



Was he downhearted' How a scientist dealt with four years of internment

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Thousands of British civilians were held in the Ruhleben internment camp near Berlin during the First World War. They were allowed a large degree of self-determination and established a miniature version of British male society behind the barbed wire. This included a flourishing bureaucracy and organisations promoting educational, cultural, religious and sporting activities, alongside less worthy pursuits such as gambling and drinking. The centenary of the opening of the camp prompted an [article in the BBC Magazine](#), to which readers responded with [memories of relatives who were interned there](#). At that time Derek Richards published his transcription and interpretation of the diaries kept by his father, Wyndham Richards, in the camp ([see separate article](#)). We have followed this story with particular interest, because our grandfather (Michael Stewart Pease) was also interned at Ruhleben and we have inherited the diaries he kept there, together with many letters and photographs from that era and the recollections he wrote subsequently. Interleaved between the pages of the diaries is a diverse collection of documents that provide very tactile evidence of our grandfather's day-to-day camp life: these range from the minutes of committee meetings and programmes for cultural events to administrative artefacts such as notifications from the parcels office and a receipt from the camp dentist. We have now transcribed and annotated the diaries and letters, and assembled them in a book which will be published later this year.

The title of this post paraphrases a catchphrase of the time ("Are we downhearted?") that became a rallying call to those interned in Ruhleben Camp. In public gatherings the response to the question was 'needless to say' a simple and resounding "No!", but the diaries provide a much more personal and subtle account of how an individual coped with his incarceration. Science played a key role in this. Michael had graduated in Natural Sciences from Cambridge University in 1913 and had commenced a scholarship at the university's School of Agriculture. He was visiting Jena when war broke out, and he found himself trapped in Germany. Shortly after the start of his internment a meeting of potential teachers was held to establish the framework for a Ruhleben Camp School. The school proved a great success, not least because of the wealth of academic talent amongst the internees. The prospectus for the summer term of 1916, for example, lists 12 departments offering 287 classes.

Michael was a stalwart of the Biological Sciences Department, representing it on the school committee, providing lectures on heredity and botany and (with his great friend Arthur Lechmere) establishing a laboratory for practical classes and original research. The laboratory became remarkably well equipped, including eight microscopes, several incubators, an embedding bath and a microtome for cutting thin sections. Obtaining the necessary reagents was a particular problem, but Michael was aided in this by his parents' energetic lobbying of

the Prisoners of War Department in Downing Street.

Michael's diaries reveal how his scientific teaching and research provided a structure to his life that helped him endure his internment. Further solace was provided by a voracious appetite for literature and ideas, and by music, which was performed to a high standard in the camp (whose number included many professional musicians who had been attending the Bayreuth Festival in 1914). His involvement in the arts included co-producing a performance of a Tudor parody *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. His judgement was that they "made a good job of it", although a heckler's point of view (in Wyndham Richards' diary) was: "Acting pretty awful. We had a gorgeous time making nuisances of ourselves".

In December 1915, Michael received a letter from Helen Wedgwood, a student at Newnham College, Cambridge. She had noticed him at political and social events in Cambridge (where both were members of the Cambridge University Fabian Society), but he confessed that he had no recollection of their meeting. Their letters express many common interests, and chronicle the growing friendship between them. After his repatriation at the end of the war the friendship blossomed into love and they married at the beginning of 1920. This marked a union between political families: Michael's father (Edward Reynolds Pease) was one of the founders of the Fabian Society and Helen's father (Josiah Clement Wedgwood) was an MP who defected from the Liberal to the Labour Party shortly after the war. Helen and Michael's wartime correspondence provides a very vibrant and immediate commentary on left-wing political attitudes of the time, including views on pacifism, women's suffrage, the trade union movement, hopes for the post-war era and (initial) optimism in reaction to events in Russia.

Michael's experiences shine a light on the cooperation and goodwill that existed between some British and German civilians during the First World War. Contacts were established between his family and the Neumeisters of Jena, whose son Walter had been captured early in the conflict and sent to England as a prisoner of war. This led to each family taking an interest in the welfare of the other's incarcerated offspring ' for example supplying food parcels and paying visits. Michael was even allowed out of the camp to stay with the Neumeisters for two weeks in 1917 and seven weeks in 1918. Attempts to obtain early release on both sides failed, but a strong friendship grew between the families which continued throughout their lives. Michael's correspondence with German academics is also marked by its civility, and they were supportive in his scientific endeavours. He stayed in touch and attempted to reciprocate after the war, when German society was suffering considerable hardships. This is evidenced in a sad and prophetic letter from Erwin Baur, Professor of Botany (Genetics) at the Institute of Agriculture in Potsdam, sent to Michael in December 1919:

"Yesterday the food parcel which some time ago you said you would send me has arrived here. I thank you so much for your kindness. Since I personally do not suffer any hardship, I have shared out the contents among the gardeners of the institute, some of whom are in dire need. I find it a bit strange of the English nation that on the one hand they block the ports and the docks and thus cause a famine and a severe crisis in the big cities, and on the other they found charitable societies to organise food relief. My feeling is that England and France are spreading the seeds of evil. You have no idea how hatred and bitterness is growing among our people in regard of the extortion and the chicanery forced on us through this 'peace treaty'".

Reading in Michael's diaries about the intrigues of committees, the goods he receives from home, or anxiously awaiting the delivery of dresses for *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, it is sometimes hard to remember that the world was at war, and that his younger brother (awarded the Military Cross with Bar) was serving in France. The sadness is there though, and the diaries are punctuated by news of the loss of close friends and relatives.

This toll continued after war ' when he was particularly affected by the loss of Arthur Lechmere to the Spanish Flu. Michael Pease was undoubtedly one of the lucky ones, and went on to lead a life enriched by his scientific curiosity, his strong bond with Helen and their lifelong commitment to the Labour Party and local politics.

Further reading:

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