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THE SANITARY SERVICE OF SEMINARIANS OF THE SEMINARY IN PRZEMYŚL DURING THE FIRST MONTHS OF THE GREAT WAR (1914–1915)

The subject of this article is the fate of the seminarians of the Przemyśl seminary during the battles for the Przemyśl fortress in 1914–15. In the face of the approaching Russian army, they decided to serve as orderlies in military hospitals. This service was very demanding, due to extremely difficult sanitary conditions, and shortages of food, medicines, dressing materials, and so on. Information about the life and work of future priests during successive sieges of the fortress was included in the *Chronicle of the Przemyśl Seminary*. Lay people who stayed in the fortress during the siege also wrote numerous memoirs and diaries describing the work of seminarians and priests. Thanks to these materials, it is possible to learn how the seminary trained Roman Catholic clergy for the war, the medical preparation that was offered by the standard seminary training program, and, finally, how the seminarians proved themselves in the hour of trial.

Keywords: seminarians, Przemyśl seminary, Przemyśl fortress, First World War, military hospitals.

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of the Przemyśl fortress and, in particular, the battles that were fought in its area during the Great War have been, and continue to be, the subject of historical research, which has resulted in numerous publications and scientific studies. As a rule, the authors focused on strictly military and humanitarian issues. Memoirs and diaries of eyewitnesses: both soldiers and civilians (Ehrenburg, 2010; Lenar, 2005; Stock, 2014; Vit, 1995; Zakrzewska, 1916) are a valuable source of knowledge about military operations as well as daily life in the besieged fortress.

In this context, an interesting fragment of the wartime history of the fortress, which has not been described more extensively so far, is the religious ministry of the seminarians of the seminary of the Przemyśl diocese of the Latin rite in military hospitals. Information on this subject is contained in the Chronicle of the Seminary (found in the Archives of the Metropolitan Higher Seminary in Przemyśl). It is presented there from two perspectives:

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the first, that of the seminarians who remained in Przemyśl and shared the hardships of the siege with the inhabitants and soldiers, and the second, that of the seminarians who decided to leave the city and, in many cases, return to their homes (*Kronika...*). These accounts were written shortly before the resumption of seminary classes in October 1915.

2. PREPARATIONS FOR WAR

When, on 18 July 1914, the seminarians of the Przemyśl seminary were leaving for their holidays, they could not have imagined that this time the break in their studies would last as long as fourteen months. The reason was the outbreak of the First World War.

The military importance of Przemyśl meant that preparations for battle were made almost from the start. Work was carried out on a huge scale in and around the city. Shooting trenches were dug; shelters and reserve depots were erected; artillery positions, also barracks for the army, warehouses and field bakeries were built. Minefields were prepared in strategic places; two additional bridges were built over the San River, and a military airfield was set up near Przemyśl. In order to clear the foreground, forests around the forts were cut down, local residents were displaced, villages and hamlets were burnt. What is more, wagons with supplies were constantly arriving in the town. The displacement also included the inhabitants of Przemyśl itself. Preparations were completed at the end of August. The failures of the Austro-Hungarian army in subsequent clashes with the Tsarist army caused chaos also in Przemyśl. More and more casualties were being brought into the city and a dysentery epidemic was spreading among the soldiers. For the first time, the shortage of food and other supplies became a problem. In this situation, the authorities issued another order to evacuate the civilian population. The refugees were left with an open road towards Kraków (Różański, 1983).

Thanks to the decision of the rector of the Przemyśl seminary, Rev. Teofil Łękowski (1834–1923), who instructed it is possible to learn about the fate of the seminarians during the siege of the fortress (*Kronika...: Nekrolog...*).

At the end of July and the beginning of August 1914, when more countries were entering the war, many seminarians came to Przemyśl. They wanted to learn how they should respond to the call to arms they received from the army². According to the chronicler's account, although such calls sent by post resulted merely from error, many clerics applied to the fortress command for admission to the fortress hospitals as nurses, in order to protect themselves from being drafted into the army in this way. These requests were approved and as early as 2 August 1914, more than half of the students – 80 (10 to each of the eight fortress hospitals) – were called up for medical service. It is worth noting that it was left to the seminary authorities to decide which of the seminarians would be sent to such service. After the list had been drawn up, summonses were sent out to the selected ones via the parishes on 4 August (*Kronika...*).

Nevertheless, such willingness on the part of the seminary community to work on hospital beds was not surprising. In the chronicle cited above, the date of 25 November 1912 bears reference to the fact that the mitered prelate, Rev. Łękowski, had sent the authorities a list of his subordinates who had volunteered to serve in the lazarettos in the event of war. Regardless of the underlying reasons, specialist training was organised quite

² Candidates for priesthood were exempted from military service; see also § 31 of the law of 11 April 1889 on the introduction of a new law on military service (Journal of Laws No 41, with further amendments).

quickly for the seminarians. The first lectures took place on 6 February 1913, just before the start of the winter examination session. These classes were conducted by General Bronisław Majewski (1853–1934) – the army’s chief sanitary officer (Stawecki, 1994). In addition to theoretical knowledge, the participants of this course were given a tour of the military hospital at Dobromilska Street in Przemyśl, as well as practical classes, which included, among other things, applying bandages and giving first aid to the wounded. The last so-called ‘hospital orderly lecture’ took place on 6 March 1913, after which the seminarians again went to the hospital. As the chronicler reported: “[we viewed] the operating theatre, the tools used to sterilise robes and operating instruments. Here we found twelve first-year schoolmates who took part in the operation indirectly. From then on, every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, groups of twelve seminarians went in their turn to the operating theatre – until Easter” [translation mine – P.D.] (*Kronika...*)³.

With the preparations for war, many of the buildings located in Przemyśl were used for military purposes, which also happened, among others, with the seminary’s headquarters, converted into a recruitment post. It usually housed 140 seminarians; still, during the mobilisation some 1,500 people were accommodated there (Ślemp, 2005). The chronicle of the seminary reads: “The new inhabitants were, however, better economists than us in the way they exploited space, and so they not only occupied all the rooms so that the smallest room, where one cleric normally lived, housed six recruits each – but all the corridors were covered with straw, on which the recruits lay side by side in such a way that their heads were on the side of the windows and the legs, especially of the mediocre ones, touched the opposite wall. Since the new defenders of the fatherland did not recognise the difference between day and night and lay on their bedding all day, it was only possible to cross the corridor by jumping over each recruit’s legs” (*Kronika...*). It is noteworthy that the military authorities left several rooms at the exclusive disposal of the rector and vice-rector, a servant, a gatekeeper and 7 seminarians.

3. SEMINARIANS’ ACTIVITIES IN THE LIGHT OF AVAILABLE ARCHIVES

The clerics referred to Hospital No I were the first to arrive in Przemyśl. This was due to the fact that they were supposed to report to the headquarters of their hospital as early as on 11 August. The others arrived in the city a few days later. The seminary building, apart from being converted over time into a hospital, or more precisely the 3rd ward of Hospital No. IV, was for some time also the place where seminarians serving in other establishments would be served meals. The tasks that were assigned to them depended on the facility to which they were assigned and their superiors. Thus, some were in charge of bandaging the wounded, others distributed medicines or wrote down medical orders, and finally others were only on night duty (*Kronika...*).

In time, the seminarians started to reside next to the hospitals where they also were served meals. Quite soon, however, their number was halved; some left for home, some were transferred to other institutions⁴. The author of the second chronicle account

³ Easter in 1913 was on 23 March.

⁴ Those remaining in the medical service were: Michał Buniowski, Kazimierz Kuźniarski, Michał Pelczar, Józef Kosowski, Jan Lorens, Bolesław Hołub, Franciszek Misiąg, Jakób Nigburowicz, Wojciech Porada, Julian Beck, Jan Guzy, Władysław Opaliński, Stanisław Wanat, Józef Żelazowski, Paweł Paško, Józef Świdnicki, Władysław Wójcik, Antoni Baszak, Roman Głodowski, Franciszek Kusy, Stanisław Matyka, Andrzej Niżnik, Ludwik Wielgosz, Jan Dziedzic, Władysław

(mentioned in the introduction) explained the whole situation: “after a few weeks, just before the first siege, many of the seminarians (with the permission of the sanitary authorities) discouraged by the ill-treatment and treatment as simple ‘mannschaft’ returned home” [translation mine – J.D.] (*Kronika...*). The clerics assigned to Hospital IV, or more precisely to the seminary, had relatively the best fate of those who stayed as they were able to lead a truly seminary life, including, among other things, attending daily Mass celebrated by Rev. Rector Łękawski. For the others, fulfilling religious practices entailed many difficulties.

September 1914 saw a general retreat of the Austro-Hungarian army, resulting from the fall of Lviv⁵ and the collapse of the offensive towards Lublin. These events caused the front to shift to the San line (Kuca). The Austrian High Command moved from Przemyśl to Nowy Sącz, while General Kusmanek was ordered to defend the fortress ‘to the last resort’. In preparation for fighting the Russians, the wounded and families of officers were evacuated, and auxiliary bridges over the San River were blown up. The troops that remained in the fortress were put on high alert (Róžański, 1983).

Przemyśl was besieged by a Russian force of 280,000 soldiers. The fortress was completely cut off from the world on 26 September. However, the start of the siege did not carry any serious threat to either the defenders or the civilian population. The Russians focused on building infantry positions and artillery positions on the outskirts of the city and did not respond to the defenders’ shelling. The city became overpriced and food rationing began. A number of prohibitions were introduced, including leaving homes, holding gatherings and meetings. To maintain order, severe punishments were applied even for minor offences. Death sentences were carried out almost daily for espionage, but also, for example, for theft (Róžański, 1983).

The Russian commander-in-chief intended to take the fortress by storm. However, he did not have the heavy artillery to significantly support these plans. The Russian assaults that followed on 5, 7 and 8 October 1914 did not have the intended effect. What is more, already on 9 October the blockade of the fortress was broken, as a result of which the besiegers were forced to withdraw to a distance of a few kilometres east of Przemyśl (Róžański, 1983).

This was an undoubted success for the Austro-Hungarian troops. However, it was obvious to the command that the Russians would soon attack again. The authorities therefore called for the evacuation of the civilian population, whose presence was not necessary. At the same time, the fortress garrison was increased to 135,000 soldiers.

The expected siege began on 9 November 1914. This time, the fighting on the outskirts of Przemyśl took the form of positional warfare as the Russian command decided to change tactics, deciding on a full blockade of the fortress to force its defenders to surrender by starvation. In response to this, General Kusmanek ordered to carry out raids on enemy positions. The aim of these actions was to maintain a permanent state of threat among the besiegers, but also to identify the number and deployment of enemy forces by means of military activities.

Wyderka, Karol Złotek, Józef Borcz, Teofil Górnicki, Władysław Piotrowski, Michał Poprawski, Piotr Gałęza, Jan Wołek, Marcin Puć, Leon Czajkowski, Wojciech Dzioba, Ludwik Grabowski, Jan Kochman, Jan Michułka, Tadeusz Murdza, Stanisław Cyran.

⁵ Lviv was occupied by the Russian army on the night of 3 to 4 September 1914.

Despite these actions by the defenders, there was no prospect of an imminent change in the situation. Driven by the welfare of the clerics remaining in the city and not wanting them to lose a year of study due to the war, Rev. Łękawski considered organising lectures. Among the many problems that stood in the way of these intentions, one of the most significant was the lack of teaching staff. Indeed, at that time, only Rev. Dr. Wojciech Galant (1853–1930) (Śliwa, 1983) and Rev. Dr. Teofil Chciuk (1875–1936) remained in Przemyśl (Krzyżak, 2017; Nabywaniec, 2021). However, it was decided to ask for help from other priests so that just after the New Year the teaching could begin. Before these plans were implemented, the seminarians, like other inhabitants of the city, were preparing for Christmas. This was particularly evident in the hospitals where they worked. A chronicler recalling these moments wrote: “In the hospitals they were in a hurry to give sick soldiers a Christmas party, in such a way that a Christmas tree was put up in each of the larger rooms or everyone was gathered into one larger room, which was the case, for example, in my ward. They placed a Christmas tree on the table, lit candles and waited for the arrival of the head of the ward, who soon arrived with nurses, medics and orderlies and made his wishes in German, which were repeated in all languages by various interpreters. The Hungarians then sang a Hungarian carol to the accompaniment of a gypsy’s violin [...] and when the doctor expressed his wish for a Polish song to be sung, the Polish national anthem rang out in Hungarian. Soon [...] a mighty voice, *Silent night*, echoed against the ceiling of the room, much to everyone’s delight” [translation mine – J.D.] (*Kronika...*). After breaking the wafer, the seminarians went to the seminary building, where a Christmas Eve supper with traditional borscht and apple cake awaited them. Rev. Józef Stachyrak (1868–1954), the vice-rector, addressed the gathering (Zych, 2011), encouraging them to be dedicated in their work for the sick and to fulfil their religious practices as zealously as possible, despite the difficult conditions. Carols resounded around the table. Seminarians, serving in different hospitals and thus having rare opportunities to meet, were finally able to tell each other about their experiences. The conversations, already held in the chambers, continued until after midnight (*Kronika...*).

Working in the fortress hospitals was extremely demanding for all the staff. For the clerics, who had received only basic medical training, it must have been particularly difficult. After all, the young, inexperienced men were, for the first time, confronted with the horrors of a new war that produced casualties on an industrial scale. They were certainly shocked by the prevalence of death, the number of wounded and the nature of the mutilations. What is more, the patients were generally their peers. In the course of their service, the alumni were eyewitnesses to countless human tragedies. They also risked their own health and even their lives working in the wards for infectious patients. This was compounded by a permanent shortage of anaesthetics, dressings and medicines. These problems were also pointed out in her diary by Helena Jabłońska (1864–1936), née Seifert, an administrator of several tenements in Przemyśl (Jabłońska, 2017; Piekanić, 215).

To all the problems faced by the Przemyśl hospitals, one must also add their extraordinary overcrowding. This is confirmed by the following data: the number of patients hospitalised on 1 December 1914 amounted to 4879, on 1 March 1915 to 10581, and on 10 March already to 12140⁶.

⁶ T. Idzikowski; data included in the paper entitled *Lazarety w Przemyślu latach 1914–1918* [Lazarettos in Przemyśl in the years 1914–1918], delivered as part of the conference *Military Lazarettos in the years 1914–1918 on the path to independence* – Przemyśl, 15 November 2018

In accordance with the Rector's plans, lectures for the fourth-year seminarians began on 8 January 1915. They were conducted by Rev. Jakub Federkiewicz (moral theology) (Śliwa 1983a), Rev. Józef Stachyrak (rubrics), Rev. Dr. Wojciech Galant (pastoral theology), Rev. Dr. Teofil Chciuk (law) and Rev. Teofil Łękawski (catechetics). These classes were held in the Rector's dining room. A few days later, lectures for the second year began. The teaching, however, could not have the usual level of intensity. This was due to the lack of time, as the seminarians were mainly focused on hospital work, but also to the scarcity of paraffin used for lighting. Clerics assigned to the seminary, where the army, presumably anticipating a shortage of this fuel, installed electric lighting, were in a slightly better situation. However, in spite of these obvious difficulties, the seminarians always willingly attended these lectures, especially as both the rector and the other professorial priests were understanding towards them and did not spare them words of encouragement to persevere (*Kronika...*).

Frost of extremely low, almost Arctic, temperature appeared at the end of 1914 and the beginning of 1915. The fortress began to run out of food. The problem was so acute that both soldiers and civilians attempted to save themselves by hunting birds and, subsequently, also dogs and cats. The skins of the latter were also used to insulate uniforms. The fortress had about 14,000 horses. The shortage of fodder and numerous diseases in these animals hastened the decision to send them to slaughter. The meat obtained in this way was used to improve the alimentary situation of the fortress.

An extremely significant problem throughout the city was the dire sanitary conditions – the result of a lack of drinkable water and a poorly functioning sewage system. It is therefore not surprising that infectious diseases, including cholera, but also typhoid and dysentery, began to appear in the city fairly quickly and over time assumed epidemic proportions.

The morale of the defenders as well as the civilian population was also negatively affected by the lack of reliable information about the situation at the front and the rumours that appeared instead.

4. FALL OF THE FORTRESS

The position of the defenders worsened considerably when the besieging Russian troops were finally retrofitted with heavy artillery, which from mid-March inflicted serious damage to the fortress buildings and disorganised the Austrian artillery. In this situation, General Kusmanek decided to attempt to break the siege. However, the action taken on the night of 18–19 March 1915 ended in failure. As a result, the command was forced to surrender the fortress. Przemyśl capitulated on 22 March 1915 after 137 days of siege. On that day, Russian troops began to enter the ruins of the fortress from 10 a.m. (Różański, 1983).

The day of the surrender was immortalised e.g. in the seminary chronicle. Its author wrote: "As the population of the city was ordered to leave their homes before dawn and go to safer places, a large number of people gathered on the Tatar Hill and on Węgierska Street and waited anxiously for what was going to happen. Soon we heard one explosion, another, etc., then all the bridges and the powder magazine were blown up – then the Duńkowiczki fort, the Siedliska fort and others were blown up, so that columns of fire and clouds of smoke appeared in more and more directions. Around 8 o'clock in the morning I saw on

[Access: 18.08.2019]. Access on the internet: <https://przemyska.pl/2018/11/17/przemysl-wojskowe-lazarety-w-latach-1914-1918-w-drodze-do-niepodleglosci/>.

Grunwaldzka Street the first detachments of Russian cavalry moving in, at first one by one, then more and more crowded, and soon the whole street was filled with cavalry [...]” [translation mine – P.D.] (*Kronika...*).

Under the new government, the sick remained in the hospitals, as did the doctors and auxiliary staff working there, including clerics. The only change was the periodic inspections of these facilities by Russian officers and Russian guards.

Soon after the occupation of Przemyśl by the Russians, Easter was celebrated⁷. The seminarians staying in the city gathered in the seminary building. Rev. Łękawski addressed the gathering, who “presented the situation of the country and called for trust in God’s help” [translation mine – P.D.]. After a festive breakfast, the seminarians returned to their usual duties at the hospitals. As it turned out, however, not for long. The following day – 5 April – the seminarians were relieved of their sanitary duties thanks to Bishop Karol Józef Fischer (1847–1931) (Śliwa, 1983), a visible sign of which was the order to return their red cross bands. However, all of them were not allowed to live in the seminary. Some were deployed in the building of the old gymnasium, others remained in their former flats. In these places, they awaited the rector’s decision. However, the resumption of their studies posed many problems, food being one of them. Up to that point, the seminarians had eaten in various places in Przemyśl. Only some of them could be provided with food at the seminary, others were fed at the Ziemiański Orphanage and the Felician Sisters’ Home in Zasań. Unfortunately, under the conditions of the time, there was no chance of improving this situation. A separate issue was the restrictions introduced by the Russian authorities. The competent authority had to be informed of the start of the course, and this would have entailed changing the language of instruction to Russian. The alternative was home training which consisted in instruction rather than lectures. Here, too, there was a major obstacle. The clerics, as already mentioned, lived in different parts of the city. The constant movement of a large group of seminarians would undoubtedly have eventually attracted the attention of the Russians. Infectious diseases, which were not uncommon in Przemyśl, were also an important issue. All these circumstances led the rector to decide to organise examinations of the material covered so far and release the seminarians to their homes (*Kronika...*).

As the days passed, however, Russian rule became increasingly brutal. In addition, the secret political police, the so-called ‘ochrana’, arrived in the city along with the army. The main task of ochrana was to track down opponents of the authorities. Its officers sought not only to recruit agents (informers) among the local population, but, thanks to their activities, to control all of social life. The censorship office also cooperated closely with the authorities and the police. Its representatives dealt with the control of texts printed in the local press, books, as well as the content of texts distributed in public, including advertisements and posters (Błoński, 2007). The changes that were taking place in Przemyśl also seem to justify the seminary authorities’ decision to release the seminarians to their homes. The departure was by no means easy, especially as their future was in question. The chronicler recalled: “[Rev. Rector] bid us farewell and instructed us to trust in God that calmer times would come and then we would gather again to study. Then we went with the Rector to the chapel. Across the road the persistent thought fluttered through our minds that perhaps this was the last time we would be in the Seminary, perhaps the last time we would pray in the Seminary chapel, and so the more fervent prayer started flowing from our lips that God would confirm us in our

⁷ Easter 1915 was on 4 and 5 April.

vocation and allow us to gather in the Seminary for graduation. For the next few days, the seminarians made preparations for the journey and applied for Russian passes, and then travelled home mostly by freight trains, so that only a handful remained in Przemyśl around 3 May” [translation mine – P.D.] (*Kronika...*).

5. THE RECAPTURE OF THE FORTRESS

As a result of the Battle of Gorlice, the Russian front was broken in early May 1915. Subsequent defeats caused the Russians to hastily begin withdrawing from Przemyśl and the western part of the district. As early as on 3 June 1915, German and Austro-Hungarian troops began to enter the city. The city’s inhabitants welcomed the conquerors enthusiastically: “Austrian flags appeared in the windows of many houses, and the population gathered along the streets threw flowers at the soldiers” [translation mine – P.D.] (Forster, 2000; Heiden, 2013; Idzikowski, 2014).

The recapture of the Przemyśl fortress was celebrated throughout the Habsburg monarchy. The front was moving further and further away and ,consequently, life in the city began to look normal; tenements destroyed during the war were rebuilt, and institutions of public use were reactivated (Jabłonowska, 2017).

In June 1915, Bishop Józef Sebastian Pelczar returned to Przemyśl⁸. Almost immediately, he focused on initiating the recovery from the moral and material devastation left by the war effort (Śliwa, 1980). One of the priorities was the reactivation of the Przemyśl seminary. The academic year 1914/15 was lost for the alumni, but in order for them to be able to start the next one on time, they had to put the building in order beforehand, as well as to move the entire surviving book collection to its original place. This was, incidentally, enriched by items donated by Rev. Łękawski and other benefactors (Ślemp, 2005).

Another problem was the fact that the seminary building was listed in official documents as a hospital, despite the fact that it no longer contained any ill people at that time. Hence the formalities for its recovery were extensively prolonged and lasted until 10 July 1915. Even then, however, problems continued to pile up. The interiors had to be disinfected. This was necessary to ensure the safety of future residents, as infectious patients were housed in the seminary during sieges (*Kronika...*). Despite numerous difficulties, it was finally possible to bring the seminary’s premises into a suitable state, so that regular lectures resumed on 3 October 1915. It is worth mentioning that after the turmoil of the war, a total of 119 alumni began their studies within the walls of this institution. Among them, those who, in the face of the approaching Russian army, decided to stay in Przemyśl, returned almost in full number (*Kronika...*).

6. CONCLUSION

The description in the seminary chronicle is probably the only evidence of the seminarians’ involvement in saving the lives of wounded and sick soldiers during the battle for the fortress of Przemyśl. These young people, disregarding the daily hardships of a besieged city: hunger, disease, extremely difficult sanitary conditions and omnipresent

⁸ During the siege of the fortress, Bishop J.S. Pelczar was not in Przemyśl. He left the city on 21 September 1914, heading for Krakow. Before that, he had assigned a number of tasks to the clergy in the diocese. He specified them in a proclamation of 13 August 1914 (Pelczar, 1914).

death, faced this challenge at their own request. Even though they were assigned to carry out basic nursing or auxiliary duties, given the circumstances their attitude can be considered heroic, which makes their efforts all the more noteworthy in order to set an example of duty and devotion to ideals. The recapture of the fortress by the German and Austro-Hungarian armies, and thus the reopening of the seminary, did not mean for the future priests a definitive farewell to the army and the war. For some of them, ministering at hospital bedsides in 1914 and 1915 was only a harbinger of future service this time among Polish soldiers often on the front line.

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LEGAL ACT

Act of 11 April 1889 *on the introduction of a new law on military service* (Journal of Laws No. 41, with further amendments).