

Comparing life in Brussels and Berlin during World War I with World War II, about 25 years later, is easy. The outstanding difference was the complete absence of air raid danger for the civilian population during the first war and the frequent exposure to bombing, fire and the collapse of buildings during the second, certainly in Berlin and also in London. My father's letter to my mother (Date 170403, the 3 April 1917) reports his nightly sleep of 8 hours and one hour in the afternoon, that he has plenty to eat, receives everything free and can send money to my mother in Berlin. He urges her to eat properly and spend money on food, to buy eggs and preserve them (!), to lay in stores of sausages and other food of a non-perishable nature. (Household refrigerators being very rare, and in a later letter (170901), my father complains that ice was no longer available even in his hospital.)

It is more difficult to picture the working routine of a doctor on duty at the Military Hospital I in Brussels. Battle casualties, which reached many thousands during WWI were not his responsibility, not being a surgeon, and I cannot find any proof in his letters that they were ever channelled to the Hospitals in which he worked. In his letter of April 1917, he mentions that he had anti-typhoid injections, that he treated a case of malaria and that he had to certify two Belgian prisoners of war as being fit for a prison sentence. He had to supervise a small section of severe tuberculosis and diphtheria patients.

In another letter (170622), he mentions a case of severe tuberculosis in a young girl near death whom he has to certify as mortally ill, so that her father, in a German Prisoner of War Camp, might be released to see his daughter before she died. He added "What a grim tragedy—I think permission will be granted".

A number of the letters from Brussels were marked 'Passed by Military Censor', and I can only assume that he was not allowed to write about his professional activities. The number of patients and military casualties in any Belgian Hospital might well be considered security classified, important statistics, which could be valuable to the enemy. (Number of casualties on a given date would show the efficiency of enemy attack).

During his off-duty hours, my father was able to enjoy the culture of Brussels, visit famous churches and the Cathedral, and he went for walks in the Parks, in fact he lived a normal civilian life. He met his medical colleagues in restaurants, purchased food and sent it to Berlin and wrote normal tourist postcards to my mother, reminding her of earlier joint excursions. One of these cards showed the world-famous 'Manneken Pis', the fountain of a little boy pissing. In those distant war-days, there was no enemy action affecting civilians, either the victors or the defeated.