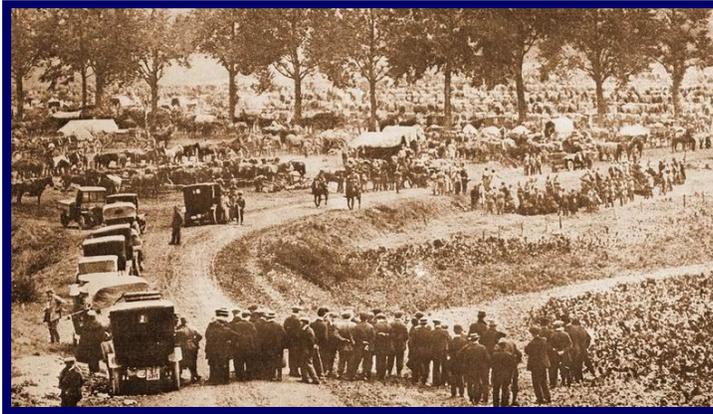


The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. See XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and

Annals from the Archives

The Sisters of Notre Dame during World War I



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German camp outside Visé, Belgium

sorrowsdramaturgy.wikispaces.com/WWI+and+WWII+in+Belgium

—Annals kept by the Massachusetts Sisters of Notre Dame were varied in their record keeping, as varied as the Superiors charged with writing those accounts. Some reported everything, taking great interest in outside events as much as they did to the goings on in their convents and schools. Others wrote only barebone outlines of yearly activities. But because they were an international congregation, the Massachusetts sisters were fully aware of the events transpiring in Europe during 1914. While they lived a mostly cloistered life and were not encouraged to take an interest in worldly affairs, they received ongoing copies of letters from the Motherhouse in Namur as well as from other convents, keeping the sisters informed of events in Europe. The result was that the Massachusetts convent annals say almost nothing about the outbreak of war during the summer of 1914 because there was no need.

Just a month after war began in Europe, Sr. Marie de Ste. Anges wrote from Namur to sisters in Clapham, England. The letter was dated August 30, 1914 and a copy was sent to convents in Massachusetts. *"Notre Chere Mere is anxious to let you know we are all quite well and safe."* She goes on to say that *"during the bombardment and burning of the Town Hall and several houses we took refuge in the crypt of the Church and spent the hours of uneasiness in prayer. At present we are living very quietly looking after our wounded soldiers. . . we are in absolute ignorance of what is happening outside the Convent. No letters arrive, still less the newspapers, this is very trying for our dear Mere who longs for news of her houses. Our convent at Dinant [also in Belgium] is destroyed by fire but our sisters are well and safe."* Sr. Madeleine du Sacre Coeur wrote from Ghent on September 8th that *"the strain has been very great these last days—and yesterday 30,000 Germans were at one end of the city gates declaring that if the smallest opposition was made, the town would be sacked and burned and razed to the ground. . . twenty-two of our sisters from Visé came. Imagine the bed-making, etc. . . Was it not a night of great emotions?"*

Sister Hortense du Sacre Coeur, one of the sisters from Visé who evacuated to Ghent during the invasion wrote a long account of her experiences after she finally made it to England. Copies of her letter describing the events in Visé, Ghent and her journey were sent to all convents. She began with events on August 2nd, when word came that the German army had crossed the Belgian border. *"Toward midnight we were awakened by the booming of a cannon, an attempt being made to blow up the bridge, which is only five minutes distant from the convent. . . At 4 o'clock in the morning there was a terrible explosion—the bridge was blown up. . . The Sisters hid in the cellar and could hear the soldiers passing overhead. . . Two men of Visé were shot on the accusation they had killed a German soldiers. Towards 3 o'clock a young soldier gave orders to the inhabitants to vacate their houses and to betake themselves to the outskirts of town. . . some of the sisters fled toward Louvre, others tried to come to terms with the soldiers. Finally they consented and the poor Sisters returned a little more at ease."* Their calm was short-lived. During the night the bombing started again and confusion followed. There were rumors the Germans were surrendering and that the French were coming to their aid, all of which were false.

"During the night a heavy combat took place on the left bank of the Meuse and from dawn until noon we heard nothing but the noise of passing artillery. . . By Saturday the 8th all the houses had raised the white flag. . . the church tower was replaced by the white flag too."

Surrender wasn't enough. Stating that all the factory and church towers in the town were potential forts, the Germans ordered them to be either burned or bombed. The sisters told of seeing the church in flames. Their superior returned at 5 p.m. on the 10th of August to say that it appeared they would be safe for the night, but that was not true for her and Sr. Margaret of St. Joseph. At 7:30 that night, two soldiers arrived at the convent, demanding that the Superior and Sr. Margaret of St. Joseph be taken as hostages "to answer for [the] Community and that of . . . the College and of the Augustinians. . . [and if] there were traitors to be found in these Communities. . . the hostages would be shot." The sisters were not allowed to bring anything with them and "what an awful sight greeted us: four armed soldiers led the way. . ."

About an hour later, they arrived at a small farm and told they would be shot if they tried to escape. After the soldiers killed all the farm animals, one of their guards told them that, "we merely wished to pass through Belgium in order to attack France on the Northern side. Belgium would have been enriched by furnishing us with provisions during our passage."

The sisters were held until August 13th when a soldier arrived with the news that they would be returned to their convent. After their return, "we were startled from our sleep by the discharge of musketry—there were fires almost everywhere. . ."

And in the morning they saw "the railway station was a mass of flames." That night, orders were given for all houses in Visé to be vacated and though the sisters pleaded for the convent to be spared, they, too, had to leave. They made their way, first to Eisden where the sisters of a Franciscan convent welcomed them. From there Sr. Hortense and others traveled to onto Ghent. When word came of the army closing in on Ghent, Sr. Hortense and others were advised to leave Belgium, which they did, finally making it to England. She ended her letter saying that "I do not hope to return soon to Belgium . . .do not forget in your prayers your poor little Belgian Sister."



Visé church in ruins

www.firstworldwar.com/photos/churches.htm

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ SND Correspondence, 1842-1958.
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