

GERMANS

In the German military cemetery in Lens-Sallaumines:
Paul Mauk, the boy soldier

Photo: Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e. V. collection

Paul Mauk, just 14 years of age, and a volunteer in the 4th Corps of the 113th infantry regiment (5th Baden regiment based in Freiburg), 'was noted for his humour, enthusiasm and talent as a sniper'.

PAUL Mauk, the youngest soldier to enlist in the Great War, is laid to rest in the section set aside for German soldiers at one end of the cemetery in Lens-Sallaumines, surrounded by his 15,645 comrades. He was just 14 years of age. On 6 June 1915, a stray bullet tore off his forearm and set fire to the ammunition he was carrying in his pocket. He died the next day, "without making the slightest complaint".

War broke out during the year of his communion. "Paul Mauk was a very open young man who never hid his feelings", writes Ernst Jünger*, a German essayist and novelist. "He had a natural kindness", the German goes on to add, "and a straight-forward cheerfulness". When he was little, Paul wanted to become a doctor "to ease suffering and to be of service".

The boy loved flowers, as well as tales of battle. Those of Felix Dahn in particular and above all the novel "A Struggle for Rome", in which the character Tolita was his favourite hero. Paul Mauk was the sixth in a

family of eight children. Born on 19 July 1900 in a village in the Black Forest, he grew up "surrounded by love" in Freiburg, and was particularly close to his brother Walther, who was just a year older than him.

Dressed in a communion suit

When war was declared, these two young boys "aware of their responsibilities" signed up at barracks 113, wearing their communion suits to disguise their youth and to lend them a serious air. They were also well-built and mature for their age so it would not have been so difficult to deceive their interviewers. The two brothers obtained a certificate of aptitude for all types of firearms and were enlisted in reservist companies. Following tough training in the 4th company they were sent to the 3rd, "where Paul was noted for his humour, enthusiasm and talent as a sniper". When Christmas came along, the Mauk brothers took care of the tree, gifts and surprises for their comrades within the company – they were, after all, little more than children.

It was in the spring of 1915 that they set foot on a battlefield for the first time. Paul was "conscious of being among those who were going to contribute to the future of the fatherland, and to influence world history." The 113th Baden infantry regiment, of which he was now part, witnessed the fall of Saarburg, the Lorraine and the Toul region. The next objective was the Lorette hill. It was here, in rest quarters, that they chanced upon their elder brother Karl, who was wounded. Karl had a role as an adviser, providing information on the situation at the front. He related to his younger brothers and other volunteer soldiers stories of the bitter and tragic fighting in the trenches. However, this wasn't enough to discourage Paul, who headed off to the fighting "full of enthusiasm". The youngster saw combat everywhere, including Meurchin, Wingles, Hulluch and Béthune. "He was consumed with an exalted sense of pride...", Ernst Jünger adds. Yet in the troops' rest quarters, Paul also joined in all the fun.

"He was fascinated by lights"

On 9 May 1915, as he crept under enemy barbed wire, Paul Mauk was wounded in the temple by a grenade fragment, yet still found it

difficult to leave the battlefield. "He was fascinated by the lights that linked the world of the trenches to no man's land, where the silhouettes seemed to him to be almost ghost-like." It was impossible to keep him in the infirmary for long. Removing his white bandage himself, he quickly rejoined his comrades, with whom he shared "the same destiny, the same misery, but also the same joy and the same pride". With his troop, he headed towards Liévin to replace the 112nd infantry regiment. For an entire day, the 4th company came under French fire and lost many men. On the evening of 6 June, when Paul had been relieved from duty and found himself in a small ditch not far from the line of the trenches, a stray bullet struck his arm, setting light to the ammunition he was carrying in his pocket. His injuries were terrible. His brother, who had also been hit, couldn't help him.

Paul Mauk was quickly transported to the 1st battalion's infirmary in Liévin. Aware of his critical condition, the young boy complained not once. To his tearful brother, "he spoke calmly of his injuries", Ernst Jünger continues, "maintaining the quiet pride of a young man who has his destiny in his own hands." This boy soldier remained dignified in the face of death. The sun of the morning of 7 June 1915 "greeted a boy sleeping peacefully (...) whose lips were set in a smile for eternity." Paul Mauk was buried in the German military cemetery in Lens-Sallaumines. The news of his death reached his village and his brother Karl, by now a lieutenant

in the regiment of chasseurs. He also would lose his life on the battlefield on 7 April 1918. A poem extolling the virtues of his younger brother was found in his personal possessions.

"My brother, my beloved brother, Let me see once more the brightness of your little eyes, More alive and happy I will embark upon the next combat, With the true courage of the German soldier (...)"

**Die Unvergessenen (Les Inoubliables)* by Ernst Jünger. Paul Mauk, by Walter Schmidt.



Photo: M.-Pierre Griffon

Paul is laid to rest in the German military cemetery in Lens-Sallaumines, in row 11, grave 268.

with nature

Communion

The German military cemetery in Lens-Sallaumines was built by German troops in 1914. It was known as the "Lorette Cemetery" or the "Cemetery of the 4th Armoured Corps", as it was here that the majority of soldiers killed in combat around the Lorette hill were buried. Troops who died in action in the region around Lens

would subsequently be laid to rest here also. In 1917-1918, allied artillery fire completely destroyed the cemetery, which the French authorities rebuilt after the war.

In 1926, following an agreement with the French military authorities, the "Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge" (German War Graves Commission) undertook work to improve the condition of the cemetery. This private association, which has over a thousand members, as well as 150 employees on French soil alone, is still

responsible for the upkeep of German cemeteries abroad and 90% of its financial resources are from donations and subscriptions.

The majority of German military cemeteries blend in perfectly with their environment, almost as if they are communing with nature, in the pure tradition of Germanic mythology inherited from Scandinavia. If a tree stands in the middle of a row of crosses, it is never moved. Instead, the cross is placed either in front or behind the tree. The cemetery in Lens-Sallaumines abides by this rule.

German military cemeteries in the Pas-de-Calais :

Lens-Sallaumines, Billy-Montigny, Saily-sur-la-Lys, Laventie, Billy-Berclau, Carvin, Meurchin, Pont-à-Vendin, Oignies, Courrières, Dourges, Achiet-le-Petit, Écourt-Saint-Quentin, Rumaucourt, Sapignies, Saint-Laurent Blangy, Villers-au-Flos and Neuville-Saint-Vaast, the largest German military cemetery in the whole of Western Europe.

Der Schützengraben

The German newspaper in Bapaume



It was called *The Trench* for obvious reasons given it was a newspaper published in Bapaume, a town occupied by the Germans since the end of August 1914. In his book *“La vie quotidienne de Bapaume dans la première guerre mondiale”* (The Daily Life of Bapaume during the First World War), a wonderful research tool for historians, Gaston Dégardin translated and read every page of *Der Schützengraben* from its very first edition, on 22 August 1915, to its last, dated 7 June 1917. Bapaume was liberated by the Australians in the spring.

In his first editorial, the editor-in-chief (undoubtedly Doctor Körber, the senior doctor at the hospital, according to Gaston Dégardin) explained that the newspaper, which was written by soldiers of the 4th Corps “in occupation” in Bapaume, “would serve as a link between them and their families in Germany”. He added: “Everyone is invited to contribute articles of a historic, scientific or humorous nature, as well as poems and songs.” In subsequent editions, the paper’s soldier-journalists published articles on the region’s villages, castles and churches – blown up during the German withdrawal of 1917 – and, of course, “several articles by General Von Stein to rally his troops”. When the printing workshop (at 25, rue d’Arras) was destroyed in July 1916, *Der Schützengraben* seems to have moved to the Château d’Havrincourt. On 9 May 1917, Doctor Schnabel, the new editor-in-chief, hailed the 50th edition of the newspaper. The Trench then ceased its operation suddenly in June 1917, when just a single article appeared in the last edition highlighting “external circumstances forcing the paper to close as a result of the dispersion of members of the Corps to other locations on the front”. While consulting the translations, Gaston Dégardin remarked: “The articles and poems were not published to set German soldiers against civilians. Their authors did not revile the French; instead they made sure that they gave the British a rough ride at every possible opportunity”.

Prior to 1916, *Der Schützengraben* (The Trench) was full of local adverts: a currency exchange in Place Faidherbe, a clothes’ shop, a tobacconist, the 4th Corps’ library, baths for officers at the Hôtel de la Fleur, in Rue d’Arras in Bapaume, the Ligny-Thillois thermal spa, the Havrincourt theatre, the Warlencourt casino, not forgetting films at the “Bapaumer Lichtspiele”, a Bapaume

cinema known as the Bali and “snubbed by civilians”.

“During the first few months it also included adverts for the market in Bapaume: game, poultry, eggs, vegetables etc. Were these adverts cancelled due to their lack of success? I did wonder who could have brought game to the market,” noted Gaston Dégardin in his book.

The Imperial German Army and its six million victims

On 1 January 2008, Erich Kästner, the last “known” German veteran from the First World War passed away in a retirement home in Cologne at the age of 108. His death went completely unnoticed in Germany, a country which has difficulty overcoming “the shame of the Nazi genocide”, to the extent that soldiers from the Great War remain a mere footnote in history – a lost generation, the memory of whom is swamped by the horrors of the Second World War. Contrary to the British, French, Americans or Australians, the Germans do not have an official list of soldiers who died between 1914 and 1918, thousands of whom lost their lives in the Pas-de-Calais. Furthermore, Germany’s Ministry of Defence was unable to provide the international media with any information on Erich Kästner – the same media which, three weeks later, would highlight in great detail the war of Louis de Cazenave, the last but one French “Poilu”, who died at



↑ German hospital damaged by British fire. Photo: Hugues Chevalier documentary collection

the age of 110. Born in Leipzig-Schönefeld on 10 March 1900, Kästner joined the Imperial German Army in July 1918, apparently serving in Flanders. He was present when the Kaiser reviewed his troops in November 1918. After the Great War, Erich Kästner studied for

regiments which incorporated soldiers from minorities (Poles, Danes from Schleswig, Jews etc). Around 60,000 Jews from Germany (who obtained civil rights in 1871) served in the Imperial Army during the Great War.

a doctorate in law. Enlisted in the Luftwaffe during the Second World War, he returned to France, after which he settled in Hanover in 1945 and went on to become a judge.

2,057,000 Germans lost their lives during the Great War and more than four million were wounded. In 1914, the German Empire was made up of twenty-five federal states: the kingdoms of Prussia, Saxony, Württemberg and Bavaria, six grand duchies, five duchies, seven principalities and three Hanseatic free towns. Alsace-Lorraine was also governed like an Imperial state. Almost every state had its own regiments –