(October 10th, 1916.)

My Impressions of the French Front

By Lieutenant Zinovi Pechkoff.*

AT a special luncheon of the Club held on the 10th October, Lieutenant Pechkoff said:

It is really a very embarrassing task and a very embarrassing pleasure to tell of all I have seen and experienced, all that I think about the war. I have seen so many things, and there are so many things that I would like to communicate to you—though it is really very hard—but I will try my best. I am not a speaker, not experienced. I rarely spoke before an audience before the war, and during the time of the war we really did not speak too much, because we acted!

I am glad to come here to this continent to let people know what is going on in Europe. When I came to the United States all the people were very sympathetic, and all very nice, but still you felt it is a neutral country. It *is* a neutral country. And I was so happy when I just set foot on the soil of America to get Dr. Locke's letter, and it was so welcome, that I was very much touched, and I thank you for the opportunity of speaking here before you.

You see I'd like to tell you all of the life of the trenches—an interesting life, though with no thrilling stories. When we came to the Front I descended to the trenches on the 27th September, 1914. My regiment was in reserve after the Battle of the Marne, and I have passed after the German retreat all through the villages and towns of Champagne, so much wronged by the German invader.

I am not going to tell you all about the atrocities, about the cases of atrocities that I have seen, because I think many of you or all of you have read about it, very much about it, may be too much about them. You think from your daily life

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"It is impossible, the Germans are not like that." Many people knew Germans, and they think they know it is impossible. Well, things that seemed impossible before the war are not only possible now, but they are facts, common facts of every day. I have passed through many villages in Champagne, and I have seen the ruined houses, I have seen the deserted villages and towns because all the people went away into the woods and further still—they ran before the enemy, and many young people, with many young girls, did *not* get away—and they lie, some of them, in the ground near the villages and towns.

Well, we come to the trenches. They were not so elaborate, these trenches, as they are now with dug-outs and spaces to rest, nor with all the means even of defence that they have now: they were simply ditches. I remember it was very dark and rainy and windy the night when we came to the trenches. Nobody knew, or had any idea, what a trench was. I remember for two weeks, or a month, we had just a little ditch to lie down in, so we just lay down. What is next? We came to the trenches about 12 o'clock midnight, a very rainy night, and we stood there to arms, our rifles on the parapet so, for an hour, for two hours, three hours, until daylight. Then we were told to put down our arms and rest: so we rested where we were, there was no place else, and the rain poured down on us.

It would take very long to tell you of the three days and three nights we stayed there in the rain. We just stayed there until another battalion came to relieve us. That was my first three days and nights in the trenches, wet to the bones; but nobody minded that. I remember people joking and laughing at what we had done. Everybody thought of that part of the campaign. I have seen people playing cards, as if they did not mind at all.

We went to the village about four kilometers away, I think about two and a half miles, from the trenches, to rest for three days; when we came back to the trenches we commenced to work and to dig further trenches. And the men worked all through the winter. There is one fact I would like to tell you to explain the situation. When we came to the trenches, we were about 800 yards from the trenches of the Germans. We thought that was too near; we were not allowed to speak or even allowed to smoke through the winter. I have been three months where we thought the trenches were very close to the Germans; but when my regiment was sent to another part of France, the northern part, the position of our trenches —our first line—was only 85 meters from the Germans! And

our "Poste d' Ecoute"—what do you call it? Yes, listening post,—was not 15 meters from the German barbed wire entanglements. All this work of course had been accomplished by us during those three months. And all of it was done under fire—both the artillery and the machine gun fire of the enemy. I was very curious. Sometimes, on a moonlight night our shadows would show black on the ground, and the Germans would think it was our bodies, and they fired at our shadows. Of course, sometimes a bullet would hit the men also, I mean their real bodies, their material bodies, but we did not mind their firing.

Now how is war carried on? How is the watch carried on? How are the twenty-four hours of the day spent in the trenches? The time is spent differently; it depends upon whether a man is in the first, second, third or fourth line. Generally, we would be eight days in our first line, eight days in the second, and so forth. In the first line, the soldiers don't do any work, any digging of trenches; upon them lies the task of defending the trenches; they carry on sentinel work. The soldiers who are in the second line—they go in at night time to take guard, to reinforce the first line, and work partly during the day. The third line trenches don't take guard at all, but go to the villages to cut wood, prepare barbed wire entanglements, etc., and during the night they bring these to the first line. The fourth line are those coming up to help in the work.

What work is carried on? Human nature is very adaptable. Just imagine—no, I don't think anyone who has not been there can imagine—how people can live under such conditions. We all, I think you all, undress yourselves to sleep—I think you do; well they do not! I have been in the trenches eight months and never undressed to sleep. Nobody thinks of that! I remember one day one of our sergeants bought some horses twenty-five kilometers away; the people offered to let him stay over night and the people told him: "Here is a nice room, you will rest well here—there is a good bed with clean sheets." The old sergeant looked at the room, and said "All right, thanks very much." And he was left alone. When the people woke in the morning the sergeant's room was open, but no sergeant was there! The people thought, "This is very queer, surely he would not leave without saying good bye." Presently he appeared and they asked him about it. He told them, "I did not find the bed uncomfortable, I was afraid to sleep. When I turned one way, I thought—there is something empty here—and when I felt the other side I thought—there is something empty there,"

so he went to the barn and slept on the hay! This is a very pretty little story, but it is characteristic. I remember myself, when I was brought to the hospital in rather bad condition, my first sensation when they put me upon the bed, and I touched with my left hand a white sheet, touched a real white sheet, I thought it very pleasant. It certainly was a beautiful sensation to be lying there with a white sheet below me, and a white sheet on top of me. Well, I thought, if I were not so sick, I would feel it was dangerous to lie in this bed, like the sergeant. But I was safe, I could not move, so it was all right.

Well, now, of course, life in the trenches is very different. In some parts, where there is no activity, for example in Champagne, there is not much activity, the life is nearly the same, with little difference. The dug-outs are very nice, lit with all kinds of lights, with the spirit of the soldiers perhaps more than any other lights.

To-day it is a month since I left the Somme Front. On Tuesday evening I left the Somme, and on Saturday I sailed from Bordeaux for the States. So I have seen the Somme fighting. I have not been at the Front for many months. I myself was wounded on the 9th May, 1915. Then I was six months in the hospital. I was hit by an explosive bullet. Some people do not realise what it is; some people don't believe it, and say it is exaggerated. I was fortunate enough and proud to take two machine guns of the Germans —never mind, some people have done more,—and when we examined the bands of the machine guns we found pretty nearly thirty per cent. of the cartridges were explosive! And I may assure you it is true, because I have seen it! And if I had not been hit by an explosive bullet, I would have had my arm! I would have lost it probably in another battle, but I would have had a chance to do some more fighting. It was a very nasty thing!

In October I left the hospital and went straight to Italy. There I lectured in Italian; I know Italian very well, better than English; I wish I could speak English as well. After returning from Italy in the early summer of 1916, I again enlisted and went to the Front. And what a difference I found! Almost impossible to recognise the Front as it was. For example, one example—the efficiency of our artillery; in 1914-15 we soldiers would sometimes really feel queer when the Germans fired at us with their artillery, and we did not reply half as much. I have seen behind our trenches the best of artillery, so when I came now I have seen "woods" of artillery, I mean the cannons. Well, that gives wonder-

ful encouragement to the soldiers. Our first attack,—I have been in four attacks, the 23rd November, the 2nd February, the 3rd March and the 9th May, four charges—they were quite local, three of them, but the fourth was on a very great scale. The preparation was not one-half, not one-hundredth time so efficient as now.

The preparation was not half, not one-hundredth time so efficient as now. They just fired half an hour and then we marched on. We were near the German line, and of course suffered great losses; but now it is quite different. You have all read in the papers about the efficiency of that attack. In the first attack, in May, 1915, our artillery was firing for sixteen hours before we went forward. The first line trenches and the second line, we took without firing even one shot; but in taking the third and fourth lines we suffered heavily. I was wounded between the third and fourth lines. My regiment, of which I am very proud, carried the fourth line of trenches in forty-seven minutes. You see between the third and fourth lines we suffered great losses, but now, in the Somme fighting, and especially in the last two months, there is such efficient artillery fire that the losses are really not great. They were very great in July, in the first drive, but now everything works just like a workshop.

I was in General Quarters a month ago, and there the work is carried on as in a workshop too. For example, the efficiency of our aviation: I have seen twenty-seven of our "ballons captifs," twenty-seven of ours, and three of the Germans! And then we have the advantage in aviators. About seven kilometers from the front I have seen the aviators, 12 esquadrilles, that means 144 machines, in only one line. So you can see in aviation we have the advantage, and how really magnificent it is! Aviation has played a great rôle in the recent attacks. The Colonel of the General Staff showed me everything. Of course I told him I was going away, and he showed me about. He showed me, for example, while a bombardment was going on, every hour, sometimes every forty minutes, an aviator comes to the General Quarters with a report. His report is not one in words, but in photographic plates of places just bombarded of the enemy lines. There is a "Usine photographique," a photographic plate, in General Quarters, and as soon as an aviator comes he gives his plate in, and in seven minutes after it is developed; nine minutes afterwards the General sees that print; one minute more, and it is telephoned to the artillery

post, to adjust the fire, to fire a little to the left or to the right. This gives you an idea of the efficiency of the work.

The General Quarters are under ground. You see, there is a beautiful château, but most of the château is ruined, so the people live in a cave. There they have electric light and other things, all this "Frabrique." If you come to the drawing room it is just like an architect's office. Every day a map is drawn of the present position of us and the enemy, so there is a clear understanding of what we are doing from day to day and from week to week. It is not a mere blind enterprise —"Perhaps it will be successful—may be yes, may be no"— now we know what we are doing. Sometimes there is too much loss—well, it can't be helped! And everybody who goes to war expects to pay for it, to be rewarded I mean!

Of course you see we should not be praised, we Allied people. It is only our duty. So why praise us?

A few days ago I had a letter from an American woman whose son was killed in the war—Kiffen Rockwell. He was a soldier in my company. A very brave boy, about 23 years old. He was wounded the same day with me. They cured his wound—it was not very serious. Then he enlisted in the Aviation Corps. He brought down three German aviators, but a fourth he did not see, and he was killed. When read in the papers that Kiffen Rockwell was killed, I wrote a letter to his mother in North Carolina. In her answer she says "How your letter comforts and cheers me, just to hear from someone who knew my boy, my faithful boy! . . . So my dear boy is gone—but I am not rebellious! He leaves a beautiful memory." This is how the mother of an American volunteer feels—the mother of a United States volunteer. So for us people, it is only our duty—and that is all.

Well, I don't know, there are so many things to tell! I will finish with the Somme. You see, now we have sufficient of everything, not only aviation but big artillery. I may say to you that I have seen batteries and batteries of 380 calibres, and I have seen one place at the Front, I cannot tell you which, where there were three trains of 400 calibre artillery. It is such a pleasure, such enjoyment, to see that. It means less loss of life.

It is less costly to spend money on material than to spend it on men—men have to grow for nineteen years, but material can be made in one year. We recognise that, and that it is better to spend millions on material than millions of men's lives.

One more thing. I don't know whether I am tiring you. (Cries of "No—no.") What impressed me on the Somme—I was driving with the Colonel of the General Staff along a new road, and I asked him if it was not quite new. "Yes," he said, "six days ago it did not exist." The men had made a road on which four big auto cars could run abreast. From a big depot it goes right up to the third line trench, sixteen kilometers. It was done in one day, he told me. I said, "How was that?" "Well," he said, "we had to do it." There were a lot of men wanted, and we had to bring material to the trenches, and had to bring provisions up, and evacuate people,—we had to do it. So we took four territorial regiments, sixteen thousand strong, and lined them up along the sixteen kilometers; we gave the eight thousand picks and eight thousand shovels; and every man had to use them for only one meter; and it was done!

Now, no more Somme! I want to read you—it is not much, only three and a half pages (cries of "Go on")—you know on the 14th July there is a great national feast in Paris, and every year they celebrate it by having a splendid review of troops in the streets of Paris. This year, the review was an unusual one, I would say a symbolic review really. You see, the soldiers who marched in the streets of Paris this year were not those polished troops that parade the streets and constitute the garrison of Paris. No, these troops were brought from the trenches. Here are some impressions on that day and if you will allow me, I will read them to you.

"I was in Paris on the 14th of July, the great National Feast day, and it was with the deepest emotion that I watched the Allied troops from all the world parade through the streets. I realised it was a sight unique in the world's history, and this feast the greatest event that Paris has ever witnessed. Everyone felt that it was the day of fraternisation between all the Allies, companions at arms. Friends and sons had stolen a day between two battles to come and visit those waiting anxiously at home, and Paris opened wide the gates of her heart and worthily did them honor.

"One wishes that the enemy could have seen the streets of Paris on that day; even his pride would have received a cruel shock!

"Paris has certainly never seen more wonderful military parade than that on this 14th July, 1916; the sepectacle will hardly be surpassed when the triumphant armies return and march under the Arc de Triomphe. Except that on that day our hearts will be lighter and more joyful.

"The first to march were the Belgians, the first in honor as in sacrifice. Then followed the English, who had nobly kept the anniversary of France's national feast by freeing three French villages from German hands. Canadians, who had crossed the seas to come and fight for the 'old country.'" —Long live Canada! (This emotional outburst of the speaker moved deeply the audience and evoked "Hear, hear" and applause.)—"Russians who greeted Paris in the beautiful religious accents of their military songs. And finally our troops closing the procession, proudly greeted as they passed with the names of their greatest exploits: mountaineers of the Vosges, rifle brigades of the Argonne and Verdun, naval fusiliers of the Yser, colonials and native troops, who showed their gratitude for our having brought them peace and security by coming to fight for our cause. Such was the army that Paris had the honor to acclaim and decorate with flowers, the army of European union, the first symbol of the army of the future, the army of the world, that will stand up for right against might.

"It was a really magnificent and unique sight to see these war-tried troops march before one, in the very midst of war, at the same moment as from the Somme to the Carpathians the battle is raging, and this historical pageant borrowed the most beautiful setting that heart could desire for the display of its military pomp.

"The troops passed on and on, but they did not pass according to the ordinary rites of military ceremonies, here it was all quite different.

"Along their course, except at the approach to the Place de la République, there accompanied them other men and women who took their places in the ranks and marched bravely forward, as if they too meant to accompany these brave troops to the end, performing their duty as nobly; and there was not one man in the whole lot who besides his medals and Croix de Guerre did not also bear a token of fresh flowers to remind him of the ever fresh and grateful thoughts of those at home.

"Soldiers and civilians had all the same expression of concentrated resolution; there was only one little difference: the eyes of the spectators were wet with tears, those of the departing were wet and shining—they laughed.

"The boulevards represented to them a great road, a road that led not to the Bastille, the French Bastille, but a road that led onwards into the East towards that other Bastille which is Germany. The revue, or rather the March, thus assumed

a symbolic character, the Allied armies marching to the assault of that terrific and colossal fortress of despotism which rises up heavy and crushing like that monument of nations at Leipzig, a nightmare of stone, typical, expression of the spirit of the nation that built it. The German bastion darkens and oppresses the sky of Europe and the world. It is imperative for the peace and security of humanity that the Bastille of Prussian militarism should be destroyed.

"The 14th July was the finest proof that could be given of the unanimity of a spirit among the Allies. It showed that there is only one war, and only one front, and that the soldiers of all the Allied nations are fighting one enemy in the common cause; for the liberty of small and oppressed nations, for the respect of international treaties, for the free development of each nationality on the basis of equality and justice, against the military oppression of Prussia, who wanted to conquer the whole world by mere brutal force."