

WHAT WERE SLOVAK TROOPS DOING IN COCHRANE ONTARIO IN 1920?

By Ernie Bies, Ottawa March 2014

Layout by Frank Pellow



Czecho-Slovak Legion in Cochrane in 1920 from collection of Gerry Robichaud, used with permission.

A friend sent me a link to a photo that showed a large contingent of soldiers in unfamiliar uniforms enjoying an unsupervised smoke break on the Cochrane railway station platform. Someone had hand-written “Slovak Troops Passing Cochrane Ont.” on the face of the card. Canadian National Railway Colonist passenger cars were clearly identifiable in the picture.



Further investigation led to the original listing of a photo post card on EBay, suggesting it was from the 1930s. It originated in the Netherlands and ultimately sold for \$172.50. This raised more questions as the uniforms were World War 1 vintage with their puttee leg wrappings and French Foreign Legion type forage caps. Being familiar with Slovak history in Northern Ontario, I was not aware of any circumstances that could explain this scene. Before 1918, the Slovaks were under the yoke of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They were conscripted to fight for the Central Powers of Austria, Hungary and Germany against the Triple Entente of England, France and Russia. Then in 1939 Slovakia became a client state of Germany and again was aligned with the Axis powers against the Allies. There was a POW camp in the Kapuskasing area in WW1 and another in Montieth in WW2 but no Slovaks were interned there. The Canadian National name on the letter boards of the rail cars indicated that the time frame was after 1918, when the Canadian Government Railways, precursor to the CNR, was formed.

Friends pointed me in the direction of the Czecho-Slovak Legion, a volunteer army fighting for the Allies in Russia, and their repatriation from Vladivostok, Siberia in 1920. Some of these Legionnaires crossed Canada on their way home to their newly formed country of Czechoslovakia. Although my parents had come to Canada from Czechoslovakia in the 1930s and settled in Bradlo, a Slovak community near Hearst, the history of the Czechoslovak Legion was new to me, but not for long.

Books, internet articles, in English and Czech, a DVD called “The Accidental Army” produced by Bruce Bendinger in his Czech Legion Project and microfilms and files at Library and Archives Canada provided the answers. The story of the Czecho-Slovak Legion and its passing connection to Northern Ontario began to emerge. This article will provide a concise history of the Czecho-Slovak Legion and its journey across Canada followed by excerpts from the war diary of František Breber, eye witness to history.

THE CZECHO- SLOVAK LEGION

Their story began before World War 1 when Czech and Slovak nationalists, who were seeking independence from the Austro-Hungarian Hapsburg Regime, began to organize and train under the guise of gymnastic clubs, called Sokols. When Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife were assassinated in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, these young men were reluctantly conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian Army and sent to the Russian front. Rather than fight their fellow Slavs many chose the path of passive resistance as characterized in the classic novel by Jaroslav Hašek, "The Good Soldier Švejk". Others just threw down their arms and surrendered.

Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Czechs and Slovaks had previously settled in Russia. They successfully petitioned Tsar Nicholas II to allow them to form a dedicated fighting unit and he approved the formation of a small Rifle Brigade, called a Družina, in the Russian army. Commanded by Russian officers it was initially used mainly for propaganda and reconnaissance purposes to encourage their fellow countrymen to resist their Austro-Hungarian masters. Crawling through the no-man's land, they listened to the conversations in the opposing trenches. When they heard Czech or Slovak voices they would encourage them to defect and join the Russian forces. Though successful, this was a very dangerous exercise as anyone caught consorting with the enemy was shot on the spot. Some of the defecting troops were shot by distrusting Russian soldiers as they approached unarmed trying to surrender. On one occasion a brass regimental band made the dash from one trench to the other with all their musical equipment in tow and promptly set up to play their traditional songs on the other side. Soon there were thousands of Czech and Slovak prisoners of war biding their time in Russian camps in Siberia willing to rejoin the fray on behalf of the Allies.

During this time Tomáš Masaryk, Eduard Beneš and Milan Rastislav Štefánik, who are recognized as the founding fathers of Czechoslovakia, formed a government in exile, lobbying Britain, France, America and Russia for recognition of the republic of Czechoslovakia and for funding for their cause. Masaryk and Štefánik travelled to Russia to convince the government to release the Czech and Slovak POWs and allow them to join the fight on the side of the Allies. The long term goal was to gain support from the Allies for their new country and to develop an army to protect it. Štefánik was a world renowned astronomer who had applied his trade in France where he became a French citizen. He became an aviator in the French Army and quickly rose to the rank of general. He was instrumental in convincing France to support fighting units in both France and Italy. Since non citizens could not join the French army, these units became part of the French Foreign Legion. Their uniforms were distinguished by their caps and ultimately the units became known as Legionnaires.

Early in 1917 Russia agreed to the release of POWs to join the rapidly expanding Czecho-Slovak Legion and soon it boasted a fighting force of 70,000 battle-hardened men under the command of French General Maurice Janin. France and the Allies provided financial support and military equipment. The Russian political situation was in turmoil when, on March 15, 1917, political unrest resulted in revolution and the abdication of the Tsar. A provisional government was formed by Alexander Kerensky although the Allies secretly hoped that the Tsar could eventually be restored to power - after all, the Tsarina was Queen Victoria's granddaughter. The Czecho-Slovak Legion continued to fight on the side of the Allies facing their first major test in the battle of Zborov in the Ukraine. Though outnumbered three to one they defeated the Germans and Austro-Hungarians taking more than 4,000 prisoners. In October, a second revolution by the Bolsheviks forced Kerensky to flee the country. He ran the government, now known as the Whites, from exile as they continued to battle the Bolshevik Reds. Navy war hero, Admiral Alexander Kolchak, now took command of the White Russian Army. The Admiral was soon named supreme ruler of the Russias, establishing a capitol at Omsk and gaining control of most of the Russian treasury, including eight train car loads of gold. Czecho-Slovak leader Masaryk issued strict orders that the Legion must avoid participation in this Russian civil war and should return to France to fight on the Western front. The Allies had other plans for them, preferring that they maintain a military presence in Russia and protect the

Trans Siberian Railway. The Soviet Red Army, preferring to concentrate on defeating the Whites, negotiated the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty with the Germany in March 1918 and withdrew from the global war. The terms of the treaty required that the Russians turn the Legion members over to the Germans and Hungarians where they would face certain execution as deserters. This left the Legion facing the impossible task of breaking through the German lines themselves to return to France and the Western Front. They chose instead to consolidate their forces and move east for evacuation from the Pacific port of Vladivostok. The Bolsheviks offered them safe passage but demanded they give up most of their armaments and rifles which would have left them vulnerable to attack from the German and Austrian POWs now being released. The Reds in each town they came to issued more demands and several skirmishes occurred which escalated into open warfare and became known as the revolt of the Legion.

The Allies had asked General Janin and the Czecho-Slovak Legion to provide protection for Admiral Kolchak and the eight car loads of gold that represented half of the Russian treasury. Continuing their eastward journey, they commandeered all the trains they encountered. Approaching Ekaterinberg, where the Bolsheviks were holding the Tsar and his family prisoner, the Legion found they were a day late. The Bolsheviks had executed the entire Romanov family and obliterated all traces of them on July 17, 1918, then abandoned the city. The Soviets then changed their minds on the evacuation of the Czech Legion, insisting they surrender their arms and join the Red Army or be shot.

The Legion's journey to the east continued as they secured the entire 8,000 mile length of Trans Siberian railway but at the cost of doing constant battle with the Bolshevik Red Army who would have long memories. The Legion also had a strong Engineering component as one of the tactics of armoured train warfare was to destroy tracks and bridges to trap the enemy then rebuild them the next day so they could move on. They carried a flatcar loaded with rails and ties with them for that purpose. Living on the trains was a challenge as their homes were simply converted boxcars called *tépluškas*, meaning warm places. Sleeping on makeshift wooden bunks, stacked two or three high with 30 or 40 men to a car, they covered themselves with their coats and used their packs as pillows. Stoves or a simple steel plate on which wood was burned, were installed to combat the minus 40 degree Siberian winter nights. These were fueled with whatever coal or wood they could commandeer, including wooden fences. Those in the centre were warm, those at the outside felt the chill. The toilet was a hole in the floor covered by a wooden disc on a peg, or the open box car door. They tried to make their lives on the rails more pleasant by decorating their *tépluškas* with colourful scenes from home and regimental insignia. They had mobile kitchens and bakeries and even produced a daily newspaper. Armaments, equipment and horses were also carried on the trains which were called echelons.



Train photos courtesy of Dr. Jan Kana, Czech Republic.

THE BIRTH OF A NATION

The Allies recognized the new country of Czechoslovakia on October 28, 1918 and Tomáš Masaryk was elected the first president, serving till 1935, when Eduard Beneš succeeded him. Štefánik had tragically been killed in a plane crash at the Bratislava airport on May 4, 1919. He was buried in his home town of Košariská where a tomb was built in his honour in 1928 atop Bradlo Hill. He had spent many hours on this hill studying the stars in his early vocation as an astronomer. The Slovak community of Bradlo near Hearst was named after his final resting place.

REPATRIATION

With the end of the war on November 11, 1918, the Legion thought they were homeward bound but, again, due to the unsettled state of the Russian government, the Allies requested that they maintain order over the Trans –Siberian railway and protect, among other things, British mining interests. Feeling obligated due to the previous support they had received from Russia and the Allies, and in anticipation of future considerations in the forthcoming Peace Conference, they found themselves returning westward over previous battlegrounds. In the meantime the Red Army was gaining in strength and numbers and winning back some of the key positions. After years of constant battle some of the Legionnaires refused to continue fighting in a war they had no part of. Some laid down their arms and set out on foot to return home, a voyage that took up to two years for those lucky enough to escape immediate execution by the Reds. Admiral Kolchak had become a ruthless dictator and the Bolsheviks wanted revenge as well as the Russian Treasury which he and his Czecho-Slovak protectors still controlled. Finally an agreement was made between General Janin and the Bolsheviks whereby the Legion would be allowed to leave Russia but not with the Gold or the Admiral who was turned over to the local government. He was tried and executed, tarnishing the images of both General Janin and the Legion. Rumours persist that not all of the gold was turned over and some became part of the Czechoslovak Treasury.

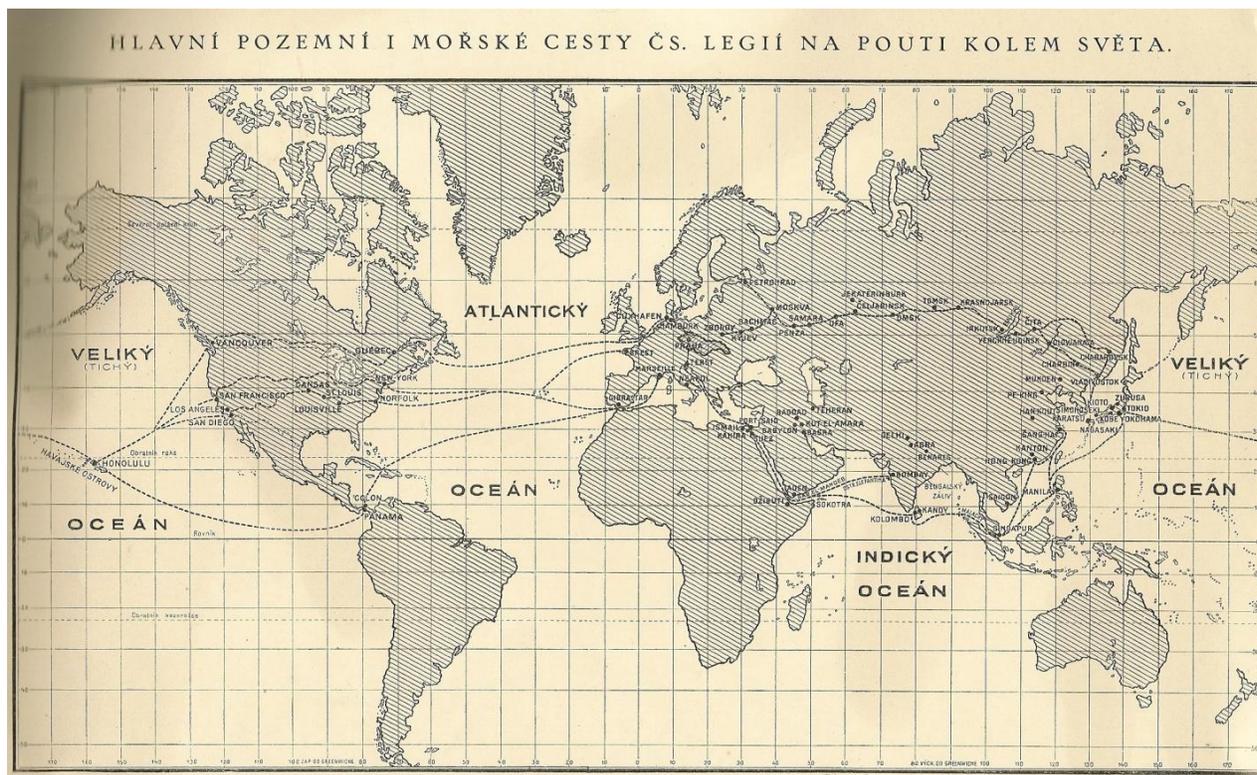
The original repatriation plan was that in recognition of the service and sacrifices made by the Legion, the Allies would ship 72,000 troops, splitting then evenly between Canadian and American Pacific Ocean ports, then overland by rail and across the Atlantic home. However, the discussions of logistics were taking too long and no ships were waiting in Vladivostok.

Impatient with the Allies who were slow to provide ships for the evacuation, the Czechoslovak government chartered foreign vessels from Japan, China, Russia and other countries. Wounded soldiers were first to leave Vladivostok on January 15, 1919, when the Roma sailed for Naples with 139 passengers arriving on March 3. The Madras followed on February 12, with 415 wounded soldiers. Seven ships sailed through Japan, Singapore, the Philippines, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean to bring an additional 7,497 evacuees to Trieste, Italy. Another six ships with 5,090 Legionnaires took the American route, some sailing directly through the Panama Canal via Cuba and Gibraltar to Marseille. Others docked in San Diego and San Francisco where the evacuees travelled overland by train to New York and Norfolk before shipping out again for Europe, delivering 3,027 to Brest and the remainder to Marseille, France. The Nanking docked in San Diego on July 4, 1919 where the troops witnessed their first Fourth of July celebrations before going to Washington, DC to meet President Woodrow Wilson, who thanked them for their war effort on behalf of the Allies. A total of 13,141 members of the Czech Legion were evacuated in 1919 but this still left almost 60,000 waiting for help in Vladivostok.

The Czechoslovak government even spent forty million crowns to purchase the Japanese ship, Tajkaj Maru. Due to the instability of the Czech Crown at the time this was probably less than \$1 million U.S. They renamed it the Legion, making it the first ship in the navy of this land-locked country. It was later sold to a Greek ship owner and renamed the Lily, and was torpedoed by a German submarine on March 9, 1942 and sent to a watery grave.

France, who had funded most of the operating costs in Siberia, including providing new uniforms for all for the trip home, declared that their responsibilities would end when the Legion left Siberia. Britain and the U.S. then agreed to share the costs to complete the repatriation with the U.S. providing twelve more ships and Britain nine. Seventeen of these carried more than 33,000 passengers to Trieste Italy with some of them making two trips.

Their various routes home are illustrated on this map:

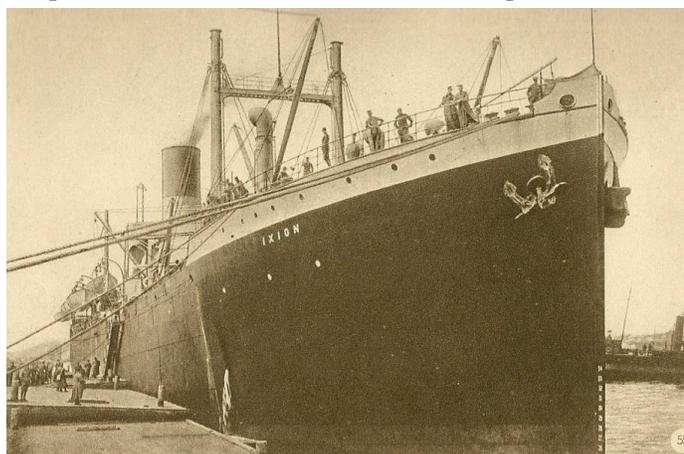


From *Navrat Československých legií kolem světa* (The return of the Czechoslovak Legions around the World) (Praha, Památník odboje, 1921) ¹

VLADIVOSTOK TO VANCOUVER

By April, 1920, the numbers of the Canadian component had been reduced to 9,000 as it proved more practical to ship most of the men home via the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean through Italy using direct steamers. Only three ships were bound for Canada, the *Ixion*, the *Protesilaus* and the *M.S. Dollar*.

The Blue Funnel Liner *Ixion* left Vladivostok on May 23, 1920 with 131 officers, 2,774 men and four Russian bears on board. It arrived at the Evans, Coleman and Evans dock in Vancouver at two P.M. on Sunday June 6. The Bears, mascots of the different regiments, were very tame and



¹ Hereafter just referred to as *Navrat Československých*

playful, one even getting its fifteen minutes of fame with a picture in the Vancouver Sun on June 8, 1920. The men were entertained aboard ship by the bears, supplementing the formal lectures by the officers and impromptu regimental band concerts and programs coordinated by Y.M.C.A. volunteers.



Regimental Band on Board. Photo courtesy of Āavrat Āeskoslovenskych

Under the command of 28 year old Colonel B.P. Vuchterle, the troops consisted of a detachment of Engineers, a horse Battery, the seventh Regiment and the Storming (Assault) Battalion. The seventh Regiment was composed mostly of Slovak soldiers and presumably these were the soldiers pictured in the original postcard showing Slovak troops passing Cochrane Ontario. Only a few dignitaries and local Bohemians greeted the ship as the date of arrival was uncertain and not well publicized but the Red Cross and other charitable organizations were on hand with cigarettes, chocolates, oranges and other refreshments for the visitors.

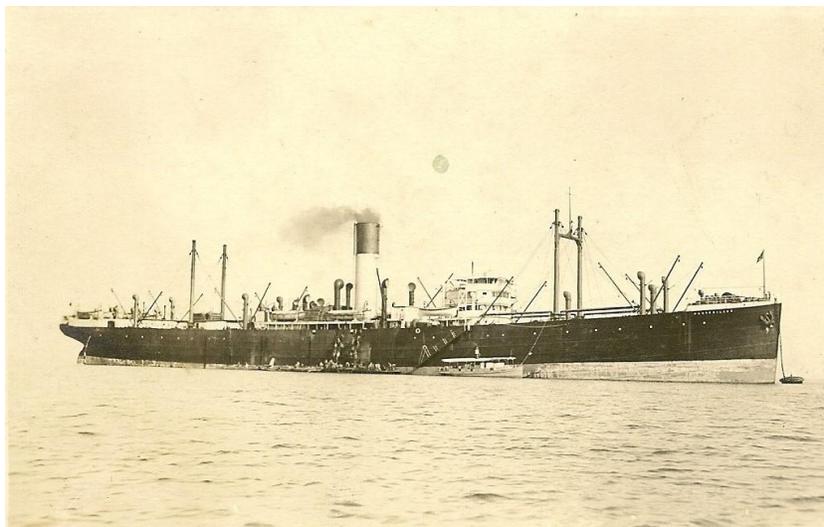
The officers were smartly dressed with curved swords at their sides. The well disciplined men, dressed in long great coats, many adorned with combat ribbons, ranged in age from early twenties to grizzled veterans of fifty plus. After their refreshments they formed up, carrying rifles and side-arms and wearing metal helmets, they marched through Vancouver to the Canadian National Railway station for the next phase of their round-the-world trip. The first of five trains, with fourteen cars in each, left the Vancouver station at eleven that night with the others following on one to two hour intervals.

Colonel Vuchterle said he was glad they were out of the turmoil in Russia and going home where they would not make war on any people but would defend their land.

The next day, June 7, 1920, the headline in the Vancouver Sun reported: "Vancouver People See Khaki-Clad Men Who Fought With Kolchak. First Contingent of Czechoslovak Troops Pass Through the City. Three Thousand Warriors From battlefields of Asia Come and Go."

The June 22, 1920 edition of the Vancouver Sun announced: "Second Contingent of Czechs Arrive. Nearly Three Thousand Pass Through City on Long Trip Home" They were delivered to the Great Northern Dock aboard another Blue Funnel Liner, the *Protesilaus*, which departed Vladivostok on June 8 and arrived in Vancouver at one p.m. on Monday, June 21. Commanded by Colonel Vaclav Petřik, it carried 159 officers and 2,569 members of the 9th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Artillery Regiment and 3rd Heavy Artillery Division. They were greeted by about forty members of the Bohemian National Alliance and other members of the public, as well as the Red Cross with their usual refreshments. The troops again marched through the city to the CNR station and boarded trains for their trip east. The first train left shortly before eight p.m. with three more at one hour intervals.

Y.M.C.A. volunteers, called secretaries, travelled with the ships. They had gramophones, movie projectors, cigarettes, chocolate bars, reading and writing materials and various games. They organized concerts with the regimental bands to help the men pass the time. Czech national J.K. Váleš was the secretary on board the Protesilaus and he was assisted by M. McLean, of Yorkton Saskatchewan. Mclean had gone to Vladivostok with the Canadian Siberian Forces, taken his discharge and stayed to work with the Y.M.C.A for more than a year. At the end of the trip they presented souvenir post card photos of the ships to each traveller. This photo post card of the Protesilaus was presented to the men in Quebec on June 28, 1920 by J.K. Váleš. Y.M.C.A Secretary:



Protesilaus post card from the author's collection

The final contingent, largest of the three, had departed Vladivostok on June 6 aboard the steamer M.S. Dollar, and arrived at the Great Northern dock in Vancouver at one p.m. on Tuesday, June 22. The 3,429 passengers on board were composed of 137 officers, 3,154 troops, 2 women, 2 children, 134 mobilized labourers, as well as a Russian bear and a Siberian pony. The two children were orphaned Russian boys who had been adopted by family men. One, fourteen year old Dmitri Karpov, was left homeless when his parents were killed and his family scattered. The majority of the troops were members of the 8th Cavalry Regiment, First Infantry Regiment and the Engineering Company under the command of Colonel Novák. As reported on June 23 by the Vancouver Sun under the heading: "Fine Display by Czech Rearguard" they proceeded North on Hastings, along Granville, down Georgia, across the viaduct to Main, then on to the CN station. The procession took more than an hour to pass the corner of Granville and Hastings. Four regimental bands, one led by a huge Russian bear pulling a drum on a cart and another led by a Siberian pony enhanced the scene. Four battalions of infantry were commanded by Colonel Nošal, a former private in the Austrian army, while Major Kraichirik, a former private in the Russian army, led the cavalry. Though not mounted, the cavalry presented a splendid image in their red trousers and fur lined caps. They marched through the city and boarded six east bound trains, the first leaving at five that evening, the rest on hourly intervals.

The Y.M.C.A. secretary attached to the M.S. Dollar was J.F. Kabrna, another Czech. Both he and Váleš from the Protesilaus returned with the troops to their homes in Bohemia.

Colonel Vuchterle, who was in command of the Czechoslovak movement across Canada, gave a lengthy interview to the Vancouver Sun, published on June 14, 1920 entitled "Czecho-Slovak Commander Says Kolchak Responsible for Collapse in Siberia." His detailed account of the pre-history of Czechoslovakia through the years of oppression under the Hapsburg Empire, the attempts at Germanizing Bohemia and

Slovakia and their successful drive for independence must have been very educational for the readers of the day. He was also not very sympathetic to the plight of Russian Admiral Kolchak stating his reign of terror brought about his own demise.



Colonel Vuchterle reviewing troops at Valcartier. Photo courtesy of: Ľavrat Československých

ACROSS CANADA BY RAIL

With reimbursement promised by Britain, the Canadian government facilitated the movement and accommodation of the Legionnaires across Canada. The original plan to temporarily house them in an old army barracks at Williamshead, BC was abandoned as it had previously been used as a hostel for Chinese Coolies employed on the railroad and was in need of major upgrade and maintenance. It was then decided to transfer them immediately from ship to train and move them across Canada to the WW1 training camp at Valcartier, twenty minutes north of Quebec City. Arrangements were then made to ship them home from either Quebec City or Halifax, through Cuxhaven, Germany, after a few weeks of rest and recuperation.

The Secretary of State for the Colonies provided direction to all Departments on December 17th, 1919 that the Department of Railways and Canals would coordinate the movement across Canada.

The Department of Immigration and Colonization advised the Department of Militia and Defence, on January 15, 1920, that, while there was no need for guards as the Czechoslovaks were under discipline, they did require a nominal roll certified at Vancouver and again verified at any Atlantic port where these troops were to re-embark for Europe.

The Department of Militia and Defence provided support in the form of medical staff en route and in the fifty bed hospital in Valcartier as well as accommodations at Valcartier. The Czechoslovak medical staff and orderlies proved to be very competent and well supplied with bandages and dressings. Only about two dozen Canadian medical personnel were required, most of them recently demobilized veterans of the Canadian Expeditionary Forces who were taken on as civilian employees at their old rates of pay with permission to wear their uniforms. About 140 of the Czechoslovaks required hospital care in Valcartier with stays from a few days to several weeks for various ailments and war wounds. The Department of

Militia and Defence issued a bill for their services on December 11, 1920, totalling \$34,980.30. This did not include the cost of transport across Canada or the meals provided in camp which were the responsibility of the Department of Railways and Canals.

An undertaking of this magnitude was not without a few wrinkles. Czechoslovak commander Colonel B.P. Vuchterle arrived with the first contingent of battle-weary veterans. They had survived six years in the battlefields of Siberia and landed penniless in Vancouver on June 6. The British Government had approved funding of \$300,000 for wages for the troops. Through bureaucratic red tape the funds were not approved or provided by Canada on arrival, causing severe distress for this first group. They had to travel right across Canada with only a \$5 advance, unable to buy gifts for their families that they had not seen for six years, until they got to Valcartier. Colonel Vuchterle went to Ottawa on June 16 to meet with the Minister of Finance to sort it out. Funding was finally approved on June 19 and a few days later the men got their first pay.

Another issue that surfaced was the request by the railways to the Minister of Labour to allow recruitment of the railway workers for track maintenance on Canadian projects for the summer. They offered to relieve the government of the cost of transporting them across Canada and would cover the cost of sending them home in the fall, enabling them to earn high wages for the summer. The Labour Unions in BC were opposed to this and the soldiers just wanted to get home so no recruitment was done. Perhaps some felt their skills were above track maintenance work.

Rail transport was assigned to the Canadian National Railways who had provided transportation quotes per head of \$56.52 to Quebec, \$57.32 to Montreal and \$70.22 to Halifax, with 75 cents a day for food. At the last minute Canadian Pacific Railways provided quotes of \$50.00, Vancouver to Quebec or Montreal, \$58.80 to Halifax and 75 cents a day for meals. Britain advised that it would only pay the lowest rates so CNR agreed to match the CPR rates. This resulted in a flurry of letters, laden with sarcasm, between CPR President E. W. Beatty, the Minister of Railways and Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden. Beatty originally referred to the Slovaks as prisoners of war and stated: that the British Government had promised CPR half of the transport work; that CNR apparently did not need to follow ordinary business methods as long as they had Government officials diverting business regardless of the instructions of those controlling the routing; and that the government was discriminating and unfair. The government's response was: that no such agreement with the British could be found; that the CPR had previously been the sole beneficiaries of a British contract to transport some 125,000 Chinese Coolies throughout Canada without sharing the work; that the current project was deemed Federal Government business; that the CNR had mobilized trains and equipment to Vancouver at great expense and would suffer a great loss if terms were changed at this late date; and that any division of responsibility at this late date would result in confusion, so no changes were possible at this late date..

The CNR mobilized fifteen special trains, each composed of 1 baggage car, 1 commissary (kitchen) car, 1 table (dining) car, 1 tourist (Smoking) car and 9 to 11 Colonist passenger cars. Each train carried an average of 600 passengers with the luxury of individual berths for sleeping.

The first one, Special W6, left at 23:00 June 6, 1920, carrying thirty three officers and five hundred and ninety-two troops. The officer in charge was Major Rudolf Hásek. The CNR passenger representative was E.E. McLeod of Edmonton.

The route was Vancouver to Quebec City with one hour plus stops at Kamloops, Lucerne, Edmonton, North Battleford, Kamsack, Winnipeg, Sioux Lookout, Grant, Cochrane, and Parent and with twenty minute breaks at about a dozen points in between, including Hearst Ontario. Valcartier was then just a short jaunt 20 minutes north of Quebec City.

There were also five special trains for excess baggage; one alone carried almost 400,000 pounds of military equipment and perhaps some of the gold from the Russian treasury?

Officers-in-charge for the Ixion passengers were Major Hásek, Major Nošal, Colonel Vána, Major Kouril and Major Papež. The Protesilaus passengers were under the command of Major Michmack, Major Kudrna, Captain Kopal, and Captain Korda. The final contingent from the M.S. Dollar had Colonel Nošal, Major Borečy, Major Fušek, Major Slunekl, Captain Sajbert, and Captain Silcer in charge of the trains.

The Czechoslovaks travelled with their own cooks and the railway supplied the necessary provisions. The officer commanding the Czechoslovaks reported that the feeding arrangements and quality of food was entirely satisfactory but requested an increase in bread rations. After six years of meagre rations and sleeping in their freezing tépluškas in Siberia this experience must have seemed first class to these men.

The travel across Canada was incident-free except for a handful of men who were left behind along the way when they took too long a sightseeing break and missed their trains. The Red Cross looked after them and they were put on the next train so that no one was lost.

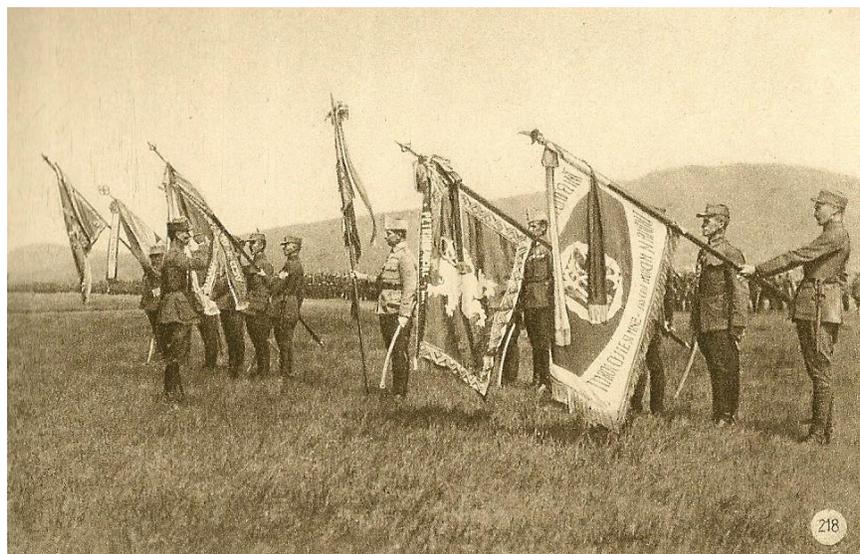
At the rates charged by CNR the cost of moving 9,000 plus troops across Canada was about \$500,000. Adding another \$200,000 for meals over an average of 30 days in train and in Valcartier, \$40,000 for Military Medical support and \$60,000 for excess baggage and other costs the total in Canada was about \$800,000. This does not include the cost of shipping the entire 70,000 or the overland costs in the U.S and Europe,



Czechoslovak Legion in Cochrane in 1920 from collection of Gerry Robichaud, used with permission.

VALCARTIER CAMP

The Legionnaires finally had a few weeks to rest after their constant travel over the past few months. They still maintained their discipline with the mornings dedicated to military drills and camp maintenance and the afternoons free for walks to explore the area or attend Civic functions. The grounds around their tents were decorated with intricate designs made with coloured rocks, sand and flowers as they hosted visits from dignitaries, civic officials, the media and the public. They presented band concerts and gymnastic demonstrations that were enjoyed by the citizens and they were able to demonstrate their superb military discipline and marching skills on many occasions.



Regimental Flags at Valcartier. Photo courtesy of: *Navrat Československých*

On June 18 Governor General Lord Devonshire personally welcomed them to Canada.

Then, on July 3, Quebec Lieutenant Governor Charles Fitzpatrick carried out an official inspection and presented the new colours that had just been received from Czechoslovakia to the regiment. The band played their new national anthem.

Many different gifts and tributes were exchanged as the Legion thanked Canadians for their hospitality and Canadians thanked the Czechoslovaks for their contribution and sacrifice in the war effort.



Quebec Lt Governor Charles Fitzpatrick presenting medals at Valcartier.
Photo courtesy of: *Navrat Československých*

HOMEWARD BOUND

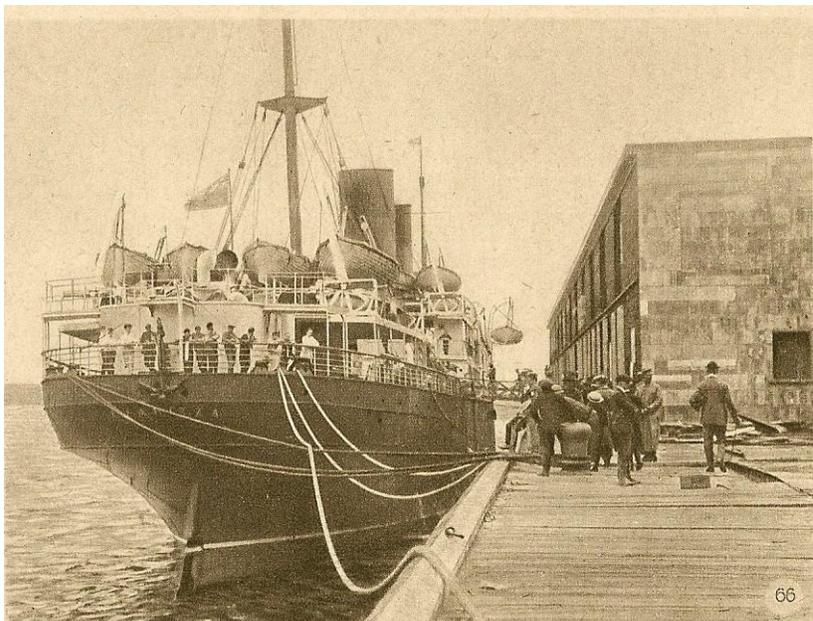
From Valcartier, some boarded ships in Quebec City and some in Halifax to deliver them to Germany.

The Czaritza departed Quebec for Europe on July 9 with 186 officers, 1,824 troops, 7 women, 2 children and 2 Russian bears on board.

They reached Cuxhaven Germany where they boarded trains on July 19, travelling through Germany where they faced protesting locals but were greeted enthusiastically by fellow countrymen in Podmokly Czechoslovakia.

The Valencia followed from Quebec, carrying 52 officers, 628 troops and a pony.

The Minnekahda sailed from Halifax with the bulk of the freight, 100 officers and 3,570 men and the Belgic completed the troop movement leaving Halifax in mid July, carrying 93 officers and 2,604 men.



The Czaritza at Quebec. Photo courtesy of: Ľavrat Československých

The last of the 7th Regiment made it home to Nitra on July 31, 1920, and were given a well deserved three-month vacation.

After concluding some business in New York on July 31, 1920, Colonel Vuchterle steamed to England aboard the White Star Liner Baltic completing the repatriation exercise and the Czecho-Slovak Legion's around the world odyssey.

AFTERWARD

Many of the Legionnaires returned to Czechoslovakia and assumed senior roles in the government and in the army. Fortunes changed in 1939 as many suffered at the hands of the Nazi regime facing imprisonment or execution for actions taken against Germany twenty years earlier. Those that survived then faced the wrath of the Communist Russians who denied them their heroic place in history, denouncing them for fighting against the Bolsheviks. Some ended their days in Siberian prison camps. A bridge honoring the Legion was renamed and statues and tributes removed. The Legionnaires and their families had to hide their history for another 40 years till the iron curtain fell and they could again display their memories with pride. The Legion Bridge got its name back. Even the Good Soldier Švejk was recognized when a giant granite bust of the author Jaroslav Hašek was unveiled to mark the 130th anniversary of his birth in 2013.

A total of fifteen trains sped east in June 1920 with 9,000 strangers absorbing the beauty of the Rocky Mountains, the prairies, farmlands and the forests of Canada from coast to coast. One wonders how many responded to the posters recruiting settlers for the Canadian West and for Northern Ontario a few years later.

Some Legionnaires returned to Canada and the U.S. where they had been treated with such kindness during the evacuation from Siberia. It would be interesting to determine if any of them found their way

back to the Northern Ontario Slovak communities of Tabor (Opasatika), Hunta (Cochrane) or Bradlo (Hearst) where some 130 families settled and rode out the depression.

Both the Ixion and the Protesilaus, steamers that brought the evacuees to Vancouver, were pressed into service by the Allies in World War II and were sunk by German mines or U Boats.

After the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948, Major Rudolf Hásek, who was in command of the first special train across Canada in 1920, immigrated to Canada. Forty years later, at the ripe age of ninety-eight, he participated in the 70th anniversary celebrations of the founding of Czechoslovakia in Toronto.

On March 30, 1968, Ludvik Svoboda aged 72, a former member of the Czechoslovak Legion, was elected President of Czechoslovakia. He is pictured to the right with veteran members of the Legions of the First World War

The last surviving member of the battle of Zborov, the Legions first major conflict in World War I, Alois Vocasek, died at the age of 107 on 2003.



Keystone Press Photo from the author's collection

CANADIAN DIARY OF A CZECH LEGIONNAIRE

Twenty three year old František Breber was participating in a Sokol gymnastics festival in Brno, on June 27 and 28, 1914, when the news of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo put an end to their games. Soon he and all able-bodied young Czechs and Slovaks were conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian Army, many against their will, and sent off to fight the Russians in the Eastern Front. Captured by the Russians in 1915, he languished in a Siberian prisoner of war camp until he was recruited to join the Czecho-Slovak Legion. He soon found himself assigned to the Armoured Train "Orlik" as a machine gunner and saw plenty of action patrolling the Trans-Siberian Railway. Later he was a first lieutenant in the Assault Battalion, commanded by Major Rudolf Hásek

In 1920 he joined the evacuation of the Czecho-Slovak Legion travelling east to Vladivostok and then to Vancouver aboard the steamer Ixion. His meticulous war diary provides his impressions of Canada as detailed in 2007, by his son Jiri Breber, in the Czech internet daily newspaper Neviditelný Pes, published by Lidovky.cz. Photos and excerpts from the diary used with permission of publisher.

Excerpts from his diary below show his experiences in Canada:

6 June, 1920: At 4:30 A.M. we were on our way to the Americas as we crowded the rails on the deck of the steamer "Ixion" looking back anxiously at the mainland. Our bear Misha, standing on her hind legs, was a head taller than us as she craned her neck to the mainland, flaring her nostrils. After two weeks on the stormy Pacific we spied the inviting green coast with its colourful rocks and scents.



At seven o'clock our ship stopped at Williamshead where we had medical examinations. No one was sick and we were thankful that our Commander Major Hásek's young Russian wife had recovered from her serious bout of sea-sickness as we were concerned for her life.

We steamed for Vancouver, arriving at two in the afternoon, with our military band playing. Two pretty young girls, smiling and waving banners, were the first to greet us. They surprised us when they answered our broken English greetings with the traditional Czech greeting 'Nazdár'.

More than 2,000 members of the seventh Regiment disembarked and were welcomed by a few local Czechs and city officials at a quick lunch. The port was closed to the public and some of our fellows thought that this was for fear of the evil "Bolsheviks" from Siberia. We soon dismissed their fears as we marched with our regimental band leading the way from the port to the train station.

Officers with unsheathed swords gleaming in the sun led each troop. Pulling a drum on a cart our mascot, Misha the Bear and her trainer led the 7th Regiment through the streets arousing great interest among the Canadians. The cavalry marched in their cloaks with spurs and boots clattering in perfect rhythm. Finally the Commando battalion, coatless but wearing steel helmets, with fixed bayonets, marched in tight formation, a joy to behold.

Crowds lined the streets and welcomed us shouting Hip Hip Hooray, Hello Boys and Nazdár. The police and Canadian officers were impressed with our discipline saying it was better than their own units returning from France.

We did not see much of Vancouver but after six years in Russia we experienced culture shock to see asphalted streets, electric street lights and tall reinforced concrete buildings, some ten stories high with many large windows.

The Vancouver railway station was wonderful with its covered tracks and platforms. The station, bathed in electric light, gave the impression of a great hall. Our train consisted of several Pullman cars, a dining car with a smoking room, and a special car for the cooks. No more boxcar *tépluškas* that we had lived in for years in Russia. We had dinner, a smoke in the smoking room and were off to bed. The cars had beds that were simply lowered from the walls creating a private booth with mattresses, sheets, blankets and pillows ready for sleeping. There was another bunk above and nice green curtains for privacy. A contrast from the years we had to sleep on wooden beds with a great coat for a blanket and a sack of hand grenades for a pillow.

7 June, 1920: Our train was far from Vancouver when I awoke, speeding through the Fraser River Valley, passing Hope and up a continuous incline. We drove through many tunnels and could see the shiny glaciers of the Rockies. We had a stop at Kamloops where our band entertained the locals at the station. Soon we reached Rogers Pass, at an elevation of 4,300 feet and looked up at Mount Sir Donald which reached 10,300 feet. We crossed steep gorges on bridges high above the valleys, through wild scenery until we reached the Blue River station. The mountain peaks disappeared into the clouds and we were spellbound by the colours cast by the sun on the slopes. I had dreamed about seeing mountains described by Karl May in the books I had read as a youth. At night we passed Mount Robson, the highest peak on our journey around the world, and reached Jasper, Alberta. The night was clear and with the moon shining over these great mountains, none of us slept as we watched from the windows.

8 June, 1920: The morning sky was overcast and raining so I could not enjoy the view of the Canadian Mountains by the rising sun. We passed Obed and Edson and reached Edmonton, the capital of Alberta at



three in the afternoon where we had a longer stop and received a \$5.00 advance on our salary. We explored the city near the station and saw wide clean streets, tall buildings and electric street cars. Back at the station the local people gave us cigarettes and oranges and we continued on our journey through fertile farmland where machines worked in the fields and the farmers drove tractors.

9 June, 1920: At Kamsack, Saskatchewan, many Russian immigrants met us and we had an interesting discussion about the situation in Russia before we had to get back on the train.

Some of the boys missed the train at Dauphin Manitoba when they thought the dispatcher said they had a one hour stop but the train pulled out while they were sightseeing. Major Hásek had them stop the train and we ran to get back on. The town of Dauphin looked like a large fairy tale scene with colourful houses set in blooming gardens.

10 June, 1920: We arrived in Winnipeg, Manitoba at two in the morning. Many Czechs lived there and they greeted us with our country's red and white flags and banners. They wanted to take us home to meet their families but the authorities said the stop could not be more than two hours so we could not go into the city. Some went anyway, missing the train. They were picked up by the next train and the officials became stricter with the rules ensuring that all were on board before leaving. They provided some advances so we could buy cigarettes and we moved on.

From Winnipeg we drove through endless forests and around many lakes. We went through a large Indian Reservation but saw very few natives as they lived far from the railway. At one station we did see some who lived in tents in the woods behind the station. They were the same as the whites but had darker skin and wore ordinary clothes. We expected to see the proud Sioux that we had read about in the novels of Karl May and James Fennimore Cooper. Some did come dressed in native costumes with feather headdresses and our photographer took some pictures. Some women carried their babies in pouches with just the head showing. They would attach these pouches to sticks in the ground and the babies could swing and almost stand.

In the middle of the night we passed Sioux Lookout and found ourselves in an inhospitable region. We saw traces of the fruitless struggle of the settlers, abandoned farms and villages, a wasteland of stone and sand and sparse forests.

11 June, 1920: Today we drove around lakes and a more interesting but sparsely populated area. Plenty of water but the trees were dry and rotting. About eleven o'clock we saw the aurora borealis. Ribbons of light rolled across the northern sky, their iridescent borders colliding and melting as new waves came. It is difficult to describe the beauty of this phenomenon. I had never seen such beautiful Northern Lights in Siberia.

12 June, 1920: This afternoon we thought we had reached the end of our rail journey as we arrived in Quebec City. We were excited thinking we would be staying in the stone fortress barracks that overlooked the city on the banks of the St. Lawrence River but, sounding its whistle, the train sped away. Twenty minutes later we were in Valcartier where we were to stay in tents in this former military training camp.

We thought we were being greeted by young girls but realized they were men in short skirts. These were the Scottish Highlanders playing bagpipes, flutes and drums, music that was new to us. Our Battalion assembled in front of the train and, carrying our rifles with bayonets fixed, we marched up the road to a nice camp, led by our band. Our boys had been through a lot and they showed their pride. It was more a ballet than a march and I was thrilled. We marched smartly past the British officers who saluted our banners and commander and suddenly, when our band stopped playing the terrible racket of the bagpipes threw off the timing of the marchers causing them to miss steps. Lieutenant Smetana and I called out cadence and told them to ignore the bagpipes, finally our company turned into the camp and the Scots stayed on the road. We agreed to a man that we could not march with bagpipes

The camp had accommodation for 50,000 men in rows of tents along asphalt roads. There were many Canadians and the back row was for us. Each tent held ten men. There were wooden buildings for kitchens, warehouses and washrooms. After we had freshened up and had dinner, we had a smoke and tried to chat with the Canadians with our limited English vocabulary.

16 June, 1920: The ship that was to take us home had just left England so we had a few days to fill. The mornings we trained and the afternoons were free. We cleaned up the area around the tents and kept our tents in order. The English Colonel and his retinue of officers paid a snap inspection and were impressed and complimented Major Hásek on the order and discipline of his troops.

In anticipation of a visit from the Governor General of Canada, the men took extra care of their tents and even improved the area around them.

New units from Siberia joined our camp. The 8th and 9th Regiments, the 3rd Artillery Division and the Jan Žižka 1st Cavalry brought our numbers up to more than 8,000 men.

17 June, 1920: The visit of the Governor General, Lord Devonshire was confirmed for the next day so the boys prepared the camp and grounds. Just as they decorated the walls of their *tépluškas* back in Siberia they landscaped the area around their tents with coloured stones and local materials, competing with each other for the best design. The paths were lined with flowers and painted archways. Battalion insignias were created from coloured stones and sand. Some created images of the Czech lion, Prague Castle and scenes from Bohemia while others paid tribute to legendary heroes, like Jan Hus and Jan Žižka. Some of the inlaid beds expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of pay lamenting “Across Canada with no Money” as they had only seen a five dollar advance for May and June. They worked far in to the night to complete their patterns.

18 June, 1920: We assembled in front of our tents under our banners in our dress uniforms with the regimental band playing. Colonel Váňa took command of the whole troop and we marched to the review field where the British and Czech flags waved from two poles. The Governor General arrived in a beautiful limousine accompanied by his wife, two daughters, and a whole group of officers and dignitaries. With the call to present arms Colonel Váňa led the march past the Viceroy as the band played the Fanfare from the Opera Libuše.

Then Lord Devonshire proceeded to inspect the troops and surprised them with the Czech greeting “Nazdár bratři” which meant hello brothers. He was startled as we all shouted back in unison “Nazdár.”

He then presented medals and military crosses and Major Hásek briskly led a march-past the Viceroy, brandishing his sword.



Governor General Review at Valcartier. Photo courtesy of Ľavrat Československých

We thought of the many bloody conflicts in Siberia where he led us bravely as we marched victoriously. We remembered our brothers who rested under Russian soil, a quarter of a battalion sacrificed for the Allied cause and for our independence. Our only regret was that we could not fight for the democracy of Russia but it was impossible as the majority of the Russian people were not ready for democracy and the Allies were exhausted after four years of war.

We returned to our camp and put away our equipment proud of the success of the day. Soon the Governor General joined us accompanied by his family and entire entourage. The guests toured our camp enthusiastically asking about the decorations. Crowds of people, journalists and photographers and important people from Quebec asked us questions but sadly our English was limited so we could not communicate well. They even went to see our bears before departing, happily complimenting us for our hospitality. The boys stayed up late discussing the successful day.

20 June, 1920: Today I was assigned the role of warrant officer for the whole battalion. The newspaper articles brought many visitors from as far away as Montreal and New York as they came to see the Czechoslovaks who had controlled the Trans Siberian railroad against great odds. Some brought gifts of cigarettes and chocolate for the boys.

21 June, 1920: We had the unpleasant experience of receiving vaccinations against typhoid in the afternoon.

23 June, 1920: We finally got paid for May and June and I received \$52. It was a lot of money as the exchange rate in the republic was 50 crowns for one dollar. That night some of the boys were not feeling well so it was best that they did not paid on arrival.

25 June, 1920: We went for a walk on the other side of the Valcartier River where we climbed a hill and enjoyed a beautiful view but were bothered by bloodthirsty mosquitoes.

On the way back we were curious about the many burrows we found in the ground. Ensign Žižka tried to catch a small animal for a pet but it hunched and sprayed him with a foul smelling liquid and ran into a burrow. Žižka could not get rid of the smell and could not go into his tent till some Canadians advised him to bury his clothes in the dirt and wash them in the morning. (There are no skunks in Europe)

29 June, 1920: We were invited for a tour of Quebec City. About 2,000 members of the 7th regiment boarded two long trains and arrived in the city at 10 in the morning. We were invited to a great hall where the Quebec Women's Association treated us to coffee, pastries, fruit, ice cream and cigarettes. Then we were taken in smaller groups to see the sights and then a dinner at Victoria Park. I visited Mr. Dumont, a local contractor, who showed me some of his building projects when he heard we were construction men as civilians. He offered us work after our army tour was over that would pay us \$5 a day to start. This was enticing as we could earn more than 6,000 Czech crowns a month here where we hardly made 1,800 crowns at home. I had not seen my parents for six years and decided to go home.

6 July, 1920: Last night we had services honoring Jan Hus and sang regimental songs. Today we had a large feast and a Sokol Festival. Several hundred of the men showcased their gymnastic skills. After the festival I arranged for the demobilization of the camp as our ship was waiting for us at the dock in Quebec.

8 July, 1920: We moved our belongings from Valcartier to the dock and saw a long white ship named Czaritza waiting for us. This was a former Russian ship that the British had seized due to an outstanding debt.

We loaded the baggage, some by hand and some in a big net lifted by a crane and lowered into the hold. At 10 o'clock we were loaded and went for dinner.

The Czaritza is a beautiful ship with three decks, a dining room for the officers, smoking and reading rooms and spacious and clean cabins for the officers and men.

9 July 1920: We left in the morning, sailing full steam into the yellowish waves of the St. Lawrence River. The river is so wide we could hardly see the other side. We saw picturesque fishing villages on shore alternated with forests, meadows and fields. We met large overseas ships heading for Quebec as well as local ferries and we passed islands with lighthouses.

When I went out on deck for a smoke after dinner we were already far into the Atlantic with just a flashing beacon on the distant shores of the American continent.

Goodbye Canada. You were friendly to us and I wonder if I will ever see you again in my lifetime?

18 July 1920: The Czaritza reached Plymouth England

20 July, 1920: The Czaritza docked at Cuxhaven, Germany where we were welcomed by the Czechoslovak Consul in Hamburg, Mr. Hugo Vavrečka. (Author's note - grandfather of future Czech President Vaclav Havel).

21 July, 1920: We crossed the border by train into Podmokly, Czechoslovakia.

HOME AT LAST.

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