

# **My Experiences as a Russian Soldier in WWI**

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Note: Information within [brackets] are comments by the translator.

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[Translation Begins]

## **My Experiences as a Russian Soldier in World War I**

by Johann Kräenbring

We Germans in Bessarabia relived three wars in the period from 1814 to 1940, that is, in 126 years: the Russian-Turkish 1877, the Russian-Japanese 1903 to 1905 and the Russian-German 1914 to 1918. The Germans of Bessarabia, therefore, had to fulfill their duties in these three wars like any other Russian citizen, although they had the Imperial promise that they should be exempt from all military duty. The German teachers were also not exempt in the First World War from 1914 to 1918.

In August of 1915, a letter came from the school authorities in Akkerman, in which one could read, among other things, the following: “Since you do not fulfill the duties of a teacher (*nje sootwjstsvujetje* [in Russian]), you are relieved of your post.” Immediately after all the German teachers had been relieved of their posts, all were suitable cannon fodder. But we were also shown a favor—not out of love, but because we Germans were not trusted—, we were not sent to the German-Russian Front, but to the Caucasus to fight against the Turks. In Lustdorf, near Odessa, we were outfitted with uniforms and from the train station in Odessa, where a special train with freight wagons was provided, our transport was set for Tiflis [today Tblisi]. Our journey via Taganrog and Rostov to Tiflis lasted twelve days. At each big station we had a longer stay. Boiled water (*Kipjatok*) was available everywhere day and night, so that every soldier could prepare his own tea (*Tschai*). Women sold freshly baked oil cakes, boiled eggs, fried fish, and so forth, at all stations. In addition, we also got the Russian national vegetable soup (*borscht*) with a portion of meat every day as a noon meal. Each soldier had bread with him in sufficient quantities, as well as sugar and tea. At 10 o’clock in the morning, we arrived in Tiflis, the capital of Georgia. After we had eaten our noon meal at 12 o’clock, as usual, we had to rest; but not in beds, but on empty guard beds (*Pritschen*) of boards. The order came at 2:00

PM to line up ready to march. The first destination that was destined for us for this day was Elisabethtal, a German Protestant municipality. On a rough road paved with stones, we now zigzagged uphill into the rocky mountains. Often on this march we had to pass steep, deep descending slopes on one side, and steep rocks on the other side, rising high into the air. The distance on this road to Elisabethtal is 98 kilometers [68.9 mi]; on footpaths, one would have covered this distance in two to three hours.

We were about three hundred men, almost all teachers from Bessarabia and Cherson. At exactly 12 o'clock in the night, we arrived dead tired at the water source in Elisabethtal. First we quenched our thirst. Then the village bailiff [law officer] came to verify for how many people resting places were to be provided for. I asked the bailiff if Mr. Paul Bühl was still a teacher in this his home community. "Yes," he said, "do you know our teacher?" — "He was my fellow pupil at the Werner School in Sarata, Bessarabia; Can you perhaps lead us to him?" — "Of course, gladly." — After he had done his duty, he led me and my schoolmate from Sarata, Immanuel Keck, to our former classmate at one o'clock in the morning. I knocked on the window of his bedroom. "Who is there?" — "It's me, Paul" — "Who?" — "It's me, Paul, I want to visit you at this quite extraordinary hour" — "Do you know, Kräenbring?" — We had not seen each other for eight years, and yet he recognized me by my voice. Immediately the light was turned on and the front door opened. Now followed the warmest greeting and the friendliest reception; good hospitality with light refreshments and first-class wine from his own garden was a matter of course. We had a lot to tell each other, all tiredness was forgotten; but we got to bed before daybreak. Luckily for us, it was raining outside. The next day we also had rain, so we were allowed to stay another night in this hospitable German community. Teacher Paul Bühl, who was also active as a sexton in his home community, showed us his school, the church and the cemetery and made us somewhat acquainted with the history of his community. The main occupation of the community is viticulture. Their Swabian language is very similar to Sarata. Teacher Bühl also told us the story of the pastor who is said to have shot a teacher in Elisabethtal. I do not want to tell the story here. The pastor in question later lived in Sarata for a short time. Our dear host Bühl was the best student in his class in Sarata with Wilhelm Mutschall as teacher in the years 1893 to 1897. We were intimate friends and maintained communication by letter for many years.

On the third day, early in the morning, all those called up had to assemble at a designated place in Elisabethtal for inspection; no one was missing. Our officer in charge allowed us to hire horse drawn wagons to as far as Bely-Kljutuch (Klare-Quelle). Several farmers made their wagons quite long, so that eight to ten people could sit on them. We started at 7 o'clock, slowly even higher up into the mountains. At 10 o'clock we arrived in a Grusin village [maybe ancient Greek speaking people]. All the wagons stopped in front of a shop to give the horses a rest. Many bought cigarettes, and so forth. A Caucasus-German, who had some command of the Grusinian language, made it known to us that this merchant had very good wine; but it was forbidden by the authorities to sell wine to soldiers. All those who had a light refreshment during this break in the journey were very keen to drink some wine. The Grusinish-speaking man asked the merchant to sell some wine; no one would report it to the authorities. Finally, the merchant agreed to sell a canteen (half liter) to anyone who wished. Teacher Werre from Hoffnungstal, who was sitting next to me on the wagon, also had his canteen filled. On the way, he tasted his wine and realized that he had never drunk such a good drop in his life. I also had to try, although

I had never drunk wine in the morning. The wine was kept in animals skins of goats; it was dark red in color, clear as crystal, and actually tastier than I had ever drunk.

At last we came to Bely-Kljutsch; a small but nice town high in the mountains. Here we had to go to the camp of tents next to the town on a hill. It was September of 1915, and there was a lot of forest (only deciduous trees) around us with mountain streams, all of which had a snow-white stone bed with clear, tasty water. There was a lot of precipitation up there, mostly at night due to rain and snow. It was then eerily (*gruselig*) cold in our tents. But when the sky brightened, the sunshine was the most wonderful weather you could imagine. The birds sang, the flowers bloomed and spread wonderful fragrance—paradise. The toilet that we soldiers had to use was also interesting: a pit, about two meters [6.6 feet] wide, eight to ten meters [26-32.8 feet] long and one and a half meters [4.9 feet] deep; above this pit a real roof truss. rafters across the pit and slats nailed up at such a distance from each other that everyone, tall or short, could sit “comfortably” on them and had time in the open air to admire the magnificent nature and to feast their eyes on its splendor.

The first Sunday came with magnificent weather. We Protestants had room to hold a worship service. On a high, wooded hill we found the right place under beautiful trees. Someone had a church hymnal; a suitable song was suggested and recited; the chorale sounded in an exemplary four-part harmony, sung by the teachers and sextons. The Russians down in the camp were amazed at the harmonious singing. From an old sermon book, which someone had taken with him as a devotional book, a sermon was read aloud, by which everyone was deeply moved, where, at the end, some prayed freely and loudly. Then some songs were sung. The last was the Bessarabian spiritual favorite song “So Take Then My Hands” (*So nimm denn meine Hände*). We will never forget this unique worship service. We were in this camp for six weeks, in order to be prepared for war purposes by hard, unaccustomed exercises. It was especially difficult in unfavorable weather; but none of us Germans grumbled. All silently resigned themselves to the inevitable. The hardest thing to bear were the many lice which we had to constantly fight. In nice, warm weather we used the noon meal breaks, went to the nearest mountain stream, undressed stark naked, sat down in the deep ditch close to the running water, took our shirt first—every caught louse was thrown into the water and immediately disappeared before our eyes. Thousands were thus picked from the underwear and handed over to the raging mountain water. My wife had made me a Bulgarian purse out of rubberized fabric, which I wore on my chest on a strap around my neck. It had many wrinkles when it was contracted. During our exercises and marches we often had to sweat a lot; but the lice can not stand sweat well, they then sought shelter in the folds of my primitive money bag. At each pause I took the money bag out of my bosom and brushed the frightened bloodsuckers out of the folds with my forefinger; not individually, by the dozen. Enough of this disgusting occupation.

We also had the so-called “*Slowesnostj*” several times a week. Service rules, the titles of the various officers and much more. Among other things, everyone had to be able to pray the “Lord’s Prayer” in Russian (*Otsche nasch*). A Volga German from the region of Saratov, a young farm boy who did not understand a word of Russian, was supposed to learn to pray the “Lord’s Prayer” in Russian. The Non-Commissioned Officer in charge said it to him; the young fellow repeated what he heard. At last the Non-Commissioned Officer no longer recited the prayer, but dumb stuff. The soldier repeated everything. The group began to laugh out loud.

Then the young fellow noticed that he was being told miserable things and remained silent, saying nothing more. When the lesson was over, the young fellow came to me and said, “Grandfather (I already had gray hair at that time), when I come home and meet one of the ‘Bändel’ (Russians), he must get on his knees and must pray for me the ‘Our Father’ in German, if not, I will beat him so that he...” [preserving the original dialect: “*Großvadder, wenn ich hem komm und treff einen von den ‘Bändel’, der muss runder uf die Knie und muß mir’s ‘Vadderunser’ deutsch bete, wenn nit, so schlag ich’n, dass er...*”] So blasphemous was the prayer of the Lord treated by the Imperial Russian military.

During the time of our physical exercises, Russian women gathered near us with baskets; at each break we were offered different foods: oil cake (*Ölkuchen*), eggs, pork and the other pastries. The best were the oil cakes for three kopecks per piece or five kopecks for two. Ten to fifteen of our soldiers had to go into the forest every day to get firewood for cooking. They found many walnuts from wild nut trees, which they brought with them and distributed. We consumed a lot of such tasty nuts. We could also buy cheap good butter, because the main occupation of the mountain dwellers was cattle and sheep breeding. Little grain was sown. The delivery of the merchandise was done with oxen and buffalo oxen (*Biüffelochsen*) on two-wheeled carts. Often we found ourselves in our camp higher than the clouds. Down in the lowlands it was raining, while up here it was the most beautiful weather; a rare and interesting spectacle for us. — Katharinenfeld, famous for its excellent viticulture, with its liqueur and cognac factories was in our vicinity. It was difficult to reach only because it could only be reached by footpaths over mountains, through forests and ravines. A small group of our comrades dared to go there on a Sunday with a guide. They were received quite hospitably by the German inhabitants, among whom were also some Bessarabians, and were well entertained. In the evening, they returned to the camp excellently strengthened with filled bottles and other vessels. We were also allowed to enjoy the excellent alcohol-rich liquids.

In October of 1915, our apprenticeship (*Lehrzeit*) in Bely-Kljutsch came to an end. The youngest of our comrades were first assigned to the Turkish front. We older ones (I was 37 years old) came to Tiflis, where new battalions were formed. All teachers from Bessarabia were already accommodated as clerks in various Battalion Government Offices; only four were not; I was among them. Our comrade Friedrich Aldinger had received a package from home. He invited Eduard Tillmann and me to the good sheep’s cheese that he had received from his dear relatives. It tasted excellent to us; but while eating we complained about our situation, everyone got posts as clerks, except us. Then the door opened suddenly, a young Russian came in and asked the question: “Can you read and write?” (*Wü gramotnüje?*). We told him that we were teachers. “So much the better,” he said, and told us to come with him at once. We came to a large, beautiful office and immediately got work from the head of the government office (*Kanzlei*). Everyone did their job satisfactorily. The clear handwriting that teacher Wilhelm Mutschall taught us bore fruit here. We had already been working for two days; on the third day the three of us were again called by a soldier to another detachment. When we got there, a very young officer came towards us full of anger and shouted at us: “Who allowed you to work in a Foreign Department?” I, as the oldest, answered, “We did not know that this was a Foreign Department; we believed that we were working in our department”. — “You,” he shouted at me, “You are going to Baku [a city in Azerbaijan] as punishment, do you hear?!” (*Sluschajus wasche Bladgorodie*). “I have heard, Your Excellency.” Comrade Aldinger received a different

punishment. Tillmann again a different one. My other comrades worked on me that I would go to a higher officer and ask him to be allowed to stay here, so that we can stay together with our Bessarabian comrades. But even at home, before I was mobilized, I had made up my mind to surrender, wherever I was sent, without objection. There was also a young teacher, Eduard Fieß, whom I would have liked to take with me, because he did not have a post yet and would have liked to go to Baku. I personally turned to the Colonel (*Polkownik*) and asked him for permission to take young Eduard Fiess, who was still without a post, with me. He immediately allowed it, without any objection. So the two of us, Fieß and I, went to Baku in October of 1915, to the rich city with the many oil wells, and there we found our government office work in the First Company of the Workers' Battalion. It really took a lot of effort until we had familiarized ourselves; but all went well when all the difficulties in this regard had been overcome. Our Commanding Officer, Staff Captain Jufimzew, treated us humanely. Only in terms of climate and natural beauty did we make a bad change. A lot of precipitation in Bely-Kljutsch, but also wonderful sunshine with many fragrant flowers, with forests and wonderful sounding birdsong. In Baku, on the Caspian Sea, the pure desert, nothing but sand and stones, the air filled with the smell of naphtha [a petroleum distillate] and sooty dust. The numerous drilling towers and also the refineries for petroleum, gasoline and others made it difficult to breathe. In addition, the tropical heat in summer and the absence of any precipitation. Storms came from time to time, which drove a lot of sand into your eyes, so that you could not go out without protective goggles; but they also purified the foul air. There were only precipitations in January and February; then sometimes in moonlit night the temperature dropped below zero and small ice lumps (*Eisschliefer*) formed in puddles of water, but they disappeared again during the day. Once every two years, snow fell on a night in February, about ten centimeters [3.9 in] high. This was an event in Baku, a rare miracle of nature. Everyone, old and young, big and small, male and female, played snowball with much cheering. Our soldiers had to do hard work there. With provisions for people and animals, heavily loaded ships came down the Volga into the Caspian Sea, where they were unloaded by our soldiers or reloaded onto train cars for the Turkish Front. But one thing was wonderful in Baku: We were able to swim in the sea from April to October. In addition, there are many fish in the Caspian Sea. Among our soldiers were specially trained fishermen (*rybaki*). Our Company bought a barge and a large net, so the fishermen had to catch as many fish as we needed (our Company numbered 250 soldiers). Several soldiers had pans and oil; they ate self-fried fish to their hearts desire.

Among the rich oil manufacturers were several Germans; also a son of the former Pastor Pinquout from Tarutino. His brother was then General Superintendent in St. Petersburg. My Commander, Staff Captain Jufimzew, lived with Mr. Pingout in the yard of the oil refinery, so that I came there every day to have the finished correspondence signed. Our Staff Captain was a real good-natured Russian; but very careless. Wine, women, and cards were his favorite pastimes. Due to his reckless life, his nerves were sometimes severely affected. In such a state, it happened that he scolded a soldier for a minor offense and hurled all the Russian "strong words" in his face. But the next day, when he came back, he went to see the person in question, put his right hand on his shoulder and said: "My dear fellow (*Golubtschick*), yesterday I was too nervous and insulted you—forgive me (*Iswini*)!" I have never heard of a Russian officer being able to humble himself in such a way in front of a simple soldier. The self-awareness of his own mistakes made him popular with his soldiers. He had a son in the 4<sup>th</sup> Class of the Genady Grammar School, to whom I had to give German lessons. After he had passed his exam for the 5<sup>th</sup> Class in German,

his father came to me, thanked me and gave me 10 rubles; that was a lot of money at the time, because as a Russian soldier I got 75 kopecks a month at that time. But he did me another favor; he saw to it that I became a First Non-Commissioned Officer (*Starschy Pissaru*) with three braids on the shoulder and a monthly allowance of 11 rubles.

Higher authorities ordered camels to be sent to the Front. Reliable people from our Workers' Battalion had to be appointed. Germans were commissioned to do this, for which our Staff Captain had received the travel allowance (a considerable sum). But the soldiers said: "We have so much money now, that is enough. Give us our money when we come back." Good—agreed! The people fulfilled their duty and came back safely. In the meantime, however, Mr. Jufimzew had lost all the money playing cards. The people were patient; they waited, but sent a reminder every month. It was of no use; then they threatened to report the matter to the higher military authority. This crushed him, because he knew that he would then be demoted, discharged and punished for wasting state money. — One fine day he had disappeared. His wife came in great fear and asked us to look for him. We sent some soldiers who searched all of Baku and finally found him. He had a revolver with him with which he wanted to shoot himself. The soldiers pleaded until he agreed to return to his Company. He came, confessed his guilt and promised to have a part of his salary drawn monthly and thus pay off the debt. Apparently everything was in order, but it was too difficult for him to keep his promise; there was not enough to meet his needs. Then one from the Company made the suggestion: "Each soldier contributes one ruble. The money is taken by Assistant Clerk Alachanow (a good card player) and goes to the club with the Commander. "Perhaps through skillful play it will be possible to win a sum that will help out in this fatal situation." Both played a whole night and won so much that they could eat their fill in the club. So again no solution to the serious problem. — The next evening Assistant Clerk Alachanow said to me: "Mr. Kräenbring, would you like to help our Commander?" — "Yes, sir," I said, "I would like to, but how am I supposed to help if I have no money?" — "I know a way," said Alachanow, "and if you go with me, it will succeed. The Commander owes our baker, an old Armenian, a rather large sum for bread, as well as our butcher (an old Persian) for meat. Both are rich and can help our Staff Captain; if not, then the money they have to get from him is lost. — Said and done. We went to the bakery at 11 o'clock in the evening and woke him up. "What is the matter, has some misfortune happened?" — "It can happen," said Alakhanov, "our Jufimzew has decided to take his own life." — "What, he wants to take his own life? He still owes me a considerable sum of money." "That is why we came here," said Alakhanov, "so that you do not lose your money, you will have to lend him another sum, because if he takes his own life, it is all gone. But help him now in his time of need, then he can pay you the whole debt later." — "Good," said the old baker, "I will give the requested amount again." Then we woke up the butcher, the old Persian. There, too, our negotiations had the same success. — Two German landowners were still in our Company; they gave 100 rubles each. Thus, the cunning Alakhanov (also an Armenian) found a way to solve the serious problem. The Commander thanked him—and wept with joy. The camel transporters received their money, Jufimzew remained alive and led his Company in an exemplary manner.

At that time, I received the sad news from my wife that my son Rudi, eleven years old, had died of pneumonia. That hurt me very much; he was the healthiest and most obedient of my six children, and because of that the dearest. With the help of God, I overcame the pain. — At that

time, a new provision was made that anyone who loses a member of his family through death is entitled to leave. I was allowed to take advantage of the regulation when the time was right.

The overthrow came in March of 1917. The last Emperor, Nicholas II, resigned, and the chaos in all strata of the Russian population grew worse from day to day, including in the military. Many officers were killed by their soldiers; we gave our Staff Captain the life he wanted to take. Immediately after the Coup, our officer came to his Company and gave a speech. Among other things, he said that a new era is now beginning for the Russian Empire. We all had to recognize and confess that we had made mistakes, mistakes that we should not make from today on. We all wanted our Russian fatherland to regain honor and prestige in the world. We would only achieve this if everyone at his post fulfilled his duty conscientiously. Most likely, Russia has ceased to be an empire. Therefore, from today on, all titles for officers and other high officials were abolished. He no longer wanted to hear the salutation from any soldiers: *Wasche Wysokoblagorodie* (Your Highness), but only: *Gospodin Stabskapitan* (Mr. Staff Captain). So he knows who he actually is with every address. The title *Wysokoblagorodie* does not prove this to him. "Are we who we are; from today on we are *Towarischtschi!* (Comrades). — Long-lasting applause!! After this introduction to the new period, Comrade Jufimzew invited all his Non-Commissioned Officers to tea. A Non-Commissioned Officer, who was more conceited than he was, and who felt himself already in the saddle as a Bolshevik, said: "That people are still so dumb, run to the churches and believe in God, that must come to an end. Our *Towarischtsch Kräenbring* is a teacher and reads the Bible every day and often goes to church. He has to get out of that habit now." Then the Commander said: "I am a very thoughtless person, although I had pious parents; but I have gained one conviction that I will not let myself be deprived of: the Christian religion ennobles man!" (*Cristianskaya Religia oblagoraschiwaet Tscheloweka*). He said to me in private: My dear Kräenbring, believe me, if I had in my troops nothing but such people as the few Germans, then I would be the First Officer on the whole Caucasian Front."

As punishment I was sent to Baku, but it was my good fortune. Our comrades at the Front, who had to spend day and night, winter and summer in the open air, had to carry much heavier loads than we did and were in constant danger of death. We had a bedroom that could be heated in cold weather. We also had bugs, but we tackled them with petroleum and used it to stop their pinching. Everyone also had his bed, even though a rather primitive one; but a restful one. What I also highly appreciated, I had many sincere friends in my Company, both among the Germans and the Russians, and also had the full confidence of my Commander. Thank God I and my comrades were doing relatively well. We saw and heard nothing of the thunder of cannons and battles.

The Soldiers' Council, which had been formed after the resignation of the Emperor, also included the gold of the Commander. A small sum was regularly withdrawn to pay his debts. I do not know whether Staff Captain Jufimzew became free of debt; I was entitled to a holiday in September of 1917, which I got. I went home with the firm intention not to return to the disorganized Russian army under any conditions. With the help of God, I arrived home safe and sound and stayed at home.

During the war, the Imperial Russian Government had a plan to resettle all Germans of Bessarabia in Siberia. This plan was prevented from taking place by the resignation of the

Emperor; we were allowed to stay in our homeland. — Romania took advantage of Russia's fatal situation and occupied Bessarabia in 1918. Thus we were saved from Bolshevism. — In the autumn of 1940, we were resettled to Germany by the Third Reich; thus we were saved from Bolshevism for the second time. God, the Lord, held His protective and sheltering hand over us and guided us wonderfully. Let us never forget to thank Him from the bottom of our hearts for His gracious guidance and direction!

We have lost all our earthly goods through the Resettlement, as well as through the Flight from the advancing Russians in 1945, but the precious good, the faith in the Almighty Triune God, has remained with us. Therefore, let us always take to heart what our church choirs have so often sung with special delight and enthusiastic passion:

*Der Herr ist mein getreuer Hirt.  
Er sorgt, dass mir nichts mangeln wird.  
Er weidet mich auf grüner Au,  
tränkt mich wie Blumen durch den Tau.*

The Lord is my faithful shepherd.  
He makes sure that I will not miss anything.  
He grazes me on green meadows,  
Waters me like flowers by the dew.

*Chor: Der Herr ist mein getreuer Hirt,  
Der Herr ist mein getreuer Hirt.*

Chorus: The Lord is my faithful shepherd,  
The Lord is my faithful shepherd.

*Mit milder Hand gibt er das Brot.  
Er stillt den Schmerz und hilft aus Not;  
gesund läßt er mich tätig sein,  
schenkt mir zur Arbeit das Gedeihn.*

With a gentle hand he gives the bread.  
He calms the pain and helps when in need;  
Healthy he lets me be active,  
Gives me the vitality for the work.

*Chor: . . .*

Chorus: . . .

*Er führet mich auf rechter Bahn,  
mich täuscht kein Irrtum, schreckt kein Wahn;  
er ist mein Stecken und mein Stab,  
von God kommt mir mein Trost herab.*

He leads me on the right path,  
No error deceives me, no delusion frightens me;  
He is my dwelling place and my staff,  
From God comes my consolation.

*Chor: . . .*

Chorus: . . .

[Translation Ends]