

# A German Prisoner Of War Letter – January 1918.

by

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In 2006, Hubert Rope deposited with Orford Museum several paintings by Emmeline Rope (1856-1940) and a letter from a German prisoner of war to his parents dated 19 January 1918, along with the envelope. The Rope family had been prominent in Orford in the nineteenth century as merchants. The paintings were copied digitally, and, since only photocopies of the letter and envelope are held by the Museum, presumably the originals were also returned to Hubert Rope. However, no surviving members of the Rope family in Orford know how the letter came into the possession of the family, nor where the original is. Edward Rope served in the Honourable Artillery Company, but he was on the Italian front when the letter was written.

The envelope has several words printed on it, namely 'Prisoner of War', 'By Balloon' in English and German, 'No stamp required', and on the flap 'Absender' (sender). He was Willi Jacob or Iacob, the equivalent of a Staff Sergeant in the British army, with the number 701 and held at 30 POW Company in France. His parents lived in Bayern in Bavaria, but clearly did not receive the letter. Should they have done so, they were to reply via GPO (General Post Office) London.

Doris Fulford of Orford kindly translated the letter for me, noting that it was written in 'old script'. It reads:

Dear Parents, I am pleased to tell you that today I have been lucky again. I have been promoted to a leadership role in the Camp, which is a model Camp. There is a theatre, office, cinema and bathing facilities, a library, a music centre – installed beautifully by German craftsmen. More than enough food, quietness, heating, good sleeping conditions. - a land of milk and honey, if it would not be a prisoner of war camp. I can choose what I wish to do completely. I can be reading, studying and drawing without interference in my office. I have a small dog and cat. When I think of you, it is not difficult to accept my lot. I am in charge of 500 men who go to work, as it would be the same in a prisoner of war camp in Germany. Send me not more than 2-3 parcels per month. No bread, meat, cheese, butter. Possibly fruit, preserves and something interesting to read. It would be good if you occasionally send money, as here I can buy everything to my heart's desire. You will soon find confirmation that it is really good here and I am not forced to write this. All the best, Greetings, Willi.

Upon reading the translation, my first thought was that this sounded too good to be true, more like a holiday camp than a POW camp! Was it to be used as propaganda? However Mrs Fulford and her husband thought it genuine and she was especially influenced by the fact it was written in old German script, though her husband was puzzled by the reference to 'balloon' as am I. Searches done online to try and find Willi Jacob or Iacob did not succeed, although there is a card index of entries in the German Section of the Rath Museum of Art, used by the International Committee of the Red Cross between 1916 and 1918. They handled 20 million letters and 1.9 million parcels during the war. Neither is he named among the German POWs listed in the German Federal Archives in Coblenz.

Among the books Sarah Paterson, Curator concerned with the First World War period, at the Imperial War Museum, advised me to read is 'Violence against Prisoners of War in the First World War' by Heather Jones, which sounds the antithesis of what I was researching, but proved very useful for background information. German prisoners were mostly held in Company Labour Camps in France and not sent to work on farms, for example, in England. Heather Jones primarily used official sources