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Languages go to war

Anne D'HALEWYN

"Join the Army and see the World!" — Did anyone ever think of the linguistic aspect of this slogan? Because one serves with people of one's own Country it does not necessarily mean that the same language is used by all. This is particularly true of the Canadian Army where English and French Canadians are in constant relationship.

In 1942, I joined the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps as a Nursing Sister. I was posted to an almost all French-speaking unit. There, I was well able to judge how unhappy were the few members of that hospital staff who could not speak French and how useful it was for the French-speaking ones to be capable of conversing with their English-speaking co-workers. Our army training (what there was of it!) took place in Kingston, Ontario, and there, those who could not speak English had quite a time with the lectures and a worse experience still with the examinations.

Once in England, two-thirds of our patients being English-speaking, it became not only important but essential to know English. It is bad enough to be sick or wounded without having to struggle to make oneself understood.

Of course in England, a great many of the educated people speak French and very good French, but not the old lady on the street, not the friendly policeman on the corner who are going to give you the information you require, not the vergers who are going to show you through the ancient ca-

thedral, not the bus driver, not the ticket agent at the railroad station. So, for those who did not speak the language of the British Isles, it was pretty hard to get along. I remember one of our Nursing Sisters who once went to London to meet a cousin whom she had not seen for three years. She came back in the evening feeling very low. "Je ne sais pas assez l'anglais pour me hasarder à demander mon chemin et je n'ai pu me rendre où nous devions nous rencontrer." And the tears came rolling down her cheeks. That is only one of the many instances of that kind I could relate here.

In certain units courses were organized, but they did not prove very satisfactory because of the many changes and transfers that took place. I am talking about the Medical Corps only. I can recall starting German and after five classes being transferred to another hospital where French was being taught.

Then a group of us left for Italy. A fourteen-day trip on a Dutch boat. The crew was all-Dutch but the officers spoke English. One evening the Master of the ship gave us a most interesting lecture on Java in perfect English which he spoke without any foreign accent. On the first day, six of us were chosen to sit at the Captain's table for the evening meals. I had the bad luck to be placed between the Officer Commanding Troops and the Chief Engineer. When I say bad luck, I really mean it because the first was a British army man of

the old school who was a women-hater and had no use for **Colonials**, so there was no conversation possible on my left-hand side. On my right, fate had wished on me the ship's only officer who could not speak English! So, knowing only two words of Dutch, (one of them is **verboden** i. e. **forbidden**), I sadly retreated into food. I am sure I must have gained weight during that crossing, for I ate everything in sight at those fourteen meals, just for the sake of passing time! The consequences of not knowing a language!

Italy... Naples... Ortona... the Cassino push... Rome... the Vatican... the Pope... Memories...

Somehow, it soon leaked out that I could speak Italian and I had not been settled more than a few days when I became unofficially interpreter for the Nursing Sisters and for the Matron. At that time we employed Italian domestic help. I shall never forget the unpleasant tasks my knowledge of Italian brought on to me. "Tell them they make too much noise, the floors are not clean, the dishes are not properly washed, etc., etc..." Never anything nice to tell the poor people! There was the time when the maids asked me to write a card to go with some flowers they were offering the Matron and naturally, I wrote the note of thanks for the Matron to the maids. And the time when a group of old Italian women called me **La bella signorina americana**. I was so flattered at being judged **bella** that I forgot to explain that I was not **americana**!

During the war, very few of the guides in Italy could speak anything but Italian. It became almost imperative to know their language. Going through the Quirinal in Rome, for instance, the good deed of the day was to speak Italian to the guide, English to the Canadian British and American visitors and French to a group of French officers who had

joined us on that occasion. It was also due to our Italian, with a bit of boldness added, that we were able to speak to a priest in Vatican City and that he took us through the Vatican Palace and to an audience given by the Pope to the troops. His Holiness addressed us in Italian, English and French. He spoke fluently and without notes. We all know that he has mastered several other languages. What a wonderful gift of languages and how much closer he can get to people when he can address them in their mother tongue!

There was also the case of the old French missionary we brought back from the Far-East. This was on a hospital ship. Five of us on the boat could speak French, but with a thousand patients and a small staff, there was no time left for anything that was not work, food or sleep. Fortunately, we had with us a Canadian Intelligence Officer who was not quite so busy as we all were. Noticing that feeble, depressed, old priest, he made up his mind that he could be of some assistance to **him**. Alas! He could not speak French and the missionary could not speak English. But they had one language in common, Japanese! The patient had been months a prisoner of war and he needed more companionship than real medical care. Each day the two had lengthy conversations and each day the old missionary's health was improving. He gradually came out of his shell, and when we docked at Vancouver, he was again on his feet, not strong yet, but smiling and happy. Another miracle performed by languages.

Others have had many more and more vivid experiences than I have had during the 2nd World War. What about those who went to France, Belgium, Holland and Germany? Nevertheless, may this help to prove once again the value of the knowledge of languages.