

Kriegsgefangen

Erlebtes 1870

Th.Fontane

April 4-9, 2013

Fontane had participated in the successful campaigns against the Danes in 1864 and against the Austrians in 1866 as a journalist. Those had been successful not only for Bismarck, and when the Franco-Prussian war started, he was to be sent on to another assignment. That war was rather short, in fact it consisted in two parts. Beginning at the end of the summer, it soon reached a climax already in the beginning of September, when the main part of the French army along with its 'Kaiser' the hapless Napoleon III, surrendered and was captured. The Prussians had showed their superiority as to modern warfare, an outcome that had not been a foregone conclusion. The glorious French, the greatest continental power, had shown itself very vulnerable, and was thus reduced to a second class power. In particular the aforementioned battle at Sedan spelled the end of the Second Republic, and a provisional Third one was created. It managed to linger on for a few months, until Paris surrendered as well to the Prussian siege in early 1871. It was during this stage that Fontane was 'mis en scene'. He came to France at the end of September and during a combined sightseeing trip and pilgrimage to Domrémy, the birthplace of Joan of Arc, which was situated beyond the Prussian lines, he was apprehended as an enemy suspect, possibly a spy. He did carry on himself documents issued by the Prussian military, some Red Cross insignia, and worst of all, a loaded Revolver. He was put into a local prison and forced to spend a night in a room filled with rats, which left him no sleep. The situation was tense, it could go one way or another. Local sentiments against the Prussians were of course hostile, and lynching was a real scare. The authorities were of course more polite, but he would certainly be put before a martial court, and perhaps more likely than not, be condemned to death. In those tense days, he must have lived under the threat of immediate extinction, and the text must be based on the notes he wrote in real time, with no benefit of hindsight. He takes on an optimistic attitude, trying to convince himself that his release will be a matter of course and soon to be effected. He is brought down to the fortified town of Besancon, where his fate is to be sealed. He is received very respectfully and sympathetically, and after a few days it becomes clear that he will not be brought to a court. He is then informed that he is freed of all accusations, but that the authorities are not at liberty of releasing him, but needs to keep him in custody for the duration of the war. He is offered the status of a superior officer, and will thus travel in style and always be given the best accommodations. Then under escort of gendarmes he is brought by train to the island of Oléron just north of Bordeaux and close to Rochefort. During changes of trains and overnight stays in various cities and towns he is subjected to the hostility of the local population, who congregate in large numbers, shouting and throwing stones. Of course without the official protection he would be lost. During the trip he takes great care to inspect the landscape and give extensive reports. Some of it is

boring, while other parts are truly enchanting.

He is finally settled on the island. He is given a choice of accommodation, and decides on the last alternative. He is given a manservant, another prisoner of war, a Polish hussar. He acquires a pet, a small cat. The days are made to follow a routine. Breakfast, walks along the ramparts (when the wether permits, as the place is ravaged by rainstorms in the fall). He makes sure that he gets a certain minimum of exercise each day, and for that purpose he walks back and forth. In order to save himself the nuisance of counting, he brings with him the required number of stones in his pocket, each one to be deposited after a lap. There is lunch and there is tea, when he is receiving visitors. This is nice of course, but the visitors are not very interesting as to conversation, so he has to make some effort at entertaining. A great problem is that he has nothing to read, when that is brought to the attention of the Commander, he is given three books. The first slim volume he finds unreadable. Typical French frivolity, depicting brief love affairs on the train. The second is more interesting, a historical work, from which he learns about the particulars surrounding Napoleons exile to St.Helena. The third and thickest, seems to amuse him the most, consisting of 'bon mots' from a variety of notables, mostly French.

Fontane is of Huguenot stock on both sides, his ancestors finding a sanctuary in Prussia during the great exodus brought about by Louis XIV in 1685. Since childhood he has been exposed to French, and as an adult he masters the language sufficiently well in order not only to get around but also to converse seriously, nevertheless admitting to his linguistic inadequacies. He is not bilingual, few people are, and French remains a foreign language to him. The book is however peppered with French¹ expected of course to provide no difficulties to the educated German reader. Fontane, although a Prussian nationalist, like most of his compatriots, has a very high opinion of the French, at least as regards to those men he encounters, the street people does not count of course. He finds them highly educated, as well educated as the Germans; very respectful and kind. Conversely he is never met with any hostility on their part, but a mutual feeling of sitting in the same boat prevails. War is a terrible thing, they all can agree on. Fontane is well-treated and has really nothing to complain of. However, when large contingents of captured Prussian soldiers arrive, many are sick and die from privations. This is of course less an act of hostility than organizational ineptitude, and he refers approvingly of French doctors, who make spirited protests. Of course the book, which is basically a personal diary, gives no clue to the overall situation, which I guess was assumed to be known. An innocent reader, would have no idea that the French emperor had abdicated along with the main army, and that France is reigned by a provisional government, which may not have total control, making the situation more dangerous than it would have been otherwise. So as a reader one wonders why such large contingents of victorious Prussians were captured during the second low-grade phase of the war, provided one even knows that, which cannot be taken for granted by a modern reader. Otherwise one would have no inkling that not a full scale war is on foot. Fontane, no doubt out of boredom and a need to pad out his report, includes a few stories about fellow prisoners of war who have been captured during raids in villages. What were they doing? Advance reconnaissance, or simply roaming through

¹ making the publisher provide German translations in an appendix. Translations I occasionally find not only helpful but crucial. However, it is not consistently done. The editors having missed a few.

occupied but not yet subjugated and pacified territories. There are frequent references to Franc-tireurs, references which the contemporary reader would of course understand, but the modern reader needs to be informed that those were French irregulars, bent upon making the position for the Prussians as uncomfortable as possible. So those small bands of Prussians can fall prey to ambushes. If they are lucky they are taken into custody, if not they are summarily shot or bludgeoned to death, no quarter being given.

Was war more civilized in the past? For one thing weapons were not as effective, and thus the death and mayhem caused were not as extensive. But of course the sufferings of the local population during the Thirty Years War was real enough, and a city like Magdeburg suffered more during Tilly's sack, than it would do three centuries later under allied bombing (but that is of course a rare exception). What strikes the modern reader is the civilized interchanges between belligerents. They are able to make a distinction between individuals and the enemy. Scientific and cultural exchanges were possible during the European wars of the 19th century, the concept of total war had to wait for the 20th century. Fontane is no doubt helped by his general appearance as a man of culture and education and his fluency in French certainly was no impediment. At the time there was a clear distinction between men of standing and the rubble, which would not be so clear a hundred years later. Still the tenor of the French might not be that different from the Iraklis under the American occupation, but not as well armed nor as desperately callous. There are no bombs.

As already noted, Fontane takes a keen interest in landscape and regional color. Sceneries take on a more significant aspect than mere location. On the eve of his release, to be covered below, he is overtaken by the mood brought about by the combined effects of location and weather. It makes him think of Elsinore, where he was once. Only that this time the weather and the lightening situation is perfect, and which were missing at the time in Denmark. A similar epiphany strikes him during his final crossing of France. Once again one location reminds him of another, but only more perfectly so, due to prevailing atmospheric conditions.

When Fontane finally is to be released he receives the news with some apprehension. His life in containment has been if boring not unpleasant. In fact he had had no worries of the usual quotidian kind, say of what to have to eat. Routines have been set filling his days with no worries beyond those of his own making (as to the outcome of the war). To actually travel out of France as a free man without any official protection daunts him, but he decides it would be cowardly to let oneself be overcome with such compunctions. So he sets off, after promising to fulfill the condition of his release, namely not to write anything against the French². He is sure to dress properly, and the first thing he does, when coming to the first town is to exchange his by his servant manufactured suitcase for a more proper one. It is of utmost importance that his status as a First Class passenger is never cast in doubt. He enters a local train, another touch which makes it so easy for us to identify, traveling by train is something that has not really changed in the last hundred and fifty years, and have to spend many an hour in the night waiting for the main train to

² What does it really mean? He is temperamentally unable to write against the French, a race he admires, he assures the commandant. He on the other hand is very polite. It is up to Fontane to interpret the conditions, and he is sure that he will do so to mutual satisfaction.

take him down to the south. It is noteworthy that during this time of war and upheaval, the train service seems to work just fine. During his nocturnal sojourn he meets a fellow passenger, who gives him the advice that he should sleep a lot, read a lot, and at all costs avoid talking. And of course always to travel first class.

Only when he crosses the Swiss border can he breath a sigh of relief and feel himself finally a free man. And to whom is he indebted? Is it because of his good behavior or like-ability? Or has friends in high places campaigned for his release. He does not know, at least not at the time, that Bismarck himself has intervened on his behalf. Bismarck having pointed out to the French authorities that Fontane was an utterly harmless fellow. So at least, was the high-minded opinion of the Iron Chancellor. No doubt he was familiar with him and his writings. Being rad by many makes you rather influential, more so than of merely holding some political office.

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