

1933
Walter George S. Messersmith

A telegram advised us early in November of the sudden death of Mrs. Messersmith's father and the imperative necessity for our immediate return to the United States. Although I had no desire to leave unfinished the work which I had become so interested in at Curacao, I had the feeling that we would not return there, particularly as there were indications which seemed to show that the war was approaching an end. It was therefore goodbye to the little island which had once seemed to us a prison and which at departure was home. The ties which we had formed were to last for many years and in many cases only be strengthened by departure. I had the distinct feeling that professionally my service had done me a great deal of good and that I had learned at least a few of the fundamental things a consular officer should know. I had the satisfaction of leaving the island poorer than I had arrived, in spite of the fact that there had been ample opportunities to make a great deal of money.

The German submarines were then cruising in the North Atlantic and we made the greater part of the trip without lights. It was by no means an agreeable experience, as any who travelled in those days will remember. The day before we reached New York the news of the Armistice came to us by wireless.

Shortly after the New Year I began to make discreet inquiries as to whether I was to return to Curacao, and was definitely informed that we were to proceed to a new post, but that it had not yet been fixed where. Some weeks afterwards Mr. Carr asked me how I would like to go to Belgium to the Consulate General at Antwerp with Mr. Morgan, the Consul General, on a temporary detail, principally for the purpose of organizing the system of passport control for the northern European ports. I jumped at the opportunity, as Belgium was a magic word in those days and we could conceive of nothing better than to be able to spend even a short time there. We therefore

therefore sailed in the latter part of February, proceeding by the Government transport AGAMEMNON, a former German passenger steamer which had been taken over by us. The AGAMEMNON had been carrying troops for several years and although we were assigned one of the former palatial suites on board and congratulated ourselves on the fact that the two of us were to have such commodious quarters as a bedroom, sitting-room and bath, we learned during the first night that we were not the only occupants. Various other occupants had evidently left behind a part of their baggage for as soon as the lights were turned out sleep became impossible. We slept with the lights on all the way, and at our arrival at Brest we had all the earmarks of having some loathsome skin disease. The naval officers in charge of the ship did everything to make us comfortable but it was evident that nothing other than the entire tarrying of the interior of the ship would rid it of its unwelcome occupants. We were provided with one clean napkin on the trip over and it was fortunate that we had a large supply of linen of our own which could serve the purpose. I was entitled under the law to comfortable transportation on a good steamer but I had allowed myself to be persuaded by a young employee in the Department to proceed by a transport. In those days the transportation of the families of Consuls was not paid by the Government, and two years after we arrived in Antwerp I received a bill from the Navy for Mrs. Messersmith's transportation.

We proceeded to Antwerp via Paris as my instructions were to see Mr. Leland Harrison, then attached to the Embassy there, as well as General Churchill who was in charge of the Intelligence Service of the Army. My detail at Antwerp was to be temporary and I was to organize close passport control for the north of Europe. Our Government had received reports tending to show that large numbers of undesirables and trouble makers were about to proceed to the United States and that, particularly through certain ports, the Soviet government had the intention of sending out a considerable number of agents as well as Soviet propaganda literature. To assist me in this work

I was to request General Churchill to lend me two Army officers from the Intelligence Service and Mr. Harrison was to give me complete information as to the situation so far as it was known to us. General Churchill assigned two lieutenants to Antwerp, one of whom was Lieutenant Sterns of Boston who afterwards entered the diplomatic service. We arrived at Antwerp on the 6th of March 1919, a cold and rainy day and found the Terminus Hotel where we stopped temporarily a dreary and desolate place. I was getting a salary of \$2,500. a year and the cost of our stay at the hotel where we had nothing more elaborate than a room and bath, was twice my daily income from the Government. We finally settled in the Grand Hotel, on the Rue Gerard, which has now disappeared, where we were able to get a room and bath and three meals a day for just exactly one and a half the amount of my salary. The room was supposed to be heated but the winter was unfortunately one of the coldest and dampest that had been experienced for years. We found that the heat was only turned on for an hour in the morning and in the early evening before dinner. Not knowing any people it is no exaggeration to say that for our first two months we went to bed practically every evening immediately after dinner in order to keep warm. I paid an extra 8 francs a day for a fire, but found that this was a useless expenditure as no servant was ever to be had when we needed more coal. The woman who ran the hotel, I found, had given instructions to the porter that we were Americans and that we were to be made to pay. One day the Military Attache from the Embassy, Major Hoffman, had luncheon with us and as the meals served were very frugal and unsatisfactory, I asked that we be served a beefsteak, and when I got my bill at the end of the week I found that the steak was down for the exact sum equivalent to my salary for a day. Our situation was no worse than that of others and Lieutenant Sterns often came in in the evening to get warm at the fire which we at last succeeded in getting.

At

At the Consulate General I found my duties very pleasant but difficult. The Consul General, Mr. Henry Morgan, was a delightful man of long experience in the Service. The staff at the office was inadequate as the work had grown very rapidly and was on a more or less pre-war basis when conditions had altogether changed. Antwerp was filled with American soldiers as it had been decided to make it the base of supply for the large army of occupation which we intended to keep in that country. At one time we had no less than 4,000 men in the city and a former hotel, the old Saint Antoine, well known to all American travellers, was taken over as headquarters. Within a comparatively short time a formidable establishment had grown up. The number of troops was decreased but the number of officers was increased. A large dock was set over by the city for the use of our transports and a regular base established. The old German Seamen's Home was used as one part of the headquarters while the main staff was established in the Saint Antoine. A hospital and a dental clinic were set up in another part of the city and a huge garage was rented for the fleet of cars. As the various ports of embarkation in France were closed down, the main current of our troops going home passed through Antwerp. While the Consulate had no direct duties in connection with all these movements of troops and supplies, it did form the liaison between our military establishments and the civil authorities, which contact was naturally of much importance and frequently involved rather difficult situations.

I set about to accomplish the object for which I had been sent to Antwerp and was able in a comparatively short time to organize the passport control and to recommend a system of uniform control at ports of embarkation, which was put into effect by the Department. The considerable movement of undesirables which we had expected to take place was not realized, but I always felt that it was due to the energetic steps which our Government took from the very beginning.

1933

- 5 -

I found that in addition to these duties the actual conduct of the Consulate General also devolved upon me. Mr. Morgan became very much dissatisfied with the cooperation which he was receiving from the local authorities and on his appointment by our Government as the Representative of the United States on Advisory Commission to assist in reconstruction matters, he decided that it would be preferable for him to move the Consulate General to Brussels. He therefore telegraphed to the Department recommending this change, and in the same telegram recommended that I be placed in charge definitely of the Antwerp consulate. It was an act for which I shall always remain particularly grateful to him, as it resulted in my temporary designation as consul in charge, and a few months later to my definite designation as consul at Antwerp. It was a post which I ordinarily could not have hoped for as it was quite important, and it gave me the opportunity which I had always hoped might come to me in the Service.