To my considerable relief, next day an order came to hand over the position we had captured to Siberian troops. That same night we were once more aboard our train on the way back to Ekaterinburg. We hoped that this time we should be allowed to enjoy our rest period without interruption.

A week passed in the careless manner of soldiers on dangerous service, who do not know what the next day will bring to them.

“Here, old man, have a drink and enjoy yourself. Tomorrow we may have to dig a hole in the snow to put you to bed,” was a usual salutation. The old Epicurean philosophy, ‘Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die,’ had taken a strong hold upon us.

On 5 November the Regiment was again on its way to the Front. Through Shamary and station 61, and on to Kordon. Gaida had planned a big scale advance, hoping to capture at a stroke the important town of Kungur, last place of consequence on the road to Perm. To capture Kungur would be to straighten out an enemy salient, and take fighting out of the worst of the mountainous districts. Our orders were to press forward along the railway line, and at the same time to throw out a large flanking party in a northerly direction, thus approaching Kungur from two directions at once. The three Siberian Regiments which were now at the Front were ordered to support the attack.

Unfortunately, the plan failed. We found Kordon in a state of terrible disorganization. Even the commanding officers of the Siberian Division seemed to have no clear idea of what was happening in the Line. Contact with the flanks was not properly maintained, and, worst of all, the Bolsheviks had succeeded in trapping the armoured train of the Siberian troops.

Our first action was to recover the train, which, as it happened, was almost at the end of its ammunition. Then we undertook the considerable work of reorganizing the sector. Only when this task was complete could we turn our minds to the advance that Gaida had planned. At dawn on 8 November, in bitter cold the troops marched away from the station. On this occasion, and for the first time, I did not accompany my battalion. The vodka cure, duly administered in Ekaterinburg, had killed my cold, but had badly damaged my digestion. I could not take food, and had grown too weak to undertake a long march under hard conditions. I remained in the train with a few other sick Legionaries, and, of course, the guard. Duncan, our American ‘uncle,’ had also decided to stay behind upon this occasion. He settled down in his Y.M.C.A. carriage, which had been attached to our train since the opening of the campaign.

“Why don’t you get out of this mess, and go home?” I had often asked Duncan of late. “You’re not like we poor blokes; you can go just when you fancy.”

“Oh, I shall go right enough – when you chaps go,” replied Duncan. “I should like to be there when you all march into your freed country, the country for which you are suffering so much.”

Duncan was a stout-hearted fellow, and every one in the battalion was fond of him, even though our affection often showed itself in the form of rough banter.

By the afternoon there were left in Kordon four almost empty troop trains, a few invalids, telegraphists, and some guards. The station stood in the midst of a dense forest, the trees approaching close to the railway and the station buildings.

At that time of year the evenings draw in very quickly, and darkness soon began to fall. All was quiet. The frost was intense. Everyone, except the unfortunates whose duty it was to be out, kept indoors. I lay on my bed, reading a book by candlelight.

Suddenly fierce rifle-fire broke out. This was followed by the explosions of hand-grenades. I blew out my candle, dressed quickly, and, revolver in hand, rushed outside. Confusion reigned. Legionaries ran, or limped about, asking each other what had happened. The firing and shouts increased. “A Bolshevik attack,” somebody shouted. We were amazed, for this was the first time that the Bolsheviks had succeeded in outflanking us and attacking from the rear. So this was the crowning achievement of the confusion which the Siberian Command had made of the Front Line.

There were too few of us to resist effectively, and we scattered to the forest on the farther side of the railway, shouting to each other to keep together. It was now pitch dark, but thanks to the snow we could see our way. On the edge of the forest, I and a few others joined another group of Legionaries. In all we numbered now about fifty, each man armed with rifle or revolver. A senior officer took command, leading us to a spot from which we could shoot straight into the station. Soon we heard shouting from another group of our men who were located somewhere behind the buildings.

With loud 'hurrahs' and consistent fire, we advanced slowly upon the station. The enemy did not come to meet us. They were content to remain within the shelter of the station, and fire wildly into the darkness. This desultory fighting continued for about half an hour. Then the Bolsheviks retreated, apparently frightened by a resistance which they probably had not expected.

We found the interior of the station in a terrible state. Furniture was smashed, the telegraphic apparatus destroyed, and in the midst of the litter lay, here and there, dead Czechs and Russians. Later on, we learned that this surprise attack cost the Legion thirty-three casualties, six killed, twenty wounded, and seven lost for ever in the forest. The missing men, poor fellows, must have died hard. To lose one's way in a Siberian forest in winter is a terrible end.

Next day came news that the Bolsheviks were pressing our left flank hard. Under these circumstances it was decided to retire from Kordon, and to abandon the advance upon Kungur. All troops were therefore recalled.

All this time I was terribly worried about Duncan's safety. On the morning following the Bolshevik attack, he was missing, and I found that his carriage was locked. I knew that if he had lost his way in the forest his chances of coming out were slender. Searchers combed the woods nearby, and buglers went out to sound calls, but Duncan was not found.

Next day the battalion returned from the abortive flanking march, and Gaida gave the order to abandon Kordon. The battalion train was sent on ahead, it having been decided that we should form the rearguard for the entire retreat in this particular sector. I accompanied my section on the march, the Kordon adventure having cured me, illness or no illness, oft remaining with the train while the main forces were away. We started in an evil frame of mind. Things had not gone well with us, and the bitter weather was an extreme trial. We had not proceeded far along the railway track when suddenly, and to our great astonishment, we saw five men emerge from the forest and start to wave frantically towards us. The strangers were William Duncan and four Legionaries from our regiment. The poor fellows were in very bad shape, half-frozen and utterly exhausted. Had it not been for his American uniform and ginger-coloured hair, it is doubtful whether I should have recognized Duncan. His eyes were deeply bloodshot from the smoke of the fires over which he had crouched closely, his face was deeply grimed and bleeding from a score of scratches.

Next morning Duncan called me into his carriage. He was weak, and his face and hands were covered with plaster, but he was fast recovering as his voice soon told me.

"Look here, Becvar," he said, half-amused, "see what they have done to my home. See, there are five bullet-holes through my mattress, one through the cooking-pan on the wall, another here, and another there." He pointed as he spoke, and then led me to the door. "Outside on the step there I found blood. Apparently a Bolshevik tried to get into my carriage and was shot in the act."

"Where were you when all this happened?" I asked.

"That's just where the luck comes in," Duncan replied nervously. "When the firing started I was in here. I rushed out and realized that the Bolsheviks were attacking. Why should I run, I thought. After all, I am not a soldier. They will not find any weapons in my place, and I am an American. So I concluded that the safest thing to do would be to stay here and lie low on my bed."

"That would have meant just five holes through your body," I remarked with a smile.

“Yes, indeed, and perhaps this pan-hole in addition. Anyway, I changed my mind, got out of the carriage, and remembered to lock the door.”

“Marvellous presence of mind,” I bantered.

“Well, you see, I thought you would be angry if some Commissar got in here, and had a mind to finish the canned peaches of which you are so fond. However, once outside, I wasted no time. I met two Legionaries from the 3rd Company, and together we crossed the track and ran into the forest. I think I broke all records on that run. Bullets whistled over our heads from every direction. At the edge of the forest we were joined by two more men. From the loud shouting in the station buildings we judged that Kordon had been taken by the Bolsheviks, who seemed to be in strength. We therefore decided to make our way back to the next station along the Line. We tramped further into the forest, and after a time turned to our left, thinking that by so doing we should be marching parallel with the railway. We went on steadily all night. The conditions were terrible. These scratches are the effects of many falls and bumps into unseen tree trunks in the pitch darkness. In some places we had to plough through snow up to our knees. At dawn we halted. Not a sound anywhere, except when, here and there, twigs cracked in the bitter frost. Fortunately the boys had snatched their haversacks before they leaped out of the train. Their forethought saved us all. We had bread, a few bits of sausage, and even a tea kettle. So we made a fire and rested. Where we were we had no idea, except the very general one that it was somewhere south of the railway. Presently we took up the tramp towards the north-east, hoping to come upon the Line, or at least upon some road. We walked, if you can call it walking, throughout the day. We found nothing but deep forest, and acres of silent snow. Towards evening we were too tired to proceed, besides which it would have been foolish to risk losing direction in the darkness. So we built a big fire, and tried to keep warm. Luckily, there was plenty of dry wood available. All night we watched each other to prevent the sleep which must have brought death.”

“Didn’t you hear our calls?” I interrupted.

“We heard nothing you may be sure, or we shouldn’t have gone on tramping in that endless fashion. When there was enough light to guess our direction, we started again. Progress was now slower than ever, for we were very tired. We knew that the small quantity of food that was left would not keep us going another day in the extreme frost. Towards noon, one of the boys suddenly motioned us to stop.

“ ‘A train,’ he whispered excitedly. We stood with our mouths wide open, listening. Yes, from far away on our left came the faint rumbling of a train, shortly followed by an engine whistle. Becvar, I am surprised that we did not all go mad. Turning sharp left we struggled along with new energy. In about half an hour we came upon a narrow road, snow covered, running from west to east. The tracks on the road surface were very old, for they were covered thickly in snow. So we decided to cross and push for the railway line. We struggled forward for another hour or so, and then suddenly saw the railway. Cautiously we looked out to see if the way was clear, and had a bad shock when we saw in the distance a body of troops marching towards us. Backing quickly into the undergrowth, we tried to learn who the newcomers were. As a matter of fact, Becvar, you were as noisy as a schoolgirls’ picnic. We could have recognized your funny shouts from miles away.”

“Well, you had a very narrow escape, Duncan. Seven others did not have your good fortune. They, poor fellows, will never come out of the forest. The distance from Kordon to the spot where we met you is about ten miles, so you must have gone very far into the woods the first night. Now I hope you’ll see sense at last and go back to your sunny America while you’ve got the chance. You’ll only get into more trouble if you don’t.”

“Well, you know, Becvar,” said Duncan with a grin, “when I was struggling along in that terrible forest I told myself again and again that if I ever got out I’d go straight back home. But somehow the feeling’s gone now, and I think I’ll stay.”

Duncan was a very fine fellow, and extremely popular with all the men. That he did not take part in the actual fighting did not mean that the risks he ran were not as great as our own.

The day was quiet. Not a shot was fired. News came that the Bolsheviks were busy repairing the line which we had damaged on our retreat from Kordon. Our line now lay across the railway at a distance of about one mile from station 60. The cold was so terrific that the flank guards and the men in the Front Line had to be changed constantly. I do not know what the temperature was, but watching the armoured train I noticed that steam coming out of the pistons froze immediately. The train had to move backwards and forwards constantly to break the ice which formed on the rails. It is known that the temperature in these regions sometimes reaches sixty degrees below freezing, and I remember hearing the local people on the station remarking: "It is really cold today." To our more western mode of thought it was incredibly cold, and we suffered accordingly. Nevertheless, despite our hardships, we were in happy mood that night, for we had learned that a detachment of British troops was to arrive at the Front next day. Perhaps, we thought, the Allies had changed their purpose, and after all proposed to help us. We discussed this topic for hours. "Ah, didn't I tell you that the Allies would keep their promise?" cried the optimists. "You will find that this coming detachment is merely the advance-guard of the coming support. I heard in Ekaterinburg last time we were out of the Line that Omsk is full of British troops." Such cheerful remarks the pessimists immediately contradicted with cold logic. "Don't talk nonsense," they would cry. "They are just tantalizing us – smearing butter round our mouths, as it were. Actually they don't care a damn about us. And why should they? Haven't they practically won their war? The promises they make are just 'swinging,' and nothing else." 'Swinging' was then the latest catch-phrase of the Legion; it meant pulling the leg of some victim. The expression became popular throughout the Army Corps, and at a later date we even published a monthly illustrated paper called Swings.

It was a bitterly cold but sunny morning when the British train arrived. In order to avoid provoking the Bolsheviks into strafing our Lines at the time of this arrival, our armoured train had refrained from shelling the enemy for the previous twenty-four hours. Our patrols had also been instructed to abstain from unnecessarily irritating the Bolsheviks.

When the train drew in and the troops detrained, we found that the complete detachment consisted of only about thirty men. They were fine fellows, and wonderfully equipped. I noticed many Legionaries casting envious glances at the smart winter uniforms of the newcomers, uniforms which really gave adequate protection from the frost. When the formalities of the official welcome were concluded, the men of the Middlesex Regiment marched off along the snowed-up railway towards the Front Line. They had brought a band with them, and after still more welcoming ceremonies the detachment lined up behind our armoured train and the British National Anthem was struck up. Hardly had the final strains of 'God Save the King' died away than the enemy started vigorously to shell that part of the line from which the music had come. Maybe, he considered that we were becoming far too jovial, and wished to cool our ardour. The explosions thundered in the forest.

Smartly the British detachment marched back to the station, smartly they entrained, and as smartly the engine whistled and drew them out of the danger zone on their return journey to Omsk, leaving the Bolsheviks in a thoroughly nasty frame of mind which they proceeded to vent upon us. The demonstration was over, and all the good it had done was to supply our pessimists with ample matter for their many and none too complimentary remarks [about] the subject of swinging.

That same evening the battalion was relieved, and we were sent one station down the line for the purpose of 'enjoying two days of complete rest,' as we were told. Station 61 was our resting place. We settled down contentedly enough until, early next morning, we were routed out of our warm carriages into a particularly bitter frost. It appeared that an urgent message had come through from the Siberian troops holding Ust-Kruky. They were in grave danger, they said, of being surrounded by the advancing forces of the enemy.

The men were in a nasty mood when we lined up in the morning frost. "What the devil do they think we are, just machines?" "If a whole Siberian Regiment can't hold a village like Ust-Kruky

they aren't worth bothering about; let 'em sink, say I." "I'm fed up with rushing round pulling other people's chestnuts out of the fire." These were some of the remarks I heard, and it was not so much the words as the tone of voice in which they were spoken which seemed significant. The men were beginning to wear down. Too much was being asked of them.

But when we marched round the conical hill outside station 61, the hill which we had recently attacked under such difficult circumstances, the spirits of the soldiers changed in the volatile manner characteristic of fighting men. Jokes passed about the transport wagons filled with shells which we set alight shortly before the battle, and loud laughter sounded again. Nevertheless, the jokes were of a different calibre from those which had been cracked in the early days of the campaign. They were less spontaneous and light-hearted, and, here and there, an element of sharp irony and sarcasm was manifest.

That night we spent in the cold barns belonging to a small village, and on the next morning, 14 October, we arrived in Ust-Kruky. The position did not seem to be dangerous in any way, and we felt the more disgruntled at having had our period of rest interrupted. The main Bolshevik attack was delivered at about noon, and to us it seemed to lack the drive which we had anticipated from the urgency of the message which had summoned our assistance. We could clearly see the long lines of enemy troops advancing over the snow-covered meadows against the hill upon which the village lay. The Siberian troops waited quietly in their positions on the slopes, while our battalion was held in reserve on the hinder portion of the summit.

The Commander of this sector was a Siberian, and he had gathered his staff behind a haystack to watch the enemy approach. With this group stood several of our officers, and I had the opportunity to join them. The spectacle was extremely interesting. If only it had not been so cold! The intense frost was felt less by the Siberians than by ourselves, for they wore high felt boots, which in Russian are known as *valenky*. But we, in our ordinary leather boots, suffered agonies, and found it necessary to shuffle about continually in an effort to keep the sluggish blood circulating. We were actually angry with the Bolsheviks for being so slow in their advance.

Suddenly a messenger from the village arrived, and handed a piece of paper to the Siberian Commander. He glanced at the writing, and then smiled cynically.

"What nonsense to send us a message like this," he remarked. Then, turning to us: "Gentlemen," he said, "this message says that an Armistice has been signed in France." He crushed the slip of paper viciously between his fingers, and stowed it away in his pocket. We listened politely to the Commander, what he had to say, and when he finished went on shuffling about to keep warm. The message carrying information concerning one of the greatest crises in world history was then of no more interest to us than the weather forecast for tomorrow.

"Captain Morel."

The Siberian leader turned to our Commander.

"Please send one company of your battalion at once through the village to advance against the right flank of the enemy, and prepare the rest for a frontal counter-attack."

We did not at all like the idea of taking orders from this Siberian officer who seemed unable to hold off the Bolsheviks without our help, but he was in command of the sector, and so we had to obey.

As soon as the flank movement had been prepared, the order for the counter-attack was given. With a roaring 'hurrah' we swept over the summit of the hill and, joined by the Siberians, rushed to meet the enemy, who by this time had reached the foot of the hill about two hundred yards distant. Suddenly the fire from our flanking party caught the Bolsheviks, inflicting heavy punishment. They could not face the two attacks at one and the same time, so turned and fled, leaving many casualties, dark spots upon the white snow. Our task was accomplished, and we returned to the village for the night. In the small hours of the morning we were woken up and marched back towards the railway.

“If you want a decent night’s rest before tomorrow’s job, we must get back to station 61 this evening,” said Captain Morel.

“What, tomorrow again?” I asked Krasa. “This will kill the men.”

“Can’t be helped,” said Krasa sullenly. “Apparently Molebski Zavod is in danger. An order came during the night that we must rush back as quickly as possible.”

“Siberians again?” I asked.

“Not exactly, there’s a battalion of our men there as well. It sounds as if the enemy are far too strong for them. I shouldn’t be surprised if the Ust-Kruky attack was a blind designed to split our forces. It seemed to me yesterday that the enemy attack had no guts at all.”

Our march was fast, with little time for rests, and by night we reached our station. Our dear carriages! They were our home now, our everything. We had come to love them, and to feel safe when in them.

The news awaiting us was gloomy. We expected nothing else because throughout the afternoon we had heard the tumult of a fierce cannonade coming from the south. The Colonel greeted us.

“I am sorry, brother Morel,” I overheard him say, “but by five o’clock tomorrow morning you must be on your way.”

At the early roll-call we all had a shock. Only three hundred men had turned out.

“Forty-five men unfit for duty, brother Captain,” reported the doctor. “I have seen them all.”

“What is their trouble?” demanded Morel.

“Most of them have feverish colds. Others are suffering from severe frost-bite, and exhaustion.”

Until this moment few of us had realized how greatly our numbers had shrunk. We had been nearly six hundred strong when fighting had started. There had been no fresh drafts to fill the gaps in our ranks, and now the casualty list seemed tremendous. There is no denying that we were disheartened. How much longer was this situation to continue? Were we to be left fighting without rest until all of us had been gradually killed? On the march everyone was silent. It had been snowing during the night, and the going was heavy. We struggled as fast as we could, through the deep, dry snow. Fortunately, the forest formed a high wall upon either side of the road, and this protected us to some extent against the sharp, icy wind, which, nevertheless, blew snow from the trees into bur faces with cutting force. Captain Morel seemed tireless. He spent his time rushing backwards and forwards along the struggling line of men.; “Come on, brethren, we’re not beaten yet,” he would cry. “The boys at Molebski Zavod are waiting anxiously for us. We mustn’t let them down.”

However, we were too late.

At about noon we met a party of Legionaries coming from the direction of the Line. They were the advance guard of our retreating troops.

“We left Molebski Zavod at dawn,” they told us. “We could not hold it any longer. The Bolsheviks have been attacking continuously since yesterday morning.”

We moved on again, and soon met the main body of the retreating troops. We did not stop, just waving our hands to friends as we passed by. Amidst the retreating men were a number of horse-drawn sledges, carrying the dead and wounded Legionaries and Siberians. The march was almost like a funeral procession, misery and exhaustion depicted on every face.

The rear guard was still in front of us, and Captain Morel continued the march until the late afternoon. About three miles outside Molebski Zavod there is a small farm standing on a hill, and about it there is a wide clearing in the forest. This place Captain Morel chose as our halting spot. The night that followed was ghastly, perhaps the worst experience that has ever fallen to my lot. We still had our summer equipment. This we had reinforced with a few bits and odds and ends of

clothing, and Russian fur caps which we could pull down over our ears. Our tattered greatcoats were far too flimsy to protect our bodies against the intense cold and the icy wind which swept the open spaces of the hill. Our shattered boots offered a ridiculous resistance to snow and ice.

A whole company was placed as guards at the edge of the forest, behind the trees overlooking the clearing, but even there the cold was unbearable. The guards had to be changed every half-hour. Somebody found a small haystack and raked out a hole in it for our Company Commander, Captain Krasa. He invited me and another Legionary to share this cover with him. The three of us literally lay one on top of the other, but even then I could not endure the cold for more than a few minutes. I preferred to try to keep a little warmth by moving up and down the Line throughout my spell of duty. Every Legionary in the Line jumped up and down and threw his arms about like a madman.

The relief after each spell of duty was incredibly welcome. The moment we were freed we rushed at top speed to the spot where, under cover of the hill, huge fires were burning. Plenty of dry wood was available, and the Legionaries did not spare their store. We sat around these fires on tree trunks and brushwood, occasionally turning our backs to the blaze. Kettles steamed, and never before or since have I enjoyed tea so much as upon that night. No one thought of sleep. It was far too cold, and conditions were far too exposed. Three times I had to leave the fires for duty in the forest.

With the dawn came the message that a relief party was on its way from the station. Following that terrible night many men became crippled with frostbite.

For several days we hung about the Front Line. But Molebski Zavod had been lost, and finally the 8th Regiment took our place, and we were sent for a spell of rest in Ekaterinburg.

Chapter IX – To Hell With Intervention

Life in Ekaterinburg went as it always had during our periods of rest. But on this occasion there was a difference. After a short time it became obvious that the men's nerves were strained to breaking point. Everyone was excitable, and easily lost his temper. It was not only physical exhaustion that was destroying the nerve of the troops, but also the ever-present knowledge of those many unfilled gaps in our ranks. When a man was knocked out, his place had never been filled. There had been no drafts of fresh troops from which to fill it. Although we tried not to let our minds dwell upon the matter, we could not help feeling very like a line of men placed with their backs to a wall and facing a firing squad who had received instructions to shoot at pleasure one after the other. Who would be next?

'We have been willing tools in the hands of the Allies for too long,' brooded the Legionaries. 'Have we not done our share? Look at the vast numbers of Austrian and German prisoners of war in the Siberian camps, whom we stopped returning home and strengthening the German Army! Imagine the consequences if the Siberian stocks of raw materials and food had found their way to Germany! The War would have gone on at least for another year! Why should we remain here when the War is finished? Why should we spend more of our blood and enthusiasm for the benefit of the Allies who, if they have not forgotten us completely, have deliberately broken their word to us in the matter of sending us help when we are hardest pressed?'

Everyone did not subscribe to this view, and hot arguments followed. Indeed, there were many who maintained that we should be content to continue fighting.

"We must stay," they said," because we are helping the Russians to establish a free and democratic regime. The Russian people accepted us as their friends when we were in distress; we cannot desert them when they themselves are in trouble. After all we are only repaying a debt in helping them to regain their freedom from the Bolshevik terror. More than this, you are unfair to the Allies. Until very recently they have had their hands very full with Germany. Now they will think of us, for they are thoroughly well aware of the importance of re-establishing a responsible Government in Russia. You will find that they will send the help they have promised. They will not let us down."

Now, however, we received a shock which caused even the most optimistic amongst us to wonder whether after all their viewpoint was not mistaken. For a long time our dearest hope had been that the democratic Siberian Government in Omsk would soon be able to consolidate the country, and relieve us of our task in the Urals. The gradually increasing strength of the Siberian Army fighting with us in the Front Line had fed our hope in this respect.

With shattering effect came the news that, amidst horrible bloodshed, the Democratic Government in Omsk had been overthrown by the reactionary Russian officers, and that Admiral Koltchak had been installed as Dictator of Siberia.

Filled with indignation and bitter disappointment, the Legionaries lost the last of their enthusiasm for the anti-Bolshevik cause.

'It may be our job to help in establishing democratic ideals, but we can have no interest in lending our assistance in imposing just another kind of terroristic dictatorship.'

Yet another shock was administered to us on 29 November, a shock which had an important influence upon our future in the Ural war area, for it was the last straw which broke the resolution to fight of many soldiers, and led directly to the ending of our intervention in Russian internal politics.

General Stefanik, first Defence Minister of the newly formed Czechoslovak Republic, arrived from Prague by way of Vladivostok. He brought with him the greetings of Masaryk, our elected President. Stefanik was revered by the troops. An ardent Slovak patriot, and an extremely brave man, he had fought courageously in our struggle for freedom. To visit our Front Line at all was an heroic effort on his part, for he had been very seriously wounded when serving in the French Air Force and still suffered a great deal from his injuries.

On the evening of his arrival Stefanik received a group of Legionaries, and a measure of his courage in coming to Siberia may be had from the fact that the General twice fainted during the interview that followed. With gleaming eyes filled with high ideal, with energy born of his unconquerable will rather than of bodily strength, he told us of many things. We listened with excitement to his words, but his final phrases left us speechless.

"You must hold out here in Siberia until the end, until the victory is won," he said. "And this you must do relying only upon your own strength, for I can tell you authoritatively that no help from the Allies will come to this Front. It is useless our discussing the rights and wrongs of the case. The fact of importance is that help will not come. Now you know just how things stand, and also the extent of the task that lies ahead."

The Regimental representatives returned to their trains in anxious thought. How would the men take this terrible disappointment?

That night excited discussions took place in most coaches. A tense atmosphere hung about the trains. Some of the men brooded, others spoke hot words.

"All the time they have fed us with empty promises, promises which they never meant to keep, but which were made because it happened to be convenient to keep us buoyed up with hope and enthusiasm. They have prated to us of high ideals, of saving Civilization for our children, of the fight for Right. But it was all empty wind. Worse than wind, because they did not themselves believe in what they said. The Allies have thrown us down. They have put us out of their minds, have deliberately lost us on their maps. We have served our turn, and now they care nothing about us. They have condemned us all to death. We are the Lost Legion!"

These were the cries that one heard upon all sides. The men felt that they had been let down in an unforgivable, in a traitorous manner, and they were becoming cynical and bitter. A dark cloud of despondency and anger formed over the Legion.

Gradually, however, as days went by the frost seemed to have the effect of cooling the anger of the soldiers. Fewer complaints were heard, but it was noticeable that the desperate danger in which we obviously stood was having the effect of welding the soldiers into an even closer brotherhood.

On 18 December the 6th Regiment was ordered to return to the Front Line. The men made no attempt to dispute the order, but they went without their usual enthusiasm. This time our stay in the Line was to be short, but filled with astonishing happenings.

We had lost General Gaida. To our considerable surprise, he accepted an invitation from Koltchak to take command of the Siberian Army on the Ural Front.

The temptation was too great for his tireless energy, and, of course, the appointment was a responsible one. Gaida was known to the Siberian troops. They respected his ability, admired his courage, and appreciated his ability to instil confidence into their ranks. On 21 December, in terrific frost, Rungur was captured. A few days later, Siberian troops operating on the northern Tagil railway entered Perm.

We of the 6th Regiment were back in Ekaterinburg on Christmas Day 1918, leaving behind us at the Front the 5th, 7th, and 8th Czechoslovak Regiments, all of which had belonged to the Vladivostok Command. This was my fourth Christmas in Russia. Others had been away from home still longer. We were happy, forgetting our troubles in the natural festivity of the season, buoying ourselves up with the assurance: 'Next Christmas we'll be in our own country.' How little did we know all that was still in store for us, and that the same period of the following year would still find us in Siberia! Hardly were our jollifications over than we received yet another blow.

Nine well-known Omsk Socialists, all men of integrity and ardently anti-Bolshevik in their convictions, were cruelly murdered by the Koltchak party. Deep indignation was felt in all democratic elements in Siberia. Even the National Council of the Czechoslovak Army Corps felt it necessary to send a strongly worded protest to Koltchak. They pointed out in plain terms that the

Legion fought for liberty and Democracy, and that it would not lend support to a regime which showed a desire to rule through terroristic methods.

Soldiers need an ideal for which to fight. In the case of volunteer armies this point is of particular importance. Take from the soldier the ideal for which he has volunteered, and his enthusiasm, which means his efficiency, is destroyed. He loses interest in the fight, and when this happens the cause is well on the way to being irretrievably lost. The Legion was formed of men who had joined primarily with the purpose of fighting the oppressors of their race, the Austrians and Germans. They had been willing to sacrifice their lives for the independence of their country. With this object in view they had fought with determination against people who had attempted to restrain them from travelling to France. They had been willing to fight in the Ural Line because they thought that they were establishing a new anti-German Front in Russia.

These reasons for sacrifice no longer existed. Democratic Siberia seemed to have fallen under the heel of a dictatorship no less cruel than the Bolshevik regime. The Ural Line was no longer worth the loss of a single Czech life.

Deserted by the Allies, stranded in the midst of a vast country, half of which was already frankly hostile, while the rest was gradually becoming so, the Legionaries realized that once again their position was extremely precarious. Caught between Bolshevik oppression upon the one hand and the criminal lust for power of the Koltchak faction upon the other, they perceived that the structure they had been fighting to erect was already crumbling and must ultimately collapse.

'This is not the kind of situation which caused us to volunteer. Let's not waste more blood here. Let's think of ourselves and our own country first of all. We should go home at once.' This was the practically unanimous conclusion of the Legion.

"Home" now became the cry of every Legionary. "Home to help in the building of our new State; home to the families who need us; home before all jobs have been snapped up by those who stayed behind and did not raise a finger to secure the independence." This cry went through the Legion, sweeping away the warnings of the cool-headed. The Legion was not yet beaten, but it soon became abundantly obvious that the men would no longer fight on behalf of any Russian faction. These were the circumstances prevailing when the 6th Regiment was again ordered to the Front on 4 January 1919.

The Siberian troops, supported by the three Vladivostok Czech Regiments, were threatened on the left flank by a strong Bolshevik force which was advancing from the direction of a place called Krasnoufimsk. They were making Kungur their objective. The Bolsheviks were making every effort to cut the railway line to the rear of our advance troops.

I watched closely to see how the order to return to the Front Line would be taken by our men. Some were indifferent, some expressed disfavour, but as yet there was no open opposition. However, shortly before our train left Ekaterinburg, two men who had been my co-delegates at the Conference at Chelyabinsk, and who had recently been re-elected, in company with myself, to represent the Regiment at a further conference which had been planned, visited my carriage. They wished me to stay in Ekaterinburg to assist in pressing upon the National Council, in defiance of General Stefanik's wishes, the necessity of summoning a further Legion Conference. General Stefanik had issued an order prohibiting all such conferences as smacking far too much of Bolshevik influence. In his opinion they were not to be tolerated any more in the Legion.

"You know as well as we that the men are in an extremely unsettled state, Becvar," said my visitors, "But maybe you don't realize that the position in other regiments is far more threatening. The 1st Division especially is in a rotten state. They just won't go on fighting. The poor fellows have been fighting continuously, and under the most trying circumstances, since 1914. One can only be surprised that they have stood it so long. Even amongst our own boys trouble is brewing. They talk quite openly about refusing to fight any longer on the Ural Front."

“You don’t mean that they would mutiny?” I interrupted.

“I should not be at all surprised if they did,” replied one of the delegates. “It has happened already in some sections of the 1st Division, and our boys know about that. There is no doubt that the infection is spreading rapidly.”

We discussed the pros and cons of the matter until the time came for our trains to move out. “I’ll have to go with the Regiment,” I said. “The orders are to go to the Front and I cannot stay behind.”

“We understand your point of view, brother Becvar,” replied the others. “Nevertheless, under existing circumstances we are of opinion that you could be of more use here than in the Front Line.”

On the journey I told Krasa about this conversation. He was now our Battalion Commander.

“Yes,” he said, “they are right in supposing that the prospects are not rosy. But I am sure that we can rely upon our battalion. Of course, I realize that the same cannot be said safely about the troops on the southern Front. They have been through twice the hell that we have experienced. But that isn’t an excuse, and I am sure that the unrest arises from the propaganda of just a few troublemakers who have been infected with Bolshevik ideas. The bulk of the Legionaries are sound, of that I am sure.”

Events proved that Krasa was right, but the dark cloud overhanging the Legion did not pass until we had gone through a period of extreme anxiety.

At station 61 the battalion detrained. We were to form the advance-guard of a movement towards Molebski Zavod, and onwards to Krasnoufimsk, where the Bolsheviks were reported to have mustered in force. The remaining battalions of the 6th Regiment were to follow as their trains arrived.

In gloomy mood, the men began the march. Their heads were sunk forward as they struggled through the deep snow, over roads which had now become painfully familiar. We marched in Indian file, and nobody spoke. Occasionally, angry swearing was heard when someone slipped down in the snow. Our breath froze under our chins, and upon our high astrakhan caps. Soon icicles draped our faces. The cold was terrific. We had to watch each other’s ears and nose for signs of frostbite.

That night we reached Molebski Zavod. Early next morning we were once more on the march. Again our path lay through deep snow and over ice. We trudged on in great gloom of mind, suffering much from the intense Ural frost. There seemed no issue from the situation in which we were caught. What hope had we, unaided by the Allies and with Siberian help still an uncertain quantity, of beating the Bolsheviks, whose organization and resources steadily improved? Probably our weariness of mind and body caused us to see the position in the worse light.

Suddenly a mounted man rode up behind us. His Siberian pony was covered with icicles, and as his rider drew him to an abrupt halt he gave out clouds of steam into the freezing air. The messenger handed a message to Captain Krasa. The men, glad of a short rest, took little notice of the occurrence, supposing merely that fresh orders had arrived, orders that would entail yet greater hardships for themselves. So they were apathetic. Krasa called his officers to his side.

“This message has come over the wire from station 61,” he said. “We are to return at once to Molebski Zavod, and await there further orders.”

What had happened? We questioned the messenger, but he could offer no explanation. The order had come from the Colonel, and they were to pass on his instructions to the battalion. But no clue was given as to the reason for this unexpected change of plan.

On the return journey the men brightened up a good deal. Guesses were made regarding the reasons for this extraordinary order. Curiously enough, no one guessed the truth. “Can’t be any Bolsheviks in Krasnoufimsk after all. Anyway who the hell would attack in weather like this!” This remark summed up opinion.

The truth was told when we arrived in Molebski Zavod. Krasa went at once to the telephone. When he came back he stared at us for a moment without speaking.

"Mutiny!" He spoke quietly. "The other sections of the Regiment are not coming up. It is not general; just some of the battalions. What's going to happen I don't know. Meanwhile we stay here."

Not until we returned to station 61 a few days later did we hear full particulars of the catastrophe. Fifty Legionaries belonging to the battalion which arrived immediately after us had refused to march. They had been disarmed and segregated. But the next battalion to arrive refused as a body to leave their train. The efforts of the Colonel proved abortive. The men merely stated that they would no longer fight in the interests of the Dictator Koltchak, and that it was folly to persist in our policy of intervention in Russian internal affairs.

We all felt the blow to be the most serious that had so far been struck at the unity and brotherhood of the Legion. Was the magnificent fighting force which we had taken so much pride in building up voluntarily to be shattered by disunity?

Some could not withstand this grievous blow. Sergeant Sacha of the 1st Company shot himself dead with his own rifle when his section refused to obey orders. Sacha left a message behind him. "I have always believed that our brotherhood, for which we have paid so high a price, would surmount all troubles and difficulties. But now this belief is broken, and I do not wish to live to see the decay of our dear Legion."

This sentiment was typical of the feelings of hundreds of others. "Could not this tragic end have been avoided?" we asked each other indignantly. We had hardly settled at station 61 when news arrived from headquarters that the whole of the Legion was to be withdrawn from the Urals. We were to be used to guard the Trans-Siberian railway. These were instructions which General Stefanik had issued before he left Siberia for Prague.

Shame and anger filled our hearts when these orders reached us at our advanced post. We could not understand the delay in taking this decision.

"So our refusal to fight any more under the conditions that have been imposed on us has brought them to their senses. The Allies let us down, and promptly forgot about us. If we hadn't forced ourselves into prominence by taking this unpleasant action, they would have left us to die like rats in the Ural snows. Well, we're through now. To hell with intervention." These were the sentiments that we now heard upon every side. The Legion was thoroughly roused, angry because headquarters had not sooner relieved us from an impossible situation. With grim indignation we said goodbye for the last time to the Ural Mountains, and the graves of hundreds of our brethren.

Making only a short stay in Ekaterinburg, the 6th Regiment passed on to Tyumen. The original intention of headquarters had been to station the Legion close behind the Front Line, but serious trouble brewing in the east made it necessary to change these plans. The Bolshevik troops which we had broken and scattered into the forests on either side of the railway line during the summer months, had mustered again and started to show themselves in alarming numbers. The original enemy forces had been dangerously augmented by levies of peasants from the Siberian villages. These peasants had been worked upon by Bolshevik agents, and the atrocities committed by the Koltchak Government, and the cruelty with which its orders were enforced, had created a great deal of unrest and discontent. They perceived that Koltchak, although a well-meaning man, was too weak to hold in check the many self-seeking and irresponsible people who surrounded him.

"The Bolsheviks robbed us and we were glad to be rid of them, but Koltchak's wolves rob us and take our lives as well," cried the peasants. "Koltchak's men are worse than the fiercest Bolshevik."

So their ears were open to Bolshevik propaganda, and soon men began to desert even from the Siberian Army. Often the detachments which were sent against the raiding Bolshevik forces went over to the enemy as a body, complete with ammunition and equipment. Gradually even the railway

employees despaired of the Koltchak regime. These men had always been ardent anti-Bolsheviks, and very good friends to the Legion. When they became disaffected it was a clear sign that conditions were extremely serious.

These were some of the considerations which caused General Syrovy to spread the Czechoslovak troops as a guard along the Trans-Siberian railway from Irkutsk to Omsk. There can be no doubt that this last-minute decision saved the rear of the Ural Army, and preserved our line of retreat to the Far East. Had we not held the railway firmly we should not ultimately have escaped from the midst of the Bolshevik hate.

Four months were occupied in moving the Legion's two hundred and fifty troop trains from the Urals to their allotted places on the line. My Regiment was assigned to garrison duty in Omsk, the seat of the Koltchak Government, where we arrived after remaining for eight weeks in Tyumen. We arrived on 21 March to find that a magnificent welcome had been prepared for us. The station was gaily draped with the flags of all the Allied countries, and a huge banner carried the legend, 'Welcome, brave Czechoslovak brethren.' Amidst a throng of uniformed officials, a Siberian General welcomed our Commander with a flowery speech, and with the usual Russian 'bread and salt.' At last the formalities were ended, and the anthems duly played. Then we marched into the town through long lines of badly equipped Siberian soldiers who seemed to cherish no great enthusiasm for the show. At a huge lunch toasts were given to the 'heroic Czechoslovak Legion,' and in the afternoon a grand parade was held for the benefit of the newly appointed Commander-in-Chief of all Allied troops in Siberia, the French General Janin.

That evening ironical laughter echoed from coach to coach of the Czechoslovak trains. The conversation would hardly have pleased Koltchak or Janin could they have heard.

So the Allied 'help' has come at last," cried one Legionary with a bitter laugh. "England has sent us a naval gun without shells, America provides us with 'uncles' bringing chocolates, and now France caps the farce by lending us a fat General without troops."

"Well, thank goodness the comedy is over," cried another. "We at least know now where we stand And as for these fine ceremonies and great words of praise! – well, we know at just what value to assess them. Koltchak cries for our support, finding it hard to hold the Bolsheviks with conscripted troops. But let him and his Omsk gangsters go to the devil. I for one will not fight for a regime based on terror and assassination."

That we were right in supposing that the Government was extremely unpopular was soon proved by the attitude of the local people. Fearful that we should be persuaded by Koltchak's blandishments, the population of Omsk showed no pleasure at our arrival. Again and again we were compelled to deal with acts of sabotage. We sympathized with the people who were so sorely driven, but the railway was our life-line and we were compelled for our lives' sake to hold it with a firm hand.

Our trains were shunted into a siding where they were destined to remain until the autumn of 1919. We settled ourselves with what comfort we could, considering ourselves safer in our carriages than in the more commodious barracks which Koltchak offered us. The people of Omsk named our little colony 'Czechovsk' or 'Czech Town.'

Packs of fierce dogs, attracted by the scraps of food thrown away from our field-kitchens, soon made their home with us. They were wild creatures, but proved themselves our best, if not our only, friends. At night they slept in the steppe around our trains, and should anyone, who seemed to them to be an unauthorized person, approach, a noisy uproar broke out. The animals became so greatly attached to our troops that they even followed our route marches.

We filled our spare time with gymnastics and games, particularly football. Detachments of the Middlesex and Hampshire Regiments were stationed in Omsk, and, in company with Duncan, I went to challenge them. Frequent matches followed. These occupations served to keep our minds away from political affairs, and from brooding upon our difficult position. Nevertheless, at the back

of the mind of each man was the thought of home. One day disturbing news reached us from Europe. The Hungarians had invaded Czechoslovakia.

As was to be expected, the Legionaries became restless and irritable. “Why do we waste our time here?” they asked each other. “Our country is in danger, yet they keep us idling abroad.”

Alarming reports followed. ‘The Hungarians were advancing. The Czechoslovak defences were still incomplete, and the invading army could not be stopped.’ Excitement spread amongst our troops. “We must get back home where we are needed,” cried the Legionaries. “If our politicians are so muddle-headed and incompetent that they can’t get us out of Siberia, let the Legion Conference be called. Then we shall get somewhere. No time was wasted at Chelyabinsk.”

General Stefanik’s ban could not stand in face of the angry pressure which was now brought to bear. The Legion’s elected representatives decided to call a preliminary meeting in Ekaterinburg. I now felt myself to be in an awkward position, for I was one of the delegates for the 6th Regiment. So I consulted our Commander, Colonel Jaros.

“You have been elected by the boys to represent them,” he said. “I advise you to go to Ekaterinburg. My information suggests that the excitement and indignation in other Regiments is far more serious than in ours. It is only right that the meeting should be made aware of the true position here. After all the meeting is to be attended by Pavlu, political plenipotentiary of the Prague Government. So it cannot be regarded as entirely illegal.”

In Ekaterinburg I soon learned that Colonel Jaros was right in saying that opinion in other regiments was far more agitated than in the 6th. Other delegates soon made me aware of this fact.

Pavlu endeavoured to make us understand that the Prague Government must be in a better position to decide when the Legion should leave Siberia than we were ourselves. But he could not name a date when the evacuation would begin. The delegates were restless and dissatisfied with his answers. When they asked for official permission to call the Legion Conference, Pavlu gave a point blank refusal. Instead, he reminded us of General Stefanik’s command that no such Conference should be permitted. Feeling began to run high.

At length a vote was taken. The delegates decided by a substantial majority to call a Conference in the near future. Irkutsk was chosen as the scene. In a disturbed and anxious state of mind the delegates returned to their regiments.

Having reported the decisions of the Ekaterinburg meeting, I immediately resigned as delegate. Subsequent events proved that I was wise in taking this course’ I had formed a clear impression that Bolshevik propaganda had been at work amongst our troops, and that some of the delegates were actuated by purely selfish motives. We were passing through an anxious and dangerous period. To be defeated in battle would be preferable to destruction through internal dispute. Our brotherhood had survived the crash of the Russian Front in Europe, the disruptive influences of the Revolution, and finally the fierce fighting in Siberia, but now quarrels and differences of opinion and interest threatened to undermine its strength. The unity of the Legion was cracking because we could not agree upon how best to achieve what every one of us wanted – retreat from Siberia.

But, strange enough, the Legion itself remained to be more sacred to the Legionaries than anything else. They would have never agreed to any proposition which would have meant the disruption of their Legion.

In Ekaterinburg Pavlu made an ill-considered remark during a particularly heated discussion. “I will not give permission for a Conference. No, not if it means the ruin of the Legion.” This was a bitter insult in the opinion of the Legionaries. Uproar followed. “You did not create the Legion! You have no right to suggest its ruin!” Needless to say, the active Bolshevik agents were all the time working hard to bring discontent into the Czechoslovak troops, taking advantage of the fact that every Legionary spoke Russian fluently.

The Conference assembled at Irkutsk in June. The matters discussed were revolutionary, and the newly elected delegates proceeded to instigate revolt. Had their influence spread it is impossible to say what the result would have been. Fortunately, they succeeded in suborning only two companies of the 4th Regiment. This disaffection was quickly overcome by troops of the 1st Regiment which was stationed near Irkutsk. The rebellious companies were disbanded, and the Conference delegates arrested and interned in a large camp near Vladivostok.

We received this news in Omsk with great relief. The delegates had received no more than they deserved, for they had grossly overstepped the authority vested in them. The events in Irkutsk had one beneficial effect, however. They brought the Legionaries back to their senses at a stroke. They realized at last how deep was the abyss into which they had nearly fallen. Disunity and inevitable destruction had been very near. The realization of this fact had the effect of recementing our brotherhood in redoubled strength. But the settlement of our internal disputes had barely come in time. An extremely critical period was now approaching, a period which the Legion could not possibly have weathered unless each man's confidence in his neighbour had been completely re-established.

Chapter X – Red Revolt in Siberia

Cossacks leaped from their trains as they steamed into Omsk station. Rough men from the Siberian steppes, trained from boyhood to the saddle and the use of the rifle, they poured over the platform with loud shouts and boisterous laughter. They belonged to the troops of Ataman Annenkov, had just completed the 'liquidation' of one peasant revolt, and were now proceeding to perform a like function in the neighbourhood of Tyumen.

Some Legionaries, standing nearby, greeted the Cossacks joyfully.

"Hallo, old friends, what's the latest from the Front?"

A burly Cossack scowled, and slouched across the platform,

"Go and find out for yourselves, Czech cissies," came the rough reply. "You find it more cushy with the girls of Omsk than with your rifles in the Ural forests."

Gusts of roaring laughter greeted this gratuitous insult.

"Leave them alone, Grisha," broke in another Cossack. "They're not worth your trouble. They've gone soft. Thought of a bullet makes them tremble."

The contempt in the man's voice cut the Legionaries deeply, particularly because Annenkov's cavalrymen had been our first and staunch allies when anti-Bolshevik fighting began. They had acted as our scouts when we had no cavalry of our own. Despite the flagrant provocation, the Legionaries kept their tempers.

"Didn't we fight for you enough?" asked one. "Now it's up to you to settle your own damned troubles. Even so, we're still protecting your rear and communications. If it weren't for us your supplies would have been cut off long ago."

But the Cossacks were spoiling for trouble. It was clear that their minds had been poisoned against us. Probably the true facts of the case had never been explained to them.

"Of course," cried another, "someone must look after our wives while we are at the Front. Fortunately, you won't get far with them because they do like men who are men, that is to say men who will fight." Roars of laughter greeted this coarse sally. Many similar remarks followed, until at last the Legionaries became exasperated. They gave back shout for shout.

"Take this advice," cried one at last. "Get your Siberian house in order quickly if you want to keep it for yourselves, because we shall not stay much longer to hold it for you. Our own country is in danger and we want to get home."

"Hark to them crying for their mothers," cried the Cossacks with laughter, which by this time had more than a hint of menace in its ring. "The Czechs have turned yellow. They are cowards."

Suddenly bayonets flashed. Old friends had become enemies, eager to fly at each other's throat.

At that moment the station-guard arrived, just in time to prevent a nasty 'incident.'

Had we needed extra proof, this encounter would have made us realize beyond question how feeling had changed against us. We knew quite well that Koltchak's Government, despite its flags, receptions, dinners, and complimentary speeches, felt towards us just as did Annenkov's Cossacks. Forgetful of all we had done, they now hated us because we no longer wished to shed our blood in a cause which no longer involved our own vital interests. For all that went wrong the Czechoslovak Legion would now be blamed. And much had recently gone very badly wrong. Daily, disturbing news reached Omsk from the east. The Bolshevik insurgents grew steadily more formidable. Especially was this the case in the country lying between Marinsk and Nizne-Udinsk. Here the Siberian *taigas* were densest, and stations were attacked, tracks damaged, and trains smashed more and more often. In some places the Bolsheviks operated in small detachments of a hundred to a

thousand men, but in others they mustered formidable and well-equipped units up to seven thousand men.

Eventually the passive resistance policy of the Legion was no longer effective, and in the spring of 1919 it was found necessary in many places to send expeditions deep into the country upon both sides of the railway. Indeed, by the end of May the whole of the 3rd Division was engaged near Nizne-Udinsk in breaking up strong insurgent forces and driving them south-wards towards the Mongolian border. At the same time another large force composed of Legionaries, Siberian levies, and the newly formed Roumanian Legion, successfully carried out important operations to the north of the railway line. But the Bolsheviks adopted guerrilla tactics, and no sooner were they dispersed than they gathered again in the neighbourhood of the railway to continue their interrupted depredations. Reports of revolt in towns and villages in all parts of Siberia came constantly to increase the anxieties of Legion headquarters.

On the Ural Front the position was little better. Young, inexperienced and badly equipped, the Siberian conscripts were no match for the Bolsheviks, who steadily became more numerous and better organized. In May we heard of a general retreat upon all fronts. Then we heard of disagreements between Koltchak and Gaida, who, it appeared, insisted that the Government should be cleared of incompetents, intriguers, and self-seekers. There could be but one end to this impasse, for Koltchak was far too much under the influence of his immediate advisers to listen to the warning from his blunt-spoken but honest General. Gaida was dismissed from his post of Commander-in-Chief on the Ural Front. The last we saw of our old comrade and leader was as his train passed through Omsk on its way east on 11 July.

Disasters followed in quick succession. On 15 July, the Bolsheviks captured Zlatoust, and on the 16th, Ekaterinburg. The enemy were now descending the eastern slopes of the Urals to advance upon the wide Siberian steppe.

Tension grew in Omsk. The townspeople were terror-stricken, for the city was full of Bolshevik agents who spread a rumour to the effect that a general revolt was imminent. However, for once the Government kept a firm hand. Suspects were gaoled, or shot out of hand, and the whips of the Cossacks were not allowed to rest.

Refugees from the west thronged Omsk station. Packed trains arrived constantly from Chelyabinsk and Tyumen, Most of the people wished to go east, but there were few trains available, and so, in indescribable confusion, women and children rested or slept upon the platforms, and upon the floors of the overcrowded waiting rooms.

Becoming desperate, some refugees decided to stay in Omsk, but there were no longer houses to which they could go. Eventually they began to build rough homes for themselves. Near our trains, hundreds of families settled down on the steppe. They dug deep holes in the ground, and covered these with improvised roofs, following the pattern of the military *zemlanky*. Queues of these pitiable, destitute creatures formed near our trains at meal times, waiting for whatever remains there might be from the field kitchens. Our dogs did not like the refugees. They were quite sufficiently intelligent to notice that their food rapidly deteriorated as a result of the arrival of these newcomers.

Soon we were the only foreign troops remaining in Omsk. The British detachment had left for good at the beginning of August. No Czechoslovak troops remained to the west of our position, the nearest Legionaries being those stationed at Novo-Nikolaevsk, more than five hundred miles to the east. Thus the 6th Regiment now formed the Legion's rearguard.

Hoping vainly against hope, the Omsk Government still believed that they would be able to prevail upon the Legion to return to the Front Line, and lead an attack to drive back the advancing Bolsheviks. With this end in view, officials still did all they could to rearouse our interest in their cause. Military medals and high distinctions were bestowed upon many of our officers and men.

One day a grand review of all troops stationed in and around Omsk was organized. The 6th Regiment were, so to speak, the troops of honour. We were to lead the parade to a large square where Koltchak himself was to take the salute. We were then to form up in the place of honour upon the right of the Dictator. The Siberian troops following behind were to salute their Chief and also the Legionaries. There was only one jarring note in the proceedings. We quickly noticed that many Siberian officers, marching in front of their men, deliberately ignored our lines. At my side stood our battalion doctor. He was an outspoken kind of fellow, and when he saw what was happening he laughed quietly and whispered to me.

"Some of them at least are honest," he said. "I respect those officers more than Koltchak and his precious Government. I don't blame them for refusing to play their stupid part in this absurd mockery."

Just then I noticed a Siberian who seemed familiar. Looking more keenly, I recognised the Russian Colonel whom I had met in the train the previous year when returning from the Conference at Chelyabinsk.

"Doctor," I whispered, "I've seen a friend of mine. I'm going to try to slip away for a bit,"

"Do you mind if I come with you away from this damned nonsense?" he countered.

So, looking extremely official, we both marched solemnly out of the line as though we were engaged upon some important mission. Pushing our way through the crowd of civilians who had gathered to watch the review, we hurried towards the spot where the Siberian troops were reforming after the march past. I had little difficulty in finding my friend. He was glad to see me and the doctor but I missed the warm friendliness which had characterized his remarks at our previous meetings. We could not wait then, so I persuaded the Colonel to meet us that evening in a certain tea room which we all knew.

When we foregathered that evening I saw at once that the Colonel looked much older than when I had known him before. Since the battle of Marinsk his hair had greyed, and his face showed clearly that he had suffered many hardships. To begin with we were all a little shy of each other. The circumstances of this meeting were embarrassing. However, the warm comfort of the room, combined with the fumes of the excellent brandy which we drank, soon started a conversation in which each of us spoke his mind. The doctor and I began by protesting against the animosity that the Siberians were now showing towards all Legionaries.

"I understand that you fellows have been through hell in this country," the Colonel replied, "and that I also know that you regard the Koltchak regime and its doings with disgust, which, perhaps, you are not at sufficient pains to conceal. It is also common knowledge that as a nation you have won your freedom, and so see no good purpose in losing more lives in Siberia. And do not think that I underestimate the value of the service which the Legion is still doing for Siberia in safeguarding the rear of our armies. All the same I do not think that you have treated us fairly. It's not fair to provoke a fight, and then run away from it, leaving others to bear the brunt. You should have considered the consequences, all the possible eventualities, before you started fighting. But once having set the ball rolling you should follow it to the bottom of the hill."

"At every stage," cried the doctor, "we made a point of emphasizing the fact that all we wanted to do was to pass through Siberia to Vladivostok, to interfere with nobody. And in addition to this we warned everyone not to expect us to lend support to any faction in Russian internal disputes."

"And what was returning to the Urals, when the road lay in your hands but the most flagrant intervention in Russian internal affairs?" cried the Colonel hotly.

"That was not our wish, but orders from the Allies to establish an anti-Bolshevik-anti-German Front," replied the doctor.

"Allies' orders!" mimicked the Colonel ironically, "When will you poor fools understand that from the beginning you and your Legion have been treated as pawns in a great game played for the

benefit of the Western Powers? Even Koltchak is one of the Allies' importations. Your leaders just fell for a wily game. Of course you have been recompensed. An independent Czechoslovak Republic is your reward. Nevertheless, mark my words. You have backed the wrong horse, so far as you own interests are concerned. Governments change, and what you have done will be forgotten. The day will come when your Hew country will find herself in a tight corner, and then the Western Powers will drop her like a bad egg because it does not suit their policies to remember old debts. In that day they will call you an unknown people."

It seemed to me that the Colonel was over bitter, and I pointed out that the only way in which we could hope to free our country was to follow the cause of the Allies. But he was not to be persuaded, the general trend of his argument being that we should have relied upon the Russians, who were Slavs like ourselves, rather than upon the western peoples.

"You Legionaries had a wonderful chance to help Russia. The Russians have long memories and they would never have forgotten the service. But now everything seems to be lost. When one day the Czechs come for help, Russia will remember Siberia. Perhaps there have been faults on both sides; perhaps we have expected too much of your Legion. In that case we shall all suffer. We Russians of the old school will be killed without mercy, and you will go home cursed by everyone in Siberia – Bolsheviks and Democrats alike. You will find that all you have earned is the gratitude of the Western Powers, and that is not worth this," and the Colonel made a rude but expressive gesture.

We argued the matter from all angles, and eventually the Colonel conceded that even had the Legion remained at the Front the ultimate issue would have been the same, short, of course, of adequate assistance from outside. I said goodbye to the Colonel for the last time. On the way back the doctor was silent, offering only one observation on our recent conversation.

"Disappointed people always try to blame someone else," he said ruminatively. "Nevertheless, the Siberians have this much right on their side; we should never have allowed ourselves to be persuaded to intervene in the internal affairs of Russia. To hell with intervention, it never pays."

On 10 August, the Bolsheviks captured Tyumen. The Line was breaking, despite the Siberians' desperate efforts to save the situation. The Cossacks had taken the initiative. At an extraordinary meeting of the Siberian Cossacks held at Omsk, general mobilization of all able-bodied Cossacks was proclaimed. The meeting also sent a letter to the 6th Czechoslovak Regiment inviting 'Our brave Czechoslovak brethren' to a dinner arranged for 14 August. They wished this dinner to be an outward sign of 'our faithful friendship and brotherly unity.'

We were well aware of the true motive behind this gesture, and it was painful to us to learn that the Siberians still thought that we might be coerced into engaging once more in the hopeless anti-Bolshevik struggle. However, Colonel Jaros, accompanied by one hundred and fifty officers and men, attended the dinner. Many speeches were made, but the Czech representatives took care to avoid suggesting any hope that we might return to the Front. Next day the Cossacks announced the mobilization of five fresh divisions, and in this proclamation they publicly invited the Czechoslovaks to join them in their fight. Touched by the unhappy plight of the Siberians, some Legionaries would have had us rally once more to their assistance, but the majority were strongly opposed to any such move. Besides, the messages we received from the Prague Government were at last definite in their instructions, 'Your country does not expect from you any further sacrifices in Siberia; arrangements are being made for the speedy evacuation of the Legion.' And so it became clear to everyone that we should not again join Koltchak. The Cossack advance began in the first days of September, and at the first onset the surprised Bolsheviks were forced to retreat some distance along the Line towards the Urals. Omsk was jubilant, and the local papers were full of rosy prophecies regarding the approaching collapse of Bolshevik rule. But in the early days of October the tide turned. Bolshevik reinforcements staged a strong counter-attack, and the Line was shattered. Desperate fighting followed, but the final catastrophe could not long be delayed.

The Bolsheviks were at the gates of Omsk. Indescribable confusion ruled the city. Refugees who had been buoyed up with the general optimism now saw that the Siberian cause was lost, and redoubled their efforts to flee before the arrival of the fast advancing enemy forces. Misery was added to the wild evacuation by the bitterly cold winds that swept down from the steppes. As ill-fortune would have it, these winds began much earlier than usual that autumn.

Our battalion had been kept in Omsk waiting for the departure of General Janin, who had delayed until the last moment. We secured an engine for our train, and were waiting nervously for the order to start our journey towards the east. At last, on 6 November, Janin and his staff had gone; nothing should delay us now.

As 1st Lieutenant I had recently been appointed Adjutant to our battalion commander, Captain Krasa, and on that cold morning I was anxiously kicking my heels in my small office when the Captain entered abruptly. He was accompanied by a Russian officer.

"The Colonel has been asking me to arrange to take his wife and daughter with us," began Krasa. "These are his letters of introduction. See what you can do, will you, Gus? I must rush back to make the final arrangements for our departure, otherwise we shall never get away."

We had had countless such requests during the past few days, and had had to refuse them all. Merchants, officials of the Government, officers, women, all had come pleading for 'just a corner in one of your coaches.' It was a heart-rending business. The people were desperate, and played all kinds of tricks in the hope of getting their requests granted. One man came accompanied by an attractive young girl, begging us to save his daughter and, incidentally, himself from the fury of the Bolsheviks. Afterwards we found out that the girl was an Omsk prostitute whom the man had temporarily 'adopted' to improve his chances of escape in our train.

We had received the strictest orders to allow no one but Legionaries into our coaches. The situation was far too dangerous to permit of strangers being allowed amongst us.. But in any case we could not have accommodated these people. Our space was cramped for the number of our carriages had been greatly reduced. Every available piece of rolling stock was needed in the effort to cope with the phenomenal traffic.

The Russian Colonel was a man well over fifty, and looked utterly worn out. He sat down heavily, wiping perspiration from his forehead. With a heavy heart, I started to explain the old story once again.

"You will understand, Colonel, that we are not allowed to take passengers on our train. We have already refused hundreds of requests. Our orders cannot be ignored. I am terribly sorry that I cannot help you. You must ask the Russian authorities to evacuate your family."

"I tried that, but it is useless," he replied slowly. "They said all trains are already more than full, and refused to take my family. Further, there are no more engines available, and this means that no trains can leave later. You are my last hope. I ask nothing for myself. I stay in Omsk with my troops. It is my wife and my daughter for whom I am afraid."

His voice trembled. It was most painful to listen to his pleading and to feel oneself helpless. I could see from the letters that he brought that he had many friends in the Legion, and that he had often co-operated with our troops during the Siberian campaign, Suddenly I felt that I could not refuse anyone again.

Warning him that I could offer no comfort whatever to the ladies, I agreed to see his wife and daughter safe as far as Irkutsk. It seemed that they had relatives in that city.

We managed to entrain the two ladies in time, but I did not wait to see the leave-taking. The Colonel stayed in Omsk to meet a certain death. Our train eventually pulled out of the station, followed by the desperate glances of the many who had to stay behind. For some minutes a pack of dogs ran beside us, howling mournfully. This was the saddest journey we had ever started during

our many expeditions on the Trans-Siberian railway. Behind us lay misery and ruin. Before us were thousands of miles of a desperate, terrified countryside.

The six hundred miles to Novo-Nikolaevsk took us ten days to cover. The line was packed with trains. Everywhere was chaos. In one station we passed an abandoned hospital train, its wounded occupants frozen to death. Once more we passed the scenes of the previous year's fighting, now covered deep in snow. Tatarska, Kastul, Chulym – all places of painful memories – dropped behind. When we reached Novo-Nikolaevsk, we found that no longer was it possible to telephone to Omsk. We had left just in time.

We were glad to establish touch with other Legion troops. The 5th Regiment was garrisoned in Novo-Nikolaevsk. The Polish Legion, formed recently from men out of the new post-war Poland, was also there.

Our progress eastward was slow. Traffic congestion, and the danger of attack from Bolshevik insurgents caused constant delay. The whole of Siberia boiled with red revolt. Only a thin strip of country on either side of the railway afforded a comparatively safe passage across the continent. Had the troops of the Legion not held the line until the last moment, even this channel of escape would have been irretrievably closed. We stayed outside Marinsk to repulse a Bolshevik attack, and were then ordered to concentrate in the neighbourhood of Achinsk to protect the line against strong forces of insurgents who held the surrounding country in their power.

A few miles to the east of Achinsk stands a small station in the midst of deep forests. Nearby is the village of Kemtchug. This was the place where my battalion was quartered. Our duty was to maintain the safety of the line within our zone until all Czechoslovak trains had passed. It was hard duty in the freezing weather that then prevailed.

Day and night our scouts patrolled the roads in our district. Expeditions on sledges had to be sent to meet and disperse any Bolshevik force which approached the railway too closely. In the clashes which followed more Legionaries were sacrificed in those bloodthirsty Siberian forests.

There were frequent alarms and excitements. Early one morning a Russian merchant was brought to me. The scouts had found him near the railway struggling through the forest in deep snow. The man was nearly exhausted, and streams of blood ran down his face from the cuts caused by the branches of trees amongst which he had stumbled.

"Help, for the sake of God," he cried, flinging himself on the ground and extending his arms towards me. "They killed the others, they robbed me. Help, I beg of you."

When the poor fellow had rested and calmed down, he told me a terrible story. He was a member of a party of four men and six women and children who were travelling on sledges towards the east to escape from the Bolshevik advance. They had completed several hundred miles along the Great Moscow Road when they arrived at a small village where they were received in friendly manner by the inhabitants.

"They treated us well," he said in a broken, trembling voice, "We should have suspected, for they were a little too kind to be natural, but we believed that they had taken pity upon us. They gave us tea and food, refusing all payment. When we had rested we wanted to proceed, but they delayed us, saying: 'It is not safe to travel by night in our district; you are our guests and you must stay with us overnight.' Oh, we were blind! We thought they meant well!

"They looked after our horses, and distributed our party in ones and twos in various houses. When I lay down to rest I could not sleep, and in turning over the events of our arrival I became suspicious. Two local women and a child were sleeping in the same room as I. 'It is curious,' I argued, 'that no men are here.' I decided at last to go in search of the other members of our party, and consult with them concerning my suspicions. I dressed, and crept out of the cottage as silently as I could.

"Two of the local men were outside. They did not see me. In the darkness I slipped into the back yard. Some distance away was another cottage, where I knew that one of my friends and his wife

were staying. I approached the cottage when suddenly shouting and loud screams broke out. I leapt behind a tree, and the sight I saw was horrible."

At this place in his story the poor fellow broke down, and sobbed.

"Men pulled my friends out into the snow and killed them by hitting them heavily over the heads. From the direction of other cottages came piercing screams, and I knew that it was a massacre. Then I heard men running towards the cottage where I had stayed, and I knew that they were looking for me. I ran into the forest and kept on running all night. The next day, and the following night I stumbled on. Then your men found me. Now send your soldiers to the village. I will accompany them. Some of my friends may still be alive. And all my property is there. Come, I pray you."

We would gladly have dealt with the murderers had this been possible. But we should have found nothing in the village on our arrival, and we could not undertake police investigations. The only action I could take was to provide the unfortunate merchant with a little money and put him on the first available train for Achinsk, where, doubtless, he reported his case to the Russian authorities.

By this time we were eagerly counting up the Czechoslovak trains passing through Kemtchug, for we were desperately anxious to continue our journey eastwards. On 15 December Koltchak's train passed. It was escorted by an armoured train.

One day a peasant from Kemtchug village demanded to see our battalion Commander. This visit is interesting because it led to an amazing association with the local Bolsheviks. The fellow handed me a letter with some show of mystery.

"From the Bolshevik Chief," he whispered.

He claimed that this missive had been given him to deliver under threat of punishment. It had been brought to the village by 'a stranger.' The letter was addressed to 'The Commander of the Czechoslovak Troops in Kemtchug station,' and was signed 'Maiorov, Commander of the Insurgent troops in Kemtchug district.'

'I request you to evacuate the station without any further delay, otherwise I shall attack with my troops,' ran the note. There was more of it, but the first lines conveyed the substance. At the end, however, appeared the interesting remark: 'I am willing to open negotiations with you if you so desire.'

I took this letter to Captain Krasa at once. He laughed.

"Let Mr. Maiorov just try to start anything. We'll show him! By the way, did you hold the messenger?"

"He is under guard, but he's a half-witted peasant, and it's useless to try to find out anything from him."

"Then send him to the devil, and forget about the letter," said Krasa.

It was certainly true that we were not afraid of any attack that the enemy could deliver, but it seemed to me a great pity to risk any more lives now that we were actually on our way out of Siberia. So I went back and told Krasa my opinion, suggesting that I should meet Comrade Maiorov on my own account,

"After all," I urged, "no harm can be done in listening to what he has to say."

I knew that Divisional headquarters in Krasnoyarsk had actually established contact with Kravtchenko, the insurgent Commander-in-Chief, with a view to arranging with him for the railway line to be left alone by his men. I saw no reason, therefore, why we should not come to terms with the local authorities in our section.

“I refuse to do anything in the matter,” said Krasa. “If you take any step, you do so entirely upon your own responsibility.”

This was sufficient for me, and I sat down there and then to write to Maiorov, inviting him to visit me in my coach in two days’ time. Giving my letter to the peasant, I instructed him to see that it was placed in the hands from which he had received the note from the Bolshevik Chief. I did not seriously think that anything would come of this step because it did not seem likely that the insurgent leader would have the pluck to visit us, and so I was surprised when a guard entered my compartment two days later and announced: “Two Russians are asking to see you, brother Lieutenant.” “Who are they?”

“One of them says that his name is Maiorov. He says that you expect him.”

“How did they arrive?” I asked.

“They came in a sledge from the village. There was some excitement amongst the civilians at the station when they arrived. Everyone cleared out of Maiorov’s path.”

“Show them into my office,” I said, and went off to tell Krasa that the Bolsheviks had arrived, and to invite the battalion’s doctor to be with me at the meeting.

The Russians jumped to attention and saluted when the doctor and I entered the office. We introduced ourselves and invited them to be seated. Maiorov was a smart-looking young man of about thirty. His companion was, perhaps, a little older. Both men were dressed more in the fashion of civilians than of soldiers. Both wore high boots, black breeches, and warm, short coats. I expected them to be arrogant, and so was pleasantly surprised to find them polite, and not a little nervous. Maiorov was obviously an educated man.

I opened the conversation with an ironical reference to the threat contained in Maiorov’s letter. The doctor added a few sharp words of his own. Maiorov began a long-winded statement, the gist of which was that no ultimatum had been intended. On the contrary, he said, he was of the opinion that his visit inferred a desire to arrange matters amicably. It seemed that no good purpose would be served in fighting with us, since we were so soon to leave the country voluntarily.

“You Czechs are no longer our enemy. Koltchak and his supporters are our foes. However, in passing, I would like to tell you that your position at this station is not so assured as you appear to suppose.”

We smiled.

“Well, listen,” said Maiorov, and he pointed through the window. “At night your patrols leave the train and cross those fields until they reach the bushes over there. Then they turn towards that wood, follow its edge for a few yards, and then enter the trees.” And to our great surprise Maiorov continued to describe our whole defence scheme down to the most minute detail.

“Thanks for telling us,” I said with a laugh intended to carry off my chagrin. “Tonight we will change our system,”

The conversation continued on a more friendly basis, and eventually Maiorov suggested that we should come to a mutual agreement whereby we should not interfere with local Bolshevik activities, and they in return would keep away from the neighbourhood of the railway.

“I don’t think such an arrangement would function,” I replied. “Your troops terrorize the inhabitants, rob them, and even murder them in cold blood. The people look to us for help, and if we do not protect them the railway will not be safe.”

Maiorov went scarlet with indignation.

“This is not true,” he cried.

“Oh, yes it is,” I replied. “Why, only two weeks ago your troops attacked a children’s home some

fifteen miles down the road, and we were told that they treated the nurses abominably, and robbed the surgery of all the medicines. Again last week a party of nine refugees were robbed of all they possessed, and then brutally killed in a nearby village. One man escaped to this station and told the story to me. What have you to say to that?"

"Just this. That I am very glad you told me," replied Maiorov. "Your information is based on error. It is true that we took half the medical supplies of the children's hospital, but no attack was made upon anybody, and we left sufficient medicines to fulfil all immediate needs. My troops have been exposed for weeks to the bitter cold, and we have many who are sick and some who are wounded, yet we have no medical supplies. Our need was great.

"As regards the murder of the refugees, I am well aware of the details of this case, but my men had nothing whatever to do with its perpetration. As soon as the matter came to my knowledge, I took troops there, and shot the culprits on the spot. Unhappily, the district is full of robbers who have taken advantage of the weak administration of the Koltchak Government. We are doing all we can to clear up the mess. When we catch a bandit or petty robber we shoot him. I shall be glad if your men will follow our example in this respect. It is true that occasionally strong bands of highway robbers are met, and that they do much evil. But I would have you know that my men have no part or parcel in their doings. Indeed, I have arranged for my men to wear white snow-coats with the object of distinguishing them clearly from the members of these bands. Please shoot on sight all armed men who are not wearing such coats. They are criminals."

I had watched Maiorov carefully, and was sure that he spoke with sincerity. The doctor appeared to share my opinion in this respect.

"When the Legion leaves we have much work ahead of us," Maiorov proceeded. "I shall need every man I have. I do not want any to be killed without purpose in fighting with you. We know that your soldiers treat the peasants and railway employees with humanity, helping them when they need assistance and you are able to give it. You pay for all you need, and appreciate the work which the Siberians do for you. Therefore we have nothing against you. The fighting that took place between us last year we regard as a mistake, and we are ready to forget it for good."

The talk continued in this vein for a long time. Eventually we came to an agreement. Maiorov's men were not to approach the railway more closely than a line determined by certain villages which were named. On the other hand, the Legionaries were to keep within their own zone, except on those occasions when it became necessary to send to outlying places for extra food supplies. Maiorov undertook not to interfere with our foraging parties. On the contrary, he promised to encourage the peasants to let us have anything we needed. This was an important point because we had found recently that the local people were reluctant to supply us through fear of Bolshevik reprisals.

When Maiorov and his companion rose to leave, the former suddenly turned to us once more.

"Behind you," he said, "move the trains carrying the Polish Legion. These Poles are a bad lot. They have been treating the peasants very cruelly. They have seized property without payment; they have burned and harried for the sake of destruction; they have raped our peasant girls; they have beaten to death all who protested against their actions. For these things they will suffer. We shall not let them get away with such brutality."

"Oh, they are well armed," I smiled. "You can't do anything to them. Besides, what you say about them are rumours only."

"You would be surprised, sir, how well we are informed about their doings, and, for that matter, about your own. These are not rumours, but hard facts. Mark my words! You will not have gone far from Kemtchug when you will hear of what has happened to the Poles."

Our visitors left, and the doctor and I went to report the details of our conference to Captain Krasa. Krasa distrusted the arrangement we had made.

“You can’t trust those fellows out of your sight. And how do you know that Maiorov has authority to speak for the insurgents? There is no central authority. Each small band does just as it pleases.”

Days passed, and it became obvious that Maiorov was a man of his word. Our troops did not diminish their vigilance, but no longer were there clashes with Bolsheviks. Our patrols went out as usual, but never again did they meet insurgent parties within the agreed area. Occasionally in the villages marking the boundary Bolshevik troops were seen, but immediately our men arrived these soldiers departed, leaving instructions with the people to provide us with whatever we asked. Further, when we had to go to greater distances for provisions we were pleasantly surprised to find that not only were the peasants far more ready to sell, but also the prices asked were far more reasonable, and this despite the fact that the district was growing short of cattle.

“How is it that you now ask us less for your meat?” I asked on one occasion.

“If Maiorov found out that we charged you too much he would make trouble for us,” was the immediate reply.

Christmas 1919 was the saddest we had spent in Russia. Deep in the Siberian *taiga*, there could be little gaiety. Indeed, we spent the greater part of Christmas Day sitting in our carriages, anxiously wondering when we should eventually escape from Siberia.

Next day came the joyful news that there were no more Legion trains to the west of Achinsk, and that at last it was our Regiment’s turn to move. Our instructions were to hand over Kemtchug station to the Poles who were following immediately behind us. Shortage of coal kept us waiting for a few days, but on 28 December the regimental staff train proceeded through Kemtchug, and shortly afterwards the first Polish trains arrived.

I accompanied Captain Krasa on his visit to the Polish Commander officially to hand over the station. We told him what had been happening, and did not fail to mention the threats which the Bolsheviks’ Chief had uttered in regard to the Polish troops.

“We shall be ready for them, then,” said the Polish officer with a smile.

Our train arrived in Krasnoyarsk on 31 December. Almost as soon as we had entered the station, the doctor and I rushed to the town to buy drinks with which to celebrate New Year’s Eve. But the town was in the throes of evacuation, and there was nothing to be had. So we returned to the trains disconsolate.

“Doctor,” cried Krasa, when he heard this sad news, “this means that your surgical spirit will be in demand. It’s shocking stuff, but better than meeting a Siberian New Year stone cold sober.”

Then Krasa turned to me.

“I begin to think, Gus, that your Maiorov was an honest man. Anyway, he spoke the truth about the Poles.[“]

“What do you mean?” we cried.

“Well, the news has come over the wire. Our troops had hardly moved out of Achinsk and the Poles settled in than the whole station went up in air. They say that several Polish trains were utterly destroyed.

We gasped. “How did they do it?”

“We don’t know all the details yet, but it appears that the Bolsheviks had prepared a mine – dynamite and petrol. It beats me how it was done. But probably our boys slept on dynamite beds for a long time without knowing it.”

Maiorov must have known of this plan when we talked together. As events turned out, the Polish Legion did not reach the Pacific Coast. It got as far as Krasnoyarsk, and what was left of it was there captured by the Bolsheviks. The threatened revenge was indeed complete.

Chapter XI – Death of Admiral Koltchak

Chaos and disorder still ruled the Line. Everywhere were trains anxiously waiting for engines and fuel. The fuel problem had now become serious, for all the mines of importance had fallen into the hands of the advancing Bolshevik Army excepting those in the immediate neighbourhood of Irkutsk.

To add to the confusion political revolts against the Koltchak Government were taking place in practically every town and at every station. Koltchak's representatives were being thrown out on every side and the nominees of a new dispensation which called itself the Government of the Political Centre set up in their stead. The new Government was intended only as a temporary administration preparing the way for the coming Bolshevik Soviets.

Such was the turmoil through which the Legion trains had to thread their way.

The 6th Regiment received in Krasnoyarsk orders to vacate the rearguard position and proceed as fast as possible to undertake garrison duty near Irkutsk. Perhaps this was fortunate for us because the troops in the rear were receiving hot treatment from the Bolsheviks, who, following the surrender of what remained of the Polish Legion, pressed hard upon the retiring Czechoslovak troops. Bloody clashes constantly took place, and the authorities were in feverish hurry to withdraw our trains out of the Red peril. But the obstacles were tremendous.

To keep an engine for any length of time was impossible. As Adjutant, my duty was to keep the train moving. So at every stopping-place I had to hurry to the Czech officials in charge of the station and urge them to arrange further immediate passage. The arguments were endless.

"There are no engines available; you will have to wait," was the usual answer I received.

"I don't want an engine; we have one which is in order. Why can't we proceed?"

"For the very reason that it is in order," the officer in charge would reply. "It has to go back at once to bring forward another train. Then you can have it again – just until you reach the next station."

General Syrovy chose the officers whom he put in charge of the transport, and wonderful fellows they were. To their untiring work is due the fact that our trains did not just freeze down in Siberia for good. We could do nothing against their decisions, and so again and again we had to lend our engine, until our progress became exasperatingly slow.

The unfortunate engines worked without ceasing, and the result was that they began to break down.

At many stations scores of them stood on sidings waiting for repairs, which, through scarcity of mechanics, were never performed.

But delay and congestion were not the worst of our troubles. There were still people whose principal object in life was to thwart the evacuation of the Czechoslovak troops.

In the Baikal district lurked Ataman Seminov, Dictator of Chita, and supposedly an ally of Koltchak. The Ataman was backed by the Japanese because they thought he might prove useful to their interests. His troops were wild desperadoes who committed at will indescribable outrages against the civilian population, killed political enemies and even hostages. These were the troops who now proceeded to harry our retreat by every means in their power.

The Ataman had placed his Wild Division, as the fiercest of his hordes were called, near a dangerous spot in the Baikal tunnel system. He was utterly lawless, and while he was pledged to support Koltchak he took whatever step seemed most likely to bring him profit.

Our position had now grown desperate. The Bolshevik Red Army pressed our rear, and before us stood a formidable barrier in the form of the Ataman's well-armed, and stout-fighting ruffians. However, the Legionaries did not lose their heads. They first warned the man in a friendly manner to move his troops out of our path, and when this request had no effect, launched a surprise attack

upon the Wild Division. The fight was sharp, but, as it happened, the result was never in doubt. The Czechs captured all the enemy trains, including five that were armoured, the opposing Commander, together with 1,382 of his officers and men. This battle took place on 9 January 1920.

Astonished at the prompt and easy defeat of their puppet dictator, the Japanese hurried to the Legion authorities with assurances that the Ataman would no longer obstruct the passage of the Czech trains, provided all prisoners were set free. Thus was cleared a serious menace to our escape from the Siberian whirlpool.

Meanwhile the train carrying my battalion moved gradually forward until one morning we found ourselves in Nizne-Udinsk. Here a great surprise awaited us. As usual, I ran to the office to argue about our future progress, but, to my great astonishment, was received in a most unusual way.

"Yes, the sooner you go ahead the better we shall be pleased. Two engines are waiting for you with full steam up."

"Now, now," I said suspiciously, "you can't put that stuff over on me. What's the joke? And anyway, why *two* engines?"

"Ah, then you don't know your good fortune?" asked the officer in charge. "Well, my friend, you are to take Admiral Koltchak with you to Irkutsk."

"What! Koltchak here?" I cried. "What is he doing here? And in any case what have we to do with him?"

"Since the beginning of the month Koltchak's trains have been here causing us endless trouble. It was our hard luck that just as his trains arrived a revolt broke out here, and all his guards promptly deserted to the Political Centre Government which was set up. The Admiral held the loyalty of his staff officers only. Koltchak promptly asked the Allied Diplomatic Corps in Irkutsk for assistance, and orders were wired to us to take the Admiral under our care."

"So," I said. "So. The man who hated the Legionaries, who dismissed Gaida, and who could never utter an approving word of the Czechs, is now glad to accept our protection."

"And that is not all," proceeded the transport officer. "All the gold reserve of the Koltchak Government is here as well. You remember how our 1st Division captured the gold from the Kazan Bolsheviks in the summer of 1918 and handed it over to the Omsk Government? Well, Koltchak did not forget it when he fled, and now the Czechs are to rescue what is left of it for the second time."

"Does it take up much space?" I inquired.

"A whole train. I don't know exactly how much there is, but it must amount to millions of golden roubles."

"Then I'm not surprised that you want to see the back of the Admiral and his treasure. I suppose the whole district knows the whole story?"

"Yes, and everything's upside down. The new Government insisted on placing its own guards over the gold train, and is watching Koltchak. Some of the Admiral's officers wanted him to load a portion of the gold upon sledges and race for the Mongolian border. But had he tried this he would have had no chance."

Koltchak had blundered badly in staying with his Government in Omsk until the last moment, when the Bolsheviks were already at the gates of the capital, and the Front Line had been irretrievably broken. His trains had obstructed the movements of the retiring Army, and he himself had been caught up unnecessarily in the welter of confusion which had engulfed the railway. His lack of foresight had now resulted in himself being trapped powerless in the midst of the revolt which he had done so much to foment. Without authority, without troops, amidst a population which longed vehemently for his blood, he had been stripped of the last shreds of his dictatorship. But that this state of affairs should have come about he had only his own stiff-necked folly to thank.

The formalities of handing over were soon complete. First left the gold train, in charge of some Omsk officials who represented the Koltchak Government, a guard of Russian soldiers appointed by the Political Centre Government, and our own third company. The battalion train followed, having now an addition of two extra coaches, one occupied by Koltchak and his staff, and the other by President Pepelyaev.

As was to be expected, the fury of the Siberian people, which until now had been centred upon Koltchak, turned against ourselves. “The Czechs are running away with Koltchak.” “The Czechs are stealing our national gold store.” These and many other cries rose in all parts of Siberia into a crescendo of rage. For once the Democrats, Socialists, and Bolsheviks were united. It is difficult to say which hated us the most. The local Governments controlling territory on our route did not dare to organize direct attack on the Legion, but they issued inflammatory proclamations in every town. We were boycotted, and every obstacle was thrown in our way. The miners in the Cheremchovo coal mines, the only ones left to our disposal, went on strike.

The Red Army attacking our rearguard redoubled its efforts, and was enthusiastically assisted by the revolting population on both sides of the line. Then we learned one day that our cavalry and artillery detachments had been compelled to abandon their trains and carry on the retreat in marching order. This news made us understand more clearly how serious the position had become. We knew well that these Legionaries would not have sacrificed their railway coaches, which had brought them through so many dangerous corners, unless they had grown really desperate.

We arrived in Irkutsk late in the evening in bitterly cold weather. The Angara River was frozen, and, on our way to Legion headquarters, Krasa and I had to pick our way over the rugged ice, avoiding the many sharp pinnacles which beset our path. The flying bridge had only just been removed for the winter, and it was by no means certain that, in places, the ice was strong enough to bear the weight of a heavy man. However, we crossed the wide river in safety, and, late at night, reached the office of Dr. Blahoz, political representative of the Czechoslovak Government. After a short wait, Krasa was invited into a private room.

The purpose of our call at headquarters was to endeavour to secure release from the responsibilities involved in the care of Admiral Koltchak, and his gold hoard. We did not in the least relish the task that had been given us. Somewhere behind the whole affair we smelled high politics, and the faintest whiff of such matters is usually intolerable to the military mind. In this respect we were no exceptions.

Krasa was not long away. He walked across the room in which I sat, out of the door, and straight into the street. I followed quickly, trying to guess from his expression just what had happened at the interview he had just left. His face was sullen in expression, and he glared into the snow before his feet, his chin sunk deep into his coat collar. I did not dare to ask questions. Suddenly he began to swear horribly.

“The sooner we get out of this damned country the better I shall be pleased,” he cried, and proceeded to relieve his feelings in terms which are best unreported. At last he spoke of Koltchak. “There’s nothing definite about the Admiral, Gus. We can’t get rid of him. Apparently the authorities are waiting for General Janin to make a decision. Meanwhile, Irkutsk Government guards are to watch the coaches in conjunction with our own men. Apparently the Siberians do not trust us. They insist that this double guard shall be set.”

“This seems as though our leaders acknowledge the authority that the Political Centre Government claim over Koltchak,” I remarked. “What do you think will happen to the Admiral?”

“I don’t know. Politicians’ schemes are above me, and I’m fed up with the whole affair. But it looks as though we might be forced into playing a pretty mean sort of game. I don’t like Koltchak, but I hate the idea of this cat and mouse business.”

Early next morning the Russian guards arrived. There was no cheer to be seen in the station during this period. Gloomy faces, and frowning glances met one at every turn. At one moment it seemed likely that there would be a clash between the Russian soldiers and our Legionaries, who hated the extra guard being installed. They felt that the Siberians had been put there to keep watch on Czech fidelity. In short the general impression was that the air was too stuffy to breathe. There were soldiers of four different nationalities within the station precincts, and each watched the other with suspicion. Apart from ourselves and the Russians, two train loads of Japanese, and one of Frenchmen added to the overcrowded conditions. In everyone's eyes I imagined I read two words – 'Koltchak' and 'Gold.'

That afternoon Captain Krasa was summoned to headquarters, and on this occasion he went alone. Instinctively we knew that the fate of Koltchak and his gold had been decided upon. We waited anxiously for news. Krasa did not return until late at night. His face told us at once that the interview from which he came had been unpleasant in the extreme. He said little, but each word was to the point, and they told a tale of tragedy.

"Tomorrow morning Admiral Koltchak and Minister Pepelyaev are to be handed over to the authorities of the Irkutsk 'Political Centre.' The Government representatives will come to the station hall at dawn. Our officer on duty will immediately hand over the prisoners. The gold will be surrendered as well."

We stood silently, grouped around Krasa. Then, suddenly:

"It's a — shame!" burst out someone.

"Those are our orders; there is nothing to be said," cut in Krasa sharply, and turned away.

Later Krasa called me to his compartment.

"Look here, Gus, I think it's only decent to warn Koltchak and Pepelyaev of what has been decided. It's a rotten job, but they've got to know. Will you go round and tell them of our orders?"

It was nearly midnight. Miserably I tramped through the darkness, challenged several times by the guards. Koltchak was quartered in a corridor carriage. Only the door at one end of the coach was unlocked. I entered, watched suspiciously by the Russian on duty. The first two compartments were open. They were packed with Siberian staff officers. The officers looked at me inquisitively. I asked them for the Admiral. A young Adjutant appeared, and I introduced myself.

"I will announce you to the Admiral."

Presently he returned. I was asked to enter a closed compartment. In the narrow, badly lit room stood Koltchak, deposed Dictator of Siberia. His face was pale, but composed. He was a dignified figure. A handsome man, he looked magnificent in his uniform.

"I bring an important message, sir," I said.

"Sit down." The Admiral pointed to a seat, but remained standing himself. "Well, what is it?"

"We have just received orders to hand over both yourself and Minister Pepelyaev to the Political Centre tomorrow morning. The Government representatives will arrive at dawn."

"This order came from your headquarters?" inquired the Admiral.

"Yes, sir, headquarters in the town."

The Admiral paced up and down for a minute or two. I felt the perspiration start on my forehead. Suddenly Koltchak halted, and faced me. When he spoke his voice was calm.

"I should like to speak to General Syrovy. Can that be arranged?"

"I will try, sir. But it is after midnight already."

"Please do. I particularly want to speak to him at once."

“I will see that your message is sent to headquarters at once, sir.” I saluted and left the compartment.

Hurrying back to Krasa’s compartment, I gave a full report of my interview. For a while Krasa remained silent. Suddenly he rose, put on coat and cap, and said abruptly: “I’ll risk it. I shall telephone to headquarters.”

He was not long away.

“General Syrovy is not there. I left the message, and they will telephone back as soon as they can locate him.”

We waited. No one thought of bed. Minutes passed slowly. At last I could stand the tension no longer.

“I’ll go to see Pepelyaev,” I said, and marched out.

Pepelyaev occupied a small coach next to Koltchak’s. Followed by the suspicious glances of the Russian guards, I entered the carriage. An Adjutant took me direct to the Minister. Pepelyaev had little of the dignity which characterized Koltchak. He was corpulent, and a smile, constant and weak, hung upon his bulky face. He continued smiling when I told him of our orders. It seemed to me that the message did not come, as a great surprise.

“Is this final?” he asked.

“It is, so far as our orders go.”

“Isn’t there any means of avoiding tomorrow’s unpleasant encounter? Maybe you — ?” And the Minister hesitated, looking at me inquiringly.

“I am sorry, sir, but these are our orders, and we can do nothing to countermand them. May I wish you good fortune?”

I saluted and hurried out.

There was still no reply from headquarters. All our officers were awake, nervously waiting for what might happen. I reported my interview with Pepelyaev, and waited. Presently I noticed the doctor winking at me. He seemed to wish me to leave the carriage.

“Gus,” he exclaimed urgently when we were alone, “Captain Kozak of our Shock Battalion has just been in with an urgent request. It seems that amongst Koltchak’s staff officers is a General Zinovitch, whose brother was with us throughout the eastern campaign and eventually lost his life in battle. For the sake of the memory of this brave officer, our brethren of the Shock Battalion ask us to save General Zinovitch. Gus, you must do something to get the man out before dawn.”

“But it’s impossible, doctor,” I objected. “You don’t know all the difficulties. Russian guards surround Koltchak’s carriage. I daren’t risk it.”

“You must do it, Gus,” insisted the doctor. “If you don’t the Shock Battalion will never forgive us. If there is trouble I will stand by you.”

“Perhaps we are all worrying about nothing,” I urged. “Our orders may still be changed. Let’s wait until we get a reply from headquarters.”

“Nonsense! What can General Syrovy do, even if he turns up in time? The orders come from General Janin, who is Commander-in-Chief of all Allied troops. I don’t think Syrovy will even be able to speak again with Koltchak. There is only one salvation for the Admiral, and that is that he should fall into the hands of the Japanese. There are whispers that the Japanese mean to do something, and it is true that steam is kept up in their engines. It is possible that they mean to seize Koltchak suddenly and rush him out of Irkutsk.”

At that moment an officer hurried up.

“Krasa wants you urgently, Gus.”

I turned to leave the doctor, but he seized my arm urgently.

“Now, Gus, you will do something to get that man out?”

“I’ll try,” I said, “but I haven’t much hope of success.”

Krasa turned towards me abruptly as I entered.

“The reply that headquarters have just sent to Koltchak’s request for an interview with General Syrovy is that it is now too late. Please communicate that reply to Admiral Koltchak.”

I went away on my terrible mission wondering whether I was imagining this horrible situation,

The night was dark, but as I approached Koltchak’s carriage I saw the sentries pacing slowly up and down. The Siberians challenged me.

“Can’t you see who it is?” I answered roughly, pushing my way to the carriage steps. Inside the coach the anxious glances of the staff officers told me that they knew all about what was happening.

“Any good news?” asked one of them in a subdued voice. I could not speak, so just shook my head and passed on.

“Sit down, please,” said the Admiral once more. But again he stood.

“Well?”

“The reply to your request has just come in from headquarters, sir. The exact words are: ‘It is too late.’ ” I spoke slowly, the words seeming to stick in my throat.

“What do they mean – too late at night or too late as regards the situation?” inquired the Admiral.

“I can’t say, sir. They just put the message I have given you over the telephone. We had to wait a long time for the reply because General Syrovy has been away from headquarters.”

For some moments there was silence. Koltchak stood before, me, staring, an ironical smile upon his lips. Presently I broke the silence.

“I think I should tell you, sir, that there are rumours in the station that the Japanese may interfere and take you into their train before dawn.”

The Admiral looked at me sharply.

“You are not misleading me? If there is no hope at all there is something I could do you know, rather than let myself be handed over to the Bolsheviks.”

“I can vouch for nothing, but reports have come in that the Japanese troop trains are unusually active, and they have their engines prepared as though some move were contemplated.”

Silence again. By this time I was feeling the strain, and heartily wished the interview over. A few more remarks were exchanged, and then Koltchak said formally:

“I thank you for your efforts, young man. Goodbye.”

We shook hands, and I murmured some words wishing him luck. Then I saluted, and with cold sweat starting on my forehead, left the compartment,

The staff officers were waiting for me. I told them in few words that no change had been made in the orders given to us by headquarters. They took the blow calmly. “Here, would you like to have my camera?” asked one of the officers. “If you don’t take it the Bolsheviks will.” “Here’s my Cossack sword,” said another. I thanked them, but refused. Then I asked if anybody had a message he would like sent. No one replied. Suddenly, I came to my real purpose.

“Is General Zinovitch here?” I asked.

An elderly officer, seated in a corner, looked up anxiously.

"Yes, I am General Zinovitch."

"There Is no time to explain at length, but I want you to come with me," I said hurriedly. He came out into the corridor. "An officer related to you has been fighting with some of our fellows. He was killed, and to show respect to the memory of a brave man they would like to save you. Put on your coat, and come."

The General was excited, but without a word of argument he returned to his corner, slipped a few oddments from his bag into the pockets of his greatcoat, and put on his cap. Then, picking up his sabre he glanced inquiringly at me. I shook my head, and sadly he put down the sword. We were about to leave the coach when I realized that his officer's cap was far too conspicuous. Dragging off my own winter astrakhan cap, I asked the General to put it on and pull it down well over his eyes. Then I put on his cap.

"Follow closely behind me, and take notice of no one," I whispered. "If anyone questions you don't speak. I'll do the talking."

The other officers shook hands with their comrade, and I saw tears in the General's eyes. "Goodbye, General," "Goodbye, brother Czech," came many subdued voices.

We left the compartment, and I opened the door of the coach. Two Siberian guards and a Legionary stood outside. They looked up. Slowly I descended the steps, talking loudly in Czech the while. I laughed loudly and the General joined in. To someone who did not speak the language it must have seemed that two Czech officers were telling each other stories, and heartily enjoying the jokes. I was about to jump down to the ground from the last step when one of the Siberians challenged me. I pretended to be wild with anger.

"Don't you think it's time you could recognize me by now?" I roared. "You are challenging me for the fifth time tonight, and I'm fed up. Now clear out of my way."

But the guard would not be put off so easily. He stepped nearer.

"You were alone, sir, when you went in. Who is this other man?"

Instead of answering him, I turned to the General and laughing uproariously, cried out in Russian: "Hey, Joe, that's a good one. This fellow takes you for Koltchak. Come on, let's not waste time here."

The General's answering laugh was a little forced, but it served my purpose. While I talked loudly in Czech, and the General laughed, we walked slowly away, and at last reached the Legion train.

I took the General to my compartment, and shut the sliding door behind us. The Russian sat down heavily. He sighed deeply. His hands trembled.

"Don't you think they may come here and search for me?" he asked.

"Impossible. They wouldn't dare. In any case we shouldn't let them enter. You had better rest,"

I moved towards the door. The General stopped me.

"Please tell me if you did this just because a relative of mine once fought with some of your boys."

"Yes, of course," I said, and told him of the visit of the officer from our Shock Battalion.

"I am very grateful to you," he said simply when I had finished.

I slipped out of the compartment and waited behind the door until he had locked it as I had instructed. Then I went to Krasa to report the details of my second interview with Koltchak. When I had finished I went out into the corridor. The doctor followed.

"Did you get the General?" he whispered eagerly.

“Yes, he is in my compartment. In the morning we will get him transferred to another train.”

At that moment the officer on duty climbed into the carriage and approached us.

“You were in Koltchak’s coach a few minutes ago, weren’t you, Gus?”

“Yes, I was; what’s the matter?” I answered anxiously.

“Well, the Russian guards are excited. They reported to their Commander that a Czech officer brought someone out with him. The officer insists upon seeing for himself whether or not Koltchak is in his carriage.”

“Then take the fool in and show him,” cried the doctor.

“Very well, I’ll do that.”

When our officer of the watch had rushed out, the doctor and I smiled at each other. Outside, the dawn was breaking. The shapes of carriages on neighbouring tracks loomed more clearly in the gathering light. Presently the officer returned.

“Everything’s in order now,” he said, “I took the fellow to Koltchak’s carriage where he feasted his eyes on the prisoner. I was very sorry for the Admiral. I do not think he has slept at all.”

“Did the Russian inquire again about the second man who left the coach?” I asked.

“Oh, no. He was satisfied that a mistake had been made. As a matter of fact I told him that the two men his guard saw were our Adjutant and myself. After that he could not apologize sufficiently for the disturbance he had caused. Probably he is taking it out on the sentry now.”

I turned away towards the window. The doctor followed my example. Obviously, our companion was eager to know just who the mysterious second man had been. But we preferred to say nothing.

The light strengthened on this fateful 15th of January 1920. Presently the representatives of the Irkutsk Government arrived. Formally, our officer on duty handed over Koltchak and Pepelyaev. For three weeks the prisoners remained in Irkutsk gaol awaiting trial. Then one morning the Irkutsk authorities became alarmed at the near approach of the remnants of the Siberian Army, retreating before the Bolsheviks along the Great Moscow Road. An immediate evacuation of Irkutsk was ordered, and the prisoners were shot out of hand. So died the stubborn and unfortunate Admiral Koltchak, deserted by the Allies who had set him in his high office. The actual date of his death was 7 February 1920.

Late on the morning of the day when Koltchak was surrendered to the Irkutsk Government, I went back to my compartment and was glad to find that General Zinovitch had had some rest. We discussed the best and quickest way for the General to reach the East, and, in view of the fact that there was little likelihood that my battalion would leave Irkutsk at once, we agreed that the wisest course would be to secure a berth upon the French train, which, I had been told, was to leave shortly. I managed to persuade the French to adopt the General, and in due course he left in their company. Since that day I have not met General Zinovitch.

Eventually we left Irkutsk and proceeded eastwards. After two more months of constant struggle and some anxiety we reached Vladivostok on 25 March. Our Siberian adventure was over.

The 6th Regiment still had to wait some weeks before the arrival of the American vessel *President Grant*, which took us by way of China, India, and the Suez to Trieste.

On 20 June 1920 we crossed the frontier of our newly freed homeland, the Czechoslovak Republic. After a few days I at last arrived in Brno. Here, after six and a half years of weary exile, I saw my mother again.