

September, 1915.
bas ga. Ich sup
ghaffen pat
th then jhr
rinfu hger sp
fämdeër
die ghes
mdë fame
if aan pan.
efted don ja rghe
bans ufhi she
pat fubi hgtër
fub

WILLY GROTH

In Flanders
the snow
the guns
t. d. g. b. ter
spie so so
and davi
gita
r. d. d. n.
hies für Gtpt
if hām. Sag
gobä fpi

BETWEEN FRONT AND HOME

Memoirs from the
First World War
1914–1918



EDITED BY
WOLF MARBACH

WILLY GROTH

BETWEEN FRONT

AND HOME

Notes from the First World War
1914–1918

*Recollections from Romania, Serbia, Macedonia
and the Western Front*

Edited by Wolf Marbach

More from the life of Willy Groth:

<https://leben-krieg-flucht.only-space.de/>

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ABOUT THIS EDITION

On the Text

This English edition is based on the supplied transcription of Willy Groth's notes. Period spelling, abbreviations and personal turns of phrase have been retained as far as possible in translation. Explanatory expansions and uncertain readings appear in square brackets. For ease of reading, the text has been arranged into paragraphs, chapters and subheadings. No material has been added to Willy Groth's account.

Only part of the original manuscript has survived. Several pages were lost over the decades, and the missing passages cannot be reconstructed from the available material. This edition therefore presents an incomplete historical record.

Historical terms and descriptions used by the author have not been modernised or replaced. Where the German transcription is unclear or damaged, the English translation marks this openly rather than silently supplying a meaning.

Willy Groth's own voice and his view of the years 1914 to 1918 remain at the heart of the text.

CHAPTER I

Call-up and Training

Mobilisation and Departure from Stolp

With mobilisation on 1 August 1914, I too, as an Ers. Reservist [Ersatz-Reservist, a replacement reservist], had to expect my call-up any day. Yet they did not appear to be in any great hurry. Twice I was called up for harvest work and then sent home again.

In mid-September I finally received orders to report to Stolp on the 29th. There we were taken on strength, and with 200 fellow sufferers we set off for the station. “In der Heimat, in der Heimat, da gibt’s ein Wiedersehen” [“At home, at home, there will be a reunion”] and other songs were struck up along the way. We travelled third class, and after much waving and many farewells, the train carried us towards whatever awaited us.

At first everyone was in good spirits and tried to outdo the others. But as night settled over us and heavy coal dust filled the carriages, each man soon became absorbed in thoughts of the future. At midday on 30 Sept. [September] we arrived in Thorn. As we marched from the station, greeted by shouts from the soldiers and by some of the local womenfolk, we were made fully aware of our new dignity as “Schimmel” [soldiers’ slang; meaning uncertain]. Then our new “company mother”, surrounded by her staff of non-commissioned officers, received us. We were quickly formed up at the Gulaschk. [Gulaschkanone, field kitchen], divided into sections, issued bowls and ate barrack-room food for the first time.

Then it was off to the stores, where we were issued new uniforms.

Thorn and Angermünde

The following day our service began. It was a hard time; from morning until evening they drove us mercilessly. But we held out, for we knew what we were doing it for. So the time in Thorn passed until November 1915. Then we were transferred to Angermünde. The duties were a little easier

there, though we suffered greatly from the cold. During this period I was promoted to Gefreiter [a junior enlisted rank].

It was a great joy to me. But soon the old routine began again. We had to do a great deal of marching and rifle practice. And so 1916 passed as well. In November 1916 I was promoted to Unteroffizier [non-commissioned officer] and posted to the field recruit depot of the 9th Army. Now it was time to take leave of home, for we were going to the front. The journey east took us through Berlin, Breslau and Krakow.

CHAPTER II

Through Transylvania to Romania

Karlsburg, Kronstadt and the Predeal Pass

We travelled second class on an express train, which was a great comfort to us. Via Munich, Vienna and Budapest we reached Karlsburg in Transylvania. We remained there for a fortnight to grow accustomed to the climate. Then the journey continued to Kronstadt. We arrived at night and were quartered in a school. The following morning we looked around the town. Everywhere were signs of war.

Many houses had been destroyed and the people looked badly worn. But we did not let it discourage us and marched on. We came to a small village, where we took quarters in a barn. It was bitterly cold, and we had to cover ourselves with straw to keep from freezing. The next morning the crack of rifles woke us. The carriage doors were thrown open, and there we were, high up on the Predeal Pass. The train wound through the pass like a snail. On either side rose steep mountains covered with tall firs, deep in snow—a magnificent sight. Romanian defensive works still lay along the railway line.

Then a few houses: Predeal. Riddled with shells and bullets, the [unclear reading], heaps of rubble from the Romanian barracks and the ruins of wealthy villa owners. Here we had to leave the train, as the line beyond had not yet been repaired. Following the road, we climbed the mountainside in hairpin bends. Magnificent villas and gardens, deep in snow, seemed to beckon like a Christmas fairy tale. Pretty villas, mansions and other buildings stood half hidden among the gardens. At last we reached the top and were quartered in barracks that seemed more like feed barns than dwellings.

Campina, Ploiești and Târgoviște

Over-exertion gave me pains in the kidneys, but the next day I marched on with the company to Campina, the principal Romanian centre. The following day I was unable to march because of fever and was given permission to travel on by any available means. I tried several lorries, but unfortunately they were all loaded. [The following sentence is unclear in the German transcription.]

In the end each vehicle had three sledges tied behind it. We climbed aboard [?] and set off. Things did not go smoothly for long. The sledge swayed violently, and suddenly there was a jolt and we flew in an arc into the soft snow. Everything was quickly gathered up again so that we could climb back on. Then an empty lorry came along; it was stopped and took me and two comrades to Campina. A town—and pretty girls. On 4 Feb. [February], onward by sledge and cart to Baicoi, a village with seventy to eighty oil derricks and large storage tanks, though the Romanians had destroyed everything during their retreat. On the 5th, we marched to Ploski.

Gradually we came out of the mountains. Ploski stretches a long way across the plain. On 6 Feb. we marched to Samaresti—wretched houses. My group and I took quarters in an abandoned house; a fire was soon lit and before long coffee was bubbling in the mess tin. On the 7th, owing to an error by our guide, we reached Targoviste only after a long detour: 38 kilometres, marching continuously from eight in the morning until eight in the evening, with only short pauses.

By the time we finally arrived, our legs would scarcely take another step. We were quartered in clean, single-storey barracks. We had a good time there. There was plenty of duty, but in the evenings one could relax in town, where a meal cost 1.50 lei and wine 1.50 to 2 lei a kilo; compote was available everywhere. Almost all the shopkeepers could speak German. By mid-April it had become quite hot, and while everything around us was green and in bloom, snow still shone from the distant mountains; it did not disappear until the end of May.

The Way South

Reserve Regiment 21, to which we belonged as replacements, was now transferred to Macedonia. As a result, one day we too had to pack for

transfer to Serbia. On 15 June we travelled from Targoviste via Titu and Bucharest to Giurgiu. There the train was taken across the Danube by ferry to Rustschuk on the Bulgarian bank, and the journey continued, at first through flat country. Early on the 17th we entered the mountains. The slopes were mostly bare [reading uncertain], with here and there a small patch of cultivated land and a hut upon it. No road led up—only a narrow path—and everything taken there had to be carried.

Towards evening we followed the bends of a river and passed through some twelve tunnels.

It was a wonderful evening. The river lay to our right, and on either side steep mountains rose so high that only a strip of sky remained visible above. Glow-worms shone in the low undergrowth and fireflies swarmed around the train like shooting stars. At midday the following day we were in Sofia. Then we continued via Firat and Niš, reaching Vranja on the 19th. In the blazing midday heat we climbed the hill into the town. We had hoped to remain together as an independent company, but were attached to another. We were quartered in a hotel that had been converted into barracks.

CHAPTER III

Serbia and Macedonia

Vranja and the March to the Front

We non-commissioned officers were billeted in the “Balkanschlüchte” [Balkan gorges]. There we did not have to contend with lice bites, but with a host of fleas—such charming, affectionate little creatures, impossible to catch and yet always present. Then came leave, and off I went home. By the time I returned to the company, we had already been assigned to a transport for the front. Early on 24 July we travelled via Ristovac and Veles to Gradsko, arriving at midnight. Because the blazing heat made marching by day impossible, we set out on foot at seven the following evening and reached Kanatarei at midnight.

Our baggage went by light railway and, from late morning until noon, by cable railway. The following evening we continued to Trojacy; the road was very poor. The rock there is a kind of limestone. The heavy wagons travelling to the front had ground it into flour, through which we waded ankle-deep. When you reached your quarters you looked like a miller. At 5.30 in the evening on the 27th we continued over the Pletvar Pass to Prilep, where at ten that night we took quarters in a Russian house. The following day we looked around the town. Minarets everywhere, as in Turkish towns.

The population was mainly Turkish. In the streets, shop followed shop. In one street there were only blacksmiths, in another joiners, then shoemakers, tailors, and so on—though certainly not in the style of Berlin’s Leipziger Strasse. A wretched hut, a single room open to the street: there the blacksmith, joiner or shoemaker worked. The only ones without a guild of their own were the “Pritz-Pritz boys”. A whole troop of them sat ten to twenty in a row with their polishing boxes, all shouting at you: “Panon [?] bi Pritz Pritz, biko bello,” and so on. But they understood their trade.

Using their fingers as brushes to apply the polish, they worked the shoes back and forth at such speed that before long you could see your own face in them.

Monastir and the Peristeri

On 30 July we moved on again. Our baggage was once more loaded onto the cable railway, and we marched to Monastir. Near the town, in the Gypsy quarter, we pitched our tents. In this region the days were scorching hot, while the nights were bitterly cold. One really froze. We suffered a great deal from air raids, as Monastir lay in the foremost line. In the town itself scarcely a house remained intact. Nothing but heaps of rubble.

We stayed there for eight days and then went into the line. The position lay on the Peristeri, at about 2,400 metres. We began the climb at eight in the evening and reached the top at one in the morning. Up there in the mountains a very different wind blew. The position itself was quiet. Only now and then did the French artillery send a few shells up to us. But as we were well dug into the rock, they could do little harm. We had a magnificent view from up there. Far below in the valley lay Monastir. At night it was a wonderful sight when searchlights swept the town. From our position we could observe every impact of our own artillery.

By September it was already bitterly cold up there and we had the first snow. We built small shelters of stone and earth to protect ourselves from the cold. At the end of September we were relieved and returned to Monastir. There we were quartered in cellars because the town was under constant fire. It was no pleasant life, for at any moment we had to reckon with the building collapsing.

CHAPTER IV

Illness and Military Hospitals

On 4 Oct. [October] I fell ill with dysentery. At first I was taken to a field hospital near Monastir, but the very next day I was moved to Prilep. I remained there for eight days. As the illness did not improve but grew worse, I was taken farther on by hospital train to Gradsko. I was placed in a Bulgarian hospital. The conditions were wretched. We lay on the bare ground with only a little straw beneath us. We were given almost nothing to eat. After three days I was moved to a German hospital. Things improved there.

I was given a proper bed. But by then I was so weak that I could no longer stand unaided. In that short time I had lost forty pounds [about twenty kilograms]. From Gradsko I was taken to Ueskueb [Skopje], where I remained for another fortnight. My condition gradually improved. From there I was transported to Belgrade. We travelled for two days and two nights. In Belgrade we were taken to a very good hospital in a former Serbian barracks. We were very well fed there. After eight days the journey home continued.

Via Semlin, Budapest, Vienna and Passau we reached Nuremberg. There we were thoroughly deloused and given clean clothing. Then we continued to Leipzig, where I was taken to a hospital housed in a school. It was a very pleasant time. We were given very good food and the nurses were very kind to us. At last I was able to sleep properly. At the end of November I was discharged as fit for duty and granted fourteen days' convalescent leave at home.

CHAPTER V

The Western Front and Homecoming

The Spring Offensive

After my leave I returned to my replacement unit, where I remained until the middle of January 1918. Then I was assigned to another transport, this time to the west. Via Düsseldorf, Aachen, Liège, Namur and Charleroi we reached St Quentin. There we joined a division that had just arrived from the east. We were trained for the great spring offensive. It was a hard time. We had to drill constantly and had little to eat. In the middle of March it began.

We were near La Fère. At four in the morning on 21 March a drumfire began unlike anything I had ever heard. At nine we went over the top. We made good progress. The British withdrew in haste. We took many prisoners and captured a great deal of equipment. We were especially delighted by the good food we found among the British stores. It had been a long time since we had seen white bread or chocolate. We advanced as far as the outskirts of Amiens.

Retreat and Armistice

The resistance of the British and French became steadily stronger, until we could advance no farther. We dug in. It was a dreadful war of fixed positions. Day and night we lay under fire. In August the great British attacks began. They used enormous numbers of tanks. There was little we could do against those monsters. We had to retreat slowly and came back into the area around St Quentin. We remained there until November. It was a desolate time. We knew that everything was lost. On 9 November we heard that revolution had broken out in Germany. Then, on 11 Nov. [November], came the word: armistice.

At first we could scarcely believe it. Suddenly everything was so quiet. One hardly dared climb out of the trench. But then the French came across and

shook hands with us. We exchanged cigarettes and bread. It was a strange feeling. Now it was time to march back.

We marched thirty to forty kilometres every day. Via Maubeuge, Namur and Liège we returned to Germany. Everywhere the population greeted us with cheers. People were glad that the war was over. At Herford we were discharged. I received my discharge papers and some money, and then I went home. How great was the joy when, after more than four years, I was once again with my loved ones. — End.

CHAPTER VI

Later Additions and Reflections

Stolp, 1924

Romania Once More

To return once more to Romania. When we marched away from Targoviste, it was magnificent to see the fruit trees in full blossom. But the farther we went, the more desolate the countryside became. Everywhere were signs of war: burnt-out villages and trampled fields. The people looked starved. We often gave them some of our meagre bread, which they accepted gratefully. It was pitiful to see such misery.

In the area around Braila things were especially bad. The Russians had wrought terrible destruction there. They had taken everything that was not nailed down. The inhabitants had fled into the forests and were only slowly returning. We helped them rebuild their huts as well as we could. It was hard work, since we ourselves were on duty all day. But those poor people were truly grateful.

We were often given eggs or milk in return, which made a welcome change. Then harvest time came. We had to help in the fields because there were no men left. The heat was scorching. We worked in the fields from morning until evening and were glad when we returned to our quarters at night and could rest.

But the rest was often brief. We were frequently woken at night by an alarm: "The Russians are coming!" Most of the time it was a false alarm, but one always had to remain on guard. One day our divisional chaplain visited us. He held a service in the open air. It was very solemn. We sang hymns and prayed for the war to end soon.

Memories of Macedonia

The service did us all a great deal of good. Amid the terrible business one often forgets that there is anything besides killing and burning. When I now look back on my time in Macedonia, it is the Peristeri that remains most

firmly in my memory. There was something peculiar about that solitude high among the rocks. One felt so small and abandoned. And yet it was a beautiful time.

At least up there we had some respite from the endless drill. When we were not on sentry duty, we sat together and spoke of home. That was our only comfort. I have now been home for many years, yet the memory of that hard time will never fade. May mankind be spared another such war.

What Should Endure

As I write these lines today, after so many years, I do so in the hope that my children and grandchildren may one day understand from them what we had to endure. It was truly no easy time. Many a good comrade now lies beneath foreign soil. But we who were fortunate enough to return home should thank God for His merciful guidance.

He led us through every danger and reunited us with our loved ones. When I think back on the many places I saw, they pass before my mind's eye like a film: beautiful Transylvania with its mountains and forests, broad Romania with its endless fields, and barren Macedonia with its scorching days and icy nights. Everywhere I met people, good and bad, just as one does anywhere in the world.

One thing I learned: the ordinary man, whether Romanian, Bulgarian or Serbian, is at heart no different from us. He wants to do his work in peace and provide for his family. It is only the hatred between nations, stirred up by the powerful of this world, that drives them into war. May the young learn from history and see to it that such a thing never happens again. Peace on earth! That should be the watchword for all time to come. I now close my notes in the certainty that I did my duty as best I could. Stolp, December 1924.

CHAPTER VII

My Service

Period	Place / Posting
Aug. 1914 – 30 Sept. 1914	Stolp
Sept. 1914 – Nov. 1915	Thorn
Nov. 1915 – Nov. 1916	Angermünde
Nov. 1916 – Jan. 1917	Karlsburg
Jan. 1917 – June 1917	Targoviste
June 1917 – July 1917	Vranja
July 1917 – Oct. 1917	Monastir
Oct. 1917 – Nov. 1917	Military hospital
Dec. 1917 – Jan. 1918	Convalescence
Jan. 1918 – Nov. 1918	Western Front
Dec. 1918	Homecoming

CHAPTER VIII

Dedication

*In remembrance of my military service in the World War of
1914–1918.*

Dedicated to my dear parents and siblings.

Willy

CHAPTER IX

Supplementary Memories

Cable Railways and Mules

A further word about the cable railways. In the inaccessible mountains they were the only means of supplying us with food and ammunition. It was a strange sight to see the small carriers suspended above the deep ravines. They often came to a halt when the wind was too strong, and we had to go hungry up there until the weather improved. Many a sack of flour or crate of tins fell into the depths and was lost to us. The mules too were indispensable. Those hardy animals climbed the narrowest paths, where no wagon could pass. They were often wiser than we human beings and knew exactly where to place their feet.

When such a column came up the mountain, one could hear the bells of the lead animals from a long way off. It was a sound of home in a foreign land.

The Bulgarian Allies

The Bulgarians with whom we fought were a peculiar people. They were very frugal and could march all day on a piece of bread and an onion. In their dark dress and pointed caps they looked very warlike. They were good soldiers, but when it came to looting they were unsurpassed; then they knew neither friend nor kin. On the whole, however, we got on well with them. They admired our discipline, and we admired their endurance.

Across the Danube

The crossing of the Danube was a special experience. The mighty river, flowing so calmly, inspired considerable respect in us. Standing on the ferry and looking towards the opposite bank, we felt very much like tiny cogs in the great machinery of war. The far bank represented the unknown towards which we were travelling. What might await us there?

None of us knew, yet we crossed in good spirits. When I think today of the many comrades who were down there with me, it seems as though it were only yesterday. I see their faces before me, hear their laughter and their

songs. We were a close-knit band. Hardship and danger had bound us together. Each man relied on the others.

That is perhaps the only thing from the war that remains beautiful in memory: true comradeship. It recognises neither rank nor class. In the face of death all are equal. Now I lay down my pen. I have written down everything that moved me. It is a part of my life which I now bring to a close. May God protect my homeland and my loved ones. Stolp, 15 December 1924. Willy.

Serbia

A few more words about Serbia. The country is very mountainous and heavily wooded. Most of the inhabitants are peasants who lead a very simple life. Their houses are built of stone or clay and roofed with shingles. In the centre there is usually a hearth around which the whole family gathers. There is seldom a chimney; the smoke escapes through the roof. Their food consists mainly of maize bread and sheep's cheese, with paprika.

The Serbs are a proud and courageous people. The women too work hard in the fields and forests. They wear colourful costumes with much embroidery. In Vranja we saw many Gypsies, who lived there in quarters of their own. Most were blacksmiths or musicians. When they played their songs, the music was very melancholy and often made us think of home. Balkan music as a whole has a character all its own.

Macedonia and the Peristeri

In Macedonia the heat was unbearable. It was often over 40 degrees Celsius in the shade. Water was scarce and often bad, so that many of us contracted malaria or dysentery. The mosquitoes were a true plague. At night especially they gave us no peace. We had to sleep under mosquito nets, when we had them. The landscape is bare and stony. Only the valleys have any greenery. Tobacco and vines grow there.

The tortoises were our only companions up on the Peristeri. There were vast numbers of them. We often watched them for hours as they crawled slowly over the stones. Some were so large that one could sit on them. We

painted numbers on their shells and held races. It was our only pastime in that lonely position. One becomes a child again.

When the French aircraft came, we had to take cover quickly. They often dropped small steel darts, which were extremely dangerous. One heard only a faint whirring, and if one struck you, it was usually the end. Gas shells were also fired from time to time, though up there in the mountains the gas usually dispersed quickly.

On one occasion we received a visit from a Bulgarian general. He was very friendly and gave each of us a cigarette. That was a great rarity and pleased us enormously. I have now reached the end of my account. There would be much more to tell, but I have written down what mattered most. I hope these pages will be preserved for a long time and passed from hand to hand. They are a piece of contemporary history as I myself experienced it. Willy. Stolp, 1924.