

## BELGIUM I

### Why Leopold Quit

In the old moated castle of Wynendaele, south of Bruges, the pale young man with sunken eyes and rumpled curly brown hair faced another sleepless night. For 14 days he had watched terror-stricken people fleeing across the fertile fields and meadows of North Flanders. For 14 nights he had seen the moonlit May sky turn murky yellow from the glow of burning villages. Four-fifths of his country had been devastated and overrun; how many of his countrymen had been slaughtered he did not know. As Commander in Chief of the Belgian Army holding the Allied left flank, he had seen it beaten back with frightful losses toward the English Channel. On this night the Germans were at the gates of Bruges. Leopold III, King of the Belgians, sent for his Ministers.

When they arrived—Premier Hubert Pierlot, Foreign Minister Paul Henri Spaak, two others—they faced a King who was agitated and harassed, with tears in his eyes. Latest military reports, said the King, showed that the Belgian Army was bearing the brunt of the German attack. Behind it the British and French were already backing toward the Channel. Further resistance would not save Belgium. In his opinion, King Leopold said, the Belgian Army should withdraw from the war.

Not one of the four Ministers agreed with him. The Allied cause was not lost, they argued; if Belgium fought on, she would be restored after the war. The King was sure he knew better. His aide-de-camp and chief military adviser, Major General R. Van Overstraeten, was in Rome and had already sent the King an urgent personal message. Furthermore, the King was conscious that his first duty was not to the Allies, but to Belgium. Too many Bel-

gians had died already, for a cause that was doomed from the start.

All night the argument went on, growing bitter as time passed. The Ministers urged the King to quit the Army and go to France or England. According to the account of Foreign Minister Spaak, Premier Pierlot finally said:

"It is time to leave. I shall stay with you up to the last minute on condition that you go with me."

"I stay with my Army in my country," Leopold replied. "You remain with me to govern."

"Do you think Hitler would permit it?" M. Pierlot exclaimed.

"No," said the King, "but you can stay with me as privy councillor."

"But a government will be formed in France," M. Pierlot persisted.

"It will be against me," said Leopold. "I wish to have Ministers. I am no dictator."

"In that case we leave," Premier Pierlot said. The Ministers quit the castle and went to Dunkirk.

"This Same King. . . ." It was not until 72 hours later that Belgium's Army laid down its arms—a fact that was slurred over by bitter Britons and Frenchmen last

week—and Leopold's warning gave the Allies time to prepare for the blow. French Premier Paul Reynaud flew to London to consult Prime Minister Winston Churchill, then, back in Paris, told France over the radio that Belgium had given up. His tone was almost a snarl when he spoke of Leopold:

"This same King, without a word of gratitude or admiration for the soldiers of the Allies, has now handed the Belgian Army over to the invader. This decision was taken in strict contradiction to the feeling of his country and of the soldiers

who had been putting up a magnificent effort."

The press of Paris and London let go with a broadside of invective. "King Quisling," sneered the London *Evening Standard*. "King of the Fifth Column," echoed the *Daily Mirror*. In Paris the best that Leopold was called was "traitor" and "felon king." *Paris-soir* reported that General Walter von Reichenau's peace terms, which Leopold accepted, included the turning over to the Germans of all war matériel intact, free passage of the German Army to the sea. The French Legion of Honor struck Leopold's name from its rolls.

Crowed Berlin: "The Belgian troops . . . were about to be deserted by the Allies."

The first moderate voice raised last week was that of Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes, the old hero of Zeebrugge and British special attaché to King Leopold, who was with him up to the hour of surrender. Said he: "I trust that judgment will be suspended on a very gallant soldier until all the facts are known." Prime Minister Churchill agreed.

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I was born in the city of Antwerp, Belgium, a great and equally important seaport on the "Schelde River", approximately fifty miles from the open North Sea.

I lived with my parents, brothers and sisters, in the heart of Antwerp. Everything was going along peacefully until Hitler decided to rule the world. By now he had the most powerful army in the world, and the best war machines.

September the first 1939 was approaching. On that day, German Armies overran Poland, destroying every town, and killing people.

As soon as England and France heard that Germany invaded Poland, they declared war on Germany. But Britain nor France could come to Poland's aid. Then on April 9th, 1940, German troops overran Denmark, Norway. By now all of Europe's inhabitants became frightened of the Nazi Conquerors. Everyone was wondering if they were going to be next. In Belgium people were also afraid. Many remembered that Belgium was "neutral", which meant that Germany would not touch us. In Antwerp, as well as any other Belgian cities, people began to prepare for war. Schools were training its children to descend into an air-raid shelter, during an enemy bombardment. There was a different feeling all around us.

Now came the beginning of the month of May. The days passed by rapidly. I was at that time in the Third Class, which is the same as third grade here. More days passed until came May 10th.

It happened on a Friday morning. As I woke up from bed I heard strange noises, such as thunder. I knew it would be very strange to hear thunder on a beautiful warm morning. As soon as I was out of bed, I asked my mother what the noise which I heard was. The reply was "German airplanes are bombing Antwerp".

Of course Antwerp was not the only city bombed. I had a very strange feeling as I looked out of our window, but did not see anything, although I heard bombs falling. Cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Brussels and Liege had been bombed by German Air-bombers. The radio was on, and the announcer was reporting that at about 3AM this morning of Friday, May 10th, 1940, German Land and Airforces had started an invasion of Holland, Belgium and Luxemburg.