

*An Infantry soldier
under Napoleon*



Defeated by blunders

ISBN: 9789402181395

Context

3	Context
7	Word of thanks
9	Prologue

17 *Part One: Holloque aux Pierres*

<i>Page</i>	<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Date (1811)</i>	<i>Title</i>
19	1	July 15	The mill
23	2	Mid July	Remy as a foreman
27	3	Mid July	Remy's first taste of the world
33	4	Aug 17	The tavern and Léon's return
37	5	Aug 18	Home
41	6	Aug 24	Dominique
45	7	Aug 25	Léon's visit
55	8	Aug 26	Medical examination in Liège
61	9	Aug 27	Reporting for duty
75	10	Aug 28	Basic training
85	11	Aug 29	Pleasures and misery of homecoming

91 *Part Two: March to the east*

<i>Page</i>	<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Date (1811-1812)</i>	<i>Title</i>
93	12	Nov 21	The march begins
99	13	Nov 22	Aachen region
103	14	Nov 24	Jülich
107	15	Nov 25	Pulheim
113	16	Nov 27	Foragers
117	17	Nov 27	Barmen Ebersfeld
123	18	Nov 28	Droux
127	19	Nov 1811	We make a good bargain
133	20	Nov 29	Gütersloh region, the heritage
139	21	November 1811	Caught in the act!
145	22	December 1811	The misery of the march
149	23	Dec 2	Hanover

153	24	Dec 15	Prussia, Berlin
161	25	Dec 21	Reflections
167	26	January 1812	Approach to Warsaw
171	27	January 1812	Duchy of Warsaw
175	28	Jan 12, 1812	Failed foraging
181	29	Jan 13, 1812	Life is miserable
187	30	Jan 18, 1812	Lomza

195 *Part Three: Preparations for the campaign*

<i>Page</i>	<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Date (1811-1812)</i>	<i>Title</i>
197	31	Jan 26	The arrival
209	32	Jan 27	Integration into Meškučiai
213	33	Jan 28	The battalion's staff arrive
217	34	Feb 1	Companies Command Staff arrives
223	35	Feb 3	A sensitive business deal
231	36	Feb 6	First unintended recce
237	37	Feb 7	Russian Prisoner of War (POW)
243	38	Feb 8	Company training drills
249	39	Feb 12	The recce plan
253	40	Feb 14	Armed Recce
265	41	Feb 16	Promotion
271	42	Feb 28	Final preparations

274 *Part Four: The Polish War*

<i>Page</i>	<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Date (1812)</i>	<i>Title</i>
275	43	Apr 28	The preparation phase
279	44	May 30	Finally, the time has come
283	45	June 23	Kaunas
293	46	June 24	Aukštadvaris
299	47	June 27	Vilnius
307	48	June 28	The storm
311	49	June 30	Paneriai
315	50	July 16	En route to Vitebsk
319	51	July, 25-26-27	Ostrovno

329	52	July 28	Vitebsk
335	53	Aug 17	Poretchi
339	54	Aug 20	Smolensk, the slaughterhouse
345	55	Sep 5	Borodino, the preamble
347	56	Sep 6	Borodino, the first phase
353	57	Sep 7	The battle for Moscow
373	58	Sep 12	Serpukhov
379	59	Sep 17	Moscow

385 *Part Five: Forward comrades, we're going to retreat!*

<i>Page</i>	<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Date (1812)</i>	<i>Title</i>
385	60	Oct 14	The die has cast
393	61	Oct 24	Heading south, Maloyaroslavetz
401	62	Nov 1- 5	Racing winter to Smolensk
409	63	Nov 10	Vulture "Partisans"
413	64	Nov 16	Krasny
419	65	Nov 27	Studzenko
427	66	Dec, 5	Vilnius
435	67	Dec 6	En route to Königsberg
437			Epilogue

Word of thanks

I I would have never been able to write this book without the help of a number of people who I want to mention here. First my friends Jerry Cummings, retired lieutenant-colonel and Bill Slayton, retired colonel United States Army, who provided me with the main part of the native English translation of the book.

My friend and colleague Leo Dorrestijn, who edited the book for Dutch grammar, style as well as the content of the book.

My classmate from elementary school; Dr. Dennis McLennan, retired physician, provided answers on many questions I had on medical related issues.

Mr. René Drijvers, a genealogist from Liège, Belgium, provided valuable information about the ancestors of the Remouchamps family, which play a key role in this book.

Mr. Jean Moors, an amateur historian from Hollogne-aux-Pierres, Belgium, provided information about the birthplace of the protagonist and his family and ensured to the extent possible that the information about Hollogne-aux-Pierres was as factual as possible.

He also provided contemporary photographs, on which the current locations in Hollogne are visible, which were used to describe the settings in the book.

Jean is immortalized in the story as a sergeant of Remy's company. Last but not least, my Lithuanian friend Liudgirdas "Liudas" Guzevicius who accompanied me in 2011 as we logged more than 4500 kilometers tracing Napoleons *Grand Armée* in Lithuania, Belarus and Russia.

Liudgirdas also served as guide, translator and amateur historian to me during our trip in 2008 from *Liège* to *Moscow* and back, as a guide and translator- during which we visited the Napoleonic battlefields and museums.

This novel is dedicated to him.



Prologue

The decision of Napoleon to march into Russia in 1812, has always been one of the key accusations of the former Soviet Union and later its successor, the Russian Federation that “Mother Russia” has always suffered from attacks from the West in order to humiliate, degrade and finally destroy the country. The main argument of Napoleon to attack Russia has always been described as the result of Russia’s refusal to cooperate to sign up to the economic blockade of England, in the 19th century the main world power, as agreed in *Tilsit* between Napoleon and Tsar Alexander on July 7 and 9 1807. A bit unknown is the fact that French spies in the headquarters of the Russian army, specifically in the headquarters of the commander of the Russian 2nd Army; Prince Bagration and the



When Russia would not have been stopped, its influence would reach less than 800 kilometers from the French border, with small and military weak German states in between (Hanover, Saxony, Westphalia and the Confederation of the Rhine)

headquarters of the Russian 1st Army; Barclay de Tolly, that Russia had developed plans to attack France's allies, while Napoleon was occupied in Spain.

Alexander wrote to his sister Catherine, that "Sooner or later, one of us will have to retreat from this part of Europe. And that will not be me!" In the correspondence between Tsar Alexander and Napoleon aimed at defusing the increased tension between the two countries in 1810, Russia demanded that Napoleon would prevent the resurrection of Poland as an independent country, a demand that was not acceptable for Napoleon.

Prince Poniatovsky, the Minister of War of the *Grand Duchy of Warsaw*, informed Napoleon already in 1810 about strong concentrations of Russian troops along the Russian border.

First the weak ally; the Kingdom of Prussian was to be attacked, followed by subsequent attacks on Austria and the *Grand Duchy of Warsaw*, which was a thorn in the Russian side because they were fiercely opposed by the existence of a strong enemy state on the Russian borders. If those plans would have been executed successfully, Russian influence would have been some eight hundred kilometers from the French border, only separated by a number of military insignificantly German entities, since 1806 united in the "*Confederation of the Rhine*¹".

Which would have meant that the Russian influence, after defeating the Austrians, would have reached the French border! Napoleon had anticipated on that possibility and left strong garrisons in Prussia and the Duchy to prevent that Russia would decide to make use of a temporary weak position of France. He left garrisons on the territory of the Confederation of the Rhine, in *Düsseldorf, Hanau, Fulda, Hanover, Magdeburg, Bayreuth, Salzburg and Ratisbon (Regensburg)* under the command of Marshall Davout. And some strong units in Prussia: *Danzig, Glogau, (Glogów) Stettin (Szczecin) and Küstrin. (Kostrzyn)*

It became clear by mid-1810 that Alexander was manipulated by his inner circle, led by his sister, that the best way to neutralize the threat by Napoleon was to take immediate offensive action. As a result of infighting in the Imperial household, his political advisers and the struggle for power within the Ministry of Defense and the military headquarters, the offensive operation never started and was overrun by events when Napoleon crossed the river Nemunas on July 24, 1812.

¹ It included 36 states. Four kingdoms, five grand duchies, 13 duchies, seventeen principalities, and the Free Hansa towns of Hamburg, Lübeck and Bremen The west bank of the Rhine and the Principality of Erfurt had been annexed outright by the French Empire.

It is without any doubt that Napoleon attacked Russia in 1812, but the political exploitation of the attack on a poor, defensive and innocent Russia is far beyond the truth.

Today, the one-sided fairytale is once again being used as a nation-formative myth, and one that justifies modern Russian military expansion. The Kremlin is convincing the Russian population that by invading Ukraine, it is not committing aggression against a neighboring country, but merely continuing the battle against “foreign fascists” like Napoleon in 1812 and Hitler in 1941, which endanger both Russia and their world. To do that, it perpetuates historical falsifications of the Soviet era.

In this book, we tell the experiences of a simple soldier, based upon actual letters Remy Remouchamps wrote to his mother in 1811 and 1812, which are kept in the Remouchamps family’s archive. Because the book is not a diary, the story as such is fiction, but written in the correct historical context using the contents of the letters as guidance.

Hundreds of books, novels and documents are written about Napoleon’s “Polish War”. Most of the time all these historical novels start with the crossing of the Nemunas (*Njemen/Nemen*) subsequently quickly switching to the battle of Borodino followed by the deliberate destruction of *Moscow* by the Emperors forces and ending with the crossing of the *Berezina* river. Hardly any information is given about the training of the soldiers and the hardship which they experienced during the long march from *Liège*, to the outskirts of *Moscow*, a distance of more than two thousand kilometers. The retreat of the coalition forces as well as the battles fought during this retreat, is obviously hardly interesting from a historical perspective and almost no information is given about the chances of a wounded soldier to survive the onslaught during and after all the battles.

Hardly anything has been told about the almost total lack of medical support in case a soldier got wounded. These topics are not popular and conflict with the archaic, but still popular ideas of “heroism” and “honor”.

Most readers like to read about the glory, won on the battlefield, the brilliant strategies worked out by general staff officers dressed in beautiful uniforms in fancy palaces. The best example is the movie “*War and Peace*” based on the famous novel of Léonid Tolstoy, where in the almost three hours during movie, showing

extravagant uniforms worn by handsome young officers in beautiful ballrooms, only seven minutes of the script are reserved for images on the onslaught of the battlefield of *Borodino*!

The narrator is a volunteer soldier who trained with the *Grand Armée* and then marched into battle with it. Moving relentlessly to the east, the journey visits the countries of the *Confederation of the Rhine*, a creation of Napoleon in 1806, the Kingdom of Prussia and the *Duchy of Warsaw* (now the main part of Poland) created in 1807.

Most historical documents and novels describing the heroic and adventurous so-called “Polish War”, the name Napoleon gave to this campaign, probably deliberately neglecting the misery of marching through a hostile landscape with inadequate logistical and medical support.

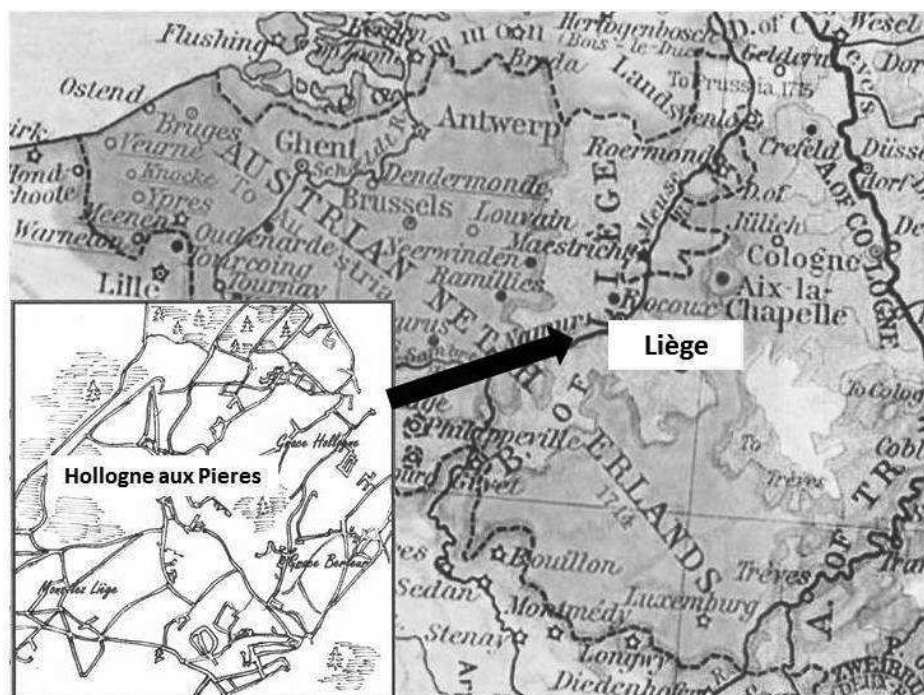
At the end of the march, Remy’s ’s battalion is stationed as an advanced, defensive post, just south of the border with Russia in today’s Lithuania where the unit prepares for the campaign against the forces of Tsar Alexander's Russia by skirmishing the area and collecting information about the movements of Russian units.

I have decided that I wanted to (re) experience the history of Remy’s journey concerning the distances, the locations of the towns and villages and the battlefields he visited, and made the trip from *Liège* to *Moscow* and back, myself. Not on foot this time and not during the winter, but comfortably by car in the summer of 2011.

Because Russia has always successfully used this campaign and other historic events to “prove” the aggression of Europe against the poor, defensive “Mother Russia” The author will show that Napoleon losing his “Polish war” was not the result of brilliant Russian strategic thinking and tactical superiority on the battlefield, but the result of failing logistics of the coalition forces, the harsh winter conditions of 1812 but mainly, some major strategic blunders made by the Emperor himself.

The book covers parts of the years 1811 and the beginning of 1812 and describes the life of a fairly well-educated, yet simple young man, who decides to break away, at least once in his life, from his monotonous existence and he dreams about seeing distant countries and regions. Remy comes from a protected environment, but like many young men in that time, he is attracted by the stories of adventure and the prospects of fame and glory. In that period of time, the Russia campaign was

supposed to end all wars and it was for many the last chance to experience the adventures of going to war and return with a lot of money and valuables. As a young man, in the days of the rise of France and the successes of Napoleon, Remy was highly enthusiastic about most advantages produced by the French Revolution. When all kinds of medieval social and political structures were demolished, a lot of archaic privileges were removed and opportunities for well-trained, creative and innovative men to build a new future were created. More or less the same basic principles the United States of America is based upon, in our current period of time.



In 1811, Remy Remouchamps lives in the village of *Hollogne-aux Pierres*, in the French *Département Ourthe* in what is now Wallonia, the French-speaking southern part of Belgium. Previously, *Hollogne-aux-Pierres* was located on the territory of the *Principality of Liège*², but after the French National Convention of October 1, 1795, as one of the consequences of the French Revolution, Napoleon annexed the area and the *Principality* was incorporated into the *Département Ourthe* with the city of *Liège* as the provincial capital. *Hollogne-aux-Pierres* was centrally located in this *department*. The Remouchamps family owned several water-driven flour mills in

² The Prince-Bishopric of Liège or the Principality of Liège was a state of the Holy Roman Empire in the Low Countries, situated for the most part in present Belgium, which was ruled by the Bishop of Liège.

the region, of which two in *Hollogne-aux Pierres* and the majority of the family worked in that region for more than hundred years: either as millers or in related professions such as grain- and flour traders.

This book describes the quite boring and monotonous but protected and relatively comfortable daily life of Remy.

In part 1, the story tells about Remy's life in a small French town and he dreams about swap his monotonous life for an adventurous life style. Remy works in *Hollogne-aux-Pierres* as a foreman in one of his father's flour mills.

Remy is attracted and motivated by the stories of his friend Léon who volunteered two years earlier to join Napoleon's army and Léon returns in 1811 from the successful battles that Napoleon fought at *Wagram* in Austria in 1809.

Remy can hardly wait for a chance to start the greatest adventure of his life and to start as a volunteer with one of the French infantry battalions, preparing for what was called "a heroic battle against barbarism from the East" in that period. The operation in "the East" was supposed to be the war that will end all wars, an often repeated qualification³ of a failed spilling of blood.

Napoleon has decided that his *Grande Armée*⁴ must be strengthened and this means the organic strength of regiments, the basic units of his army; the Regiment⁵, will be expanded with additional battalions.

In 1811 these supplementary battalions were formed and trained⁶ in the depots where temporary training facilities were created. In *Liège*, one such an infantry training unit is formed in the "*Lancers barracks*⁷". Originally this was a cavalry barracks, but it was temporarily expanded with an annex where Remy's auxiliary battalion will be trained.

⁴ Every main battle force of the French Army was called "*Grand Armée*". In history, this name is inseparably connected to Napoleons coalition force that invaded Russia in 1812.

⁵ The main fighting force of the army was the regiment, about 3800 men strong. Each regiment consisted of five battalions. Each battalion had six companies. One company "*tirailleurs*" (recce/special forces) and four companies "*fuseliers*" (main armament was a "fusil"/musket). Each company was about 140 soldiers strong, commanded by a captain, and supported by a small staff consisting of a deputy (first lieutenant) a sous-lieutenant (assistant), a sergeant major, two drummers and twelve sergeants.

⁶ Basic Training for the regiment was conducted by one of the battalions of the regiment, which stayed "in depot" and was responsible for the training of the recruits. After 1812, there was no time for a special battalion to conduct the training and the recruits were trained "on the march"

⁷ Anno 2020, the barracks still exist, called the "*Fonck barracks/kazerne*".

Part two tells about the preparations for and the army's move to the east which describes the journey Remy makes from *Liège*, right through what is now called Germany and the former *Duchy of Warsaw*⁸, now Poland behind the borders of 1945.

Part three tells the story of Remy's unit, stationed for almost six months in the north of the *Grand Duchy* in a village called *Meškuciai* in nowadays Lithuania and the preparations for the campaign before the crossing of the river *Njemen*, which was the border between Russia and the Grand Duchy. Nowadays the river is called *Nemunas* in Lithuania.

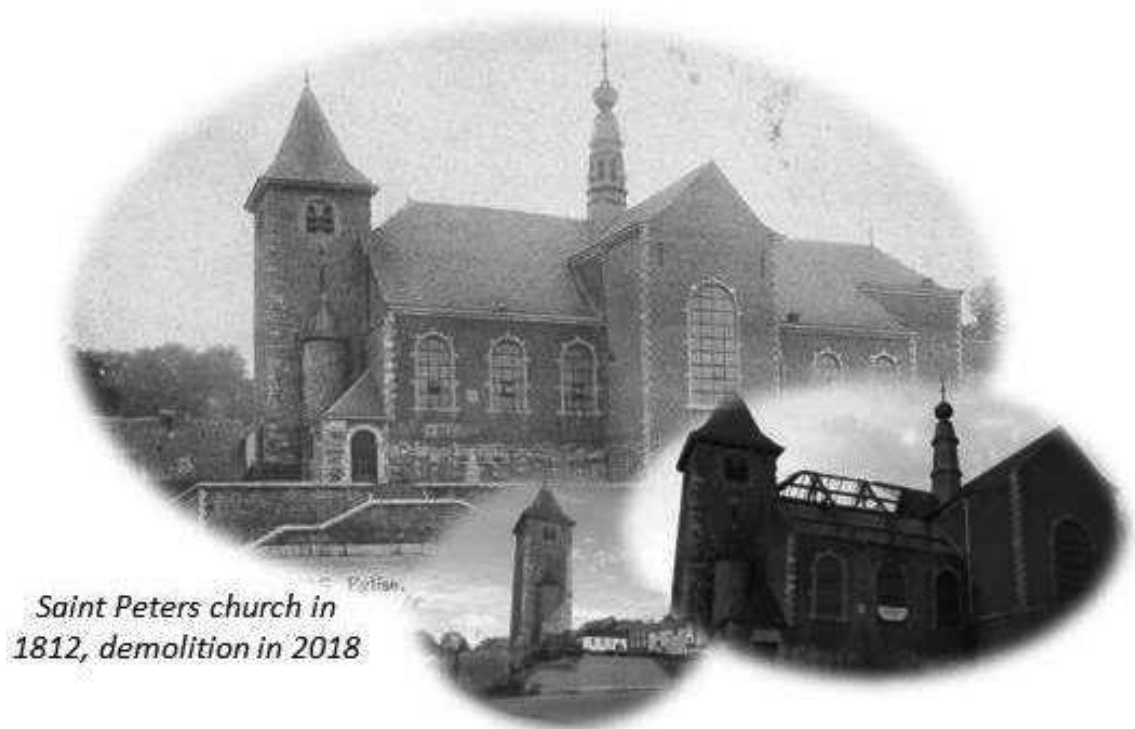
In part four the actual operation, called "The Polish War" by Napoleon, is described, again from the point of view of a simple low-ranking participant. The advance starts in *Kaunas*, where the border with Russia is crossed. The march continues through *Vilnius*, fighting battles in *Ostrovno*, *Vitebsk*, *Smolensk*, culminating in the battle for *Moscow* near the village of *Borodino*, which was won by the coalition forces. Just like all the here before mentioned battles.

Part five describes the retreat, the fighting battles in *Maloyaroslavetz*, *Viazma*, *Krasny* and ending at the river *Berezina* where intense defensive fighting at *Studzjenko* and *Borisov* by brave, mainly Swiss units, took place. The result of those battles gave the remainder of the *Grande Armée* the possibility to escape to the relative safety of *Prussia* and the *Grand Duchy of Warsaw*.

⁸ A creation of Napoleon. The Grand Duchy consisted out of conquered land from Austria and Prussia. Another so-called "vassal-state". Head of the country was King Frederick August I of Saxony, an ally of Napoleon. The Poles urged Napoleon to change the status of the Grand Duchy into a Kingdom, but Napoleon, eager not to raise the anger of Tsar Alexander, who was vehemently against a strong neighbor on its western border, declined this wish. At least for the moment.

Part One

Hollogne-aux-Pierres



*Saint Peters church in
1812, demolition in 2018*

200 years of history

Chapter 1

July 15, 1811

The mill

Set on a flat expanse on the west bank of the *Mahay* river, a tributary of the *Meuse* River, a half-day by barge from *Liège*, to the south is my home; *Hollogne-aux-Pierres*, “Hollogne on stony ground”. It is a lovely and quiet village with some seven hundred and fifty inhabitants, living dispersed from the center of town to the small farms surrounding it.⁹

Most of the hundred or so homes are built of bricks, kilned locally, with slate, taken from areas where it is exposed by the river’s erosion, or straw (grown locally) on the roofs. The centerpiece of the village is the Roman Catholic Church that serves as the place of worship for nearly everyone, excepted a small group of German Lutherans who’ve settled here. Crime doesn’t exist, but that doesn’t mean everyone loves his neighbor. Though perhaps there is some loving of one’s neighbor’s wife from time to time. I ‘lived’ there even before I was born because this is where my family settled in 1540 almost 300 years ago. Ambitious, industrious, and clever, it didn’t take them long to eschew the backbreaking work of farming, which tied man and beast to the fertile land. It was for brutes to spend endless hours following the backside of oxes, with eyes focused on the turned black earth. Brains, their indomitable entrepreneurial spirit and their mill liberated my ancestors from the need to work the land.

The family took advantage of the village’s proximity to the narrow, moderately deep and swift flowing *Mahay* and built their mill on its banks. Mills, such as my ancestors’, transformed local farmers into entrepreneurs. Even the most inadequate farmer understood that he could put seed into the ground, control the weeds, and his financial security was ensured. Blessed with fertile soil and abundant

⁹ The country of Belgium did not exist yet. The “Austrian Netherlands” were taken from Austria after the “First Coalition War” between France and a coalition of Austria, Prussia, The Netherlands Republic, Great Britain, Spain, Portugal, Naples-Sicily, Piëmont-Sardinia and some other smaller states. After the Peace treaty of Campo Formio in 1797, Austria had to accept the loss of the Austrian provinces in the Netherlands. The entire area, including the *Principality of Liège* was incorporated in the French empire. The Republic of the Netherlands was occupied and became another “Vassal state” or puppet kingdom, named; “Koninkrijk Holland/Kingdom of Holland”, headed by Napoleon’s brother Louis Bonaparte.

rain, this remote, quiet, tranquil valley flourished. The mill and its barges enabled the valley's farmers to reach markets in *Liège* and beyond.

They built the mill with their own hands. They felled trees and cured the wood but rather than putting their carpentry skills into building the mill, they determined their most immediate need was for a flat-bottom boat. They needed the boat to take them to the limestone quarries of *Sint Pietersberg*, near the city of *Maastricht*, a day's journey to the north. The boat they built resembled a flat-bottomed bathtub. It was water worthy once they caulked it and slathered its sides and bottom with a homemade grease concoction, and so they were off.

At *Sint Pietersberg* they cut and honed the mill's quern-stone, the upper stone and the ground stone. Their quern-stone measured fifty centimeters¹⁰ in diameter, was thirty centimeters thick and weighed more than 1600 kilograms.¹¹ The ground stone that was to serve as the foundation upon which the quern-stone would pulverize grain into flour, was even larger. So heavy were these stones that they had to make two trips from the quarry to the mill site.

Once the stones were on site, they fashioned the screw to turn the quern-stone, they framed the braces and to hold the quern-stone aloft and the axle and wooded cogs connecting the screw to their power source, a water wheel. Since they built the mill on a raised bank adjacent to the *Mahay*, they were able to set the waterwheel directly in the river.

Building the mill was expensive and wiped out the family resources. Their credit was stretched to the limit. The mill had to ensure a profit. Otherwise, my family would have been ruined for generations. At the time they possessed the only mill in the village, but not in the area. Their ability to secure their future was contingent upon their ability to get the farmers to bring them, and only them, their grain.

Shrewdness, a family trait, saved them and ensured their descendants were born into sound financial circumstances. Instead of charging their clients the usual rate of 1/12th of the milled grain, they offered clients only 1/16th of the milled product. Additionally, they built a second boat to ensure they never had to store flour waiting transportation. Within a generation, they had effectively wiped out their immediate competitors. Their pricing advantages never changed even when they began paying currency for the grain. Their business model survived even when

¹⁰ I realize that I need to help the Anglo-Saxon readers, only using metric measurements. I am incapable to use the measurements used in the UK and the USA in this book. Still using those measurements seems a bit "outdated" for them. For example: The size of an "inch" in the medieval way of using measurements is the size of a male thumb. (??) Like "feet", who's feet? (It turns out to be the size of the foot of Apollo). A yard (thirty-six thumbs in a yard), sounds really up-to-date, ain't it? And "mile": the distance a Roman soldier could have walked after a thousand steps (Latin: *míeles*).

¹¹ 1650 kilo is about 3300 pounds

the mill components wore out and had to be replaced. Thanks to them, I was born into a family without having to deal with the financial concerns, which confronted many of my neighbors. The work, though, remained physically demanding.

To get the flour to consumers in *Liège*, we used the *Meuse* as a wide and barrier-free highway for transport.¹²



*The valley of the river Meuse.
Holloigne-aux-Pierres is situated on a tributary of the river*

Finding brutes eager to trade trailing oxes and breathing their flatulence to pole those hulks filled with grain to *Liège's* bakeries, was easy. Profits accumulated faster than they could spend them, so those Remouchamps decided to build a new mill, cut out the middle-men and deal directly with the bakeries.

Their success is the reason why I'm covered in flour dust six days of every seven. Ownership of the mill and a thriving distribution of flour didn't mean I was able to bask in luxury while others toiled for my leisure. My father and his father before him were educated men. I first went to the Catholic Gymnasium in Louvain, led by Franciscan monks and after that, by family tradition, to the region's oldest institution of learning, then "Katholieke Universiteit" (Flemish for Catholic University), fortune landed me a place at that distinguished bastion of education. Pressed by my father who was determined that I would study for a grade in economy, a dull study that did not attract me at all, I was expected to soak up the knowledge necessary to rise above the ignorance of the proles whose existence

¹² Pictures in this chapter; Wikimedia

depended upon the results of the mill. I, however, saw things a bit differently. For me, studying commercial sciences was only an interlude offering escape from the dust and sweat in the mill. Rather than philosophy, chemistry and religion, it was *Leuven's* taverns and maidens that attracted me. The classroom was for me a place to sober up and in the library

I did my best sleeping there, because it was so quiet, except of course when in deep slumber my snoring lifted the dust of the libraries tomes. Needless to say, my failing marks and letters of admonishment from the university convinced my father that money spent on my formal education, studying economy, was wasted.

He simply wouldn't abide wasting money!

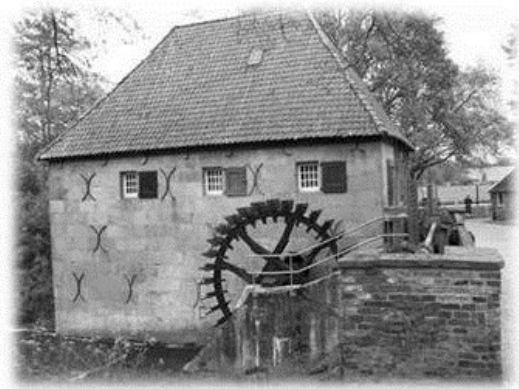
Nonetheless, he was determined I would learn the mill's business and he would be my next teacher. I was tossed from the University of Leuven, but I had no illusions that failure still was an option for me under my father's tutelage. It was there, at the mill, I found myself sober and as a foreman whose job it was to ensure the three miscreants under my supervision earned their wages...and mine too.

Chapter 2

Mid July 1811

Remy as a foreman

Hot, miserable, I'm practically blinded by the flour dust raised by a bag of flour André Fondue, one of my three subordinates, has just dropped. His curses of frustration do nothing to alleviate the misery I'm experiencing thanks to his clumsiness. If that toothless, little gremlin-like man wasn't so willing to accept the paltry wages we offer, we'd have gotten rid of him a long time ago. While I stew, seeking to control my anger, Dominique L'Ours, a mountain of a man with the looks of a Greek god, shunts André aside with a flick of his wrist, lifts the bag from the floor and heaves it high onto the stack of bags we're loading on the wagon prior to moving them to the barge.



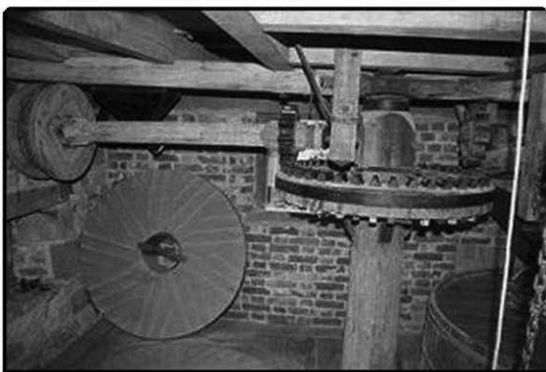
Dominique, whose ancestors were, most likely, Vikings, is strong as an ox, more than two meters (6'6") in stature and only twenty-two years old. He's the heartthrob of not only the village's women, young and old, married and single, but of women in the entire region. On market day, the hags and the fair alike preen themselves when he approaches.

How did he end up in the mill? Quite simply, he's too stupid to do anything else. He's dumber than the sacks of flour he tosses around as if they were filled with air. The mill appealed more to him than plowing fields. Ironically, his lack of brains don't dampen his attraction to the opposite sex, indeed just the opposite. His attraction to the ladies though causes problems with his home life since he has a petite wife and two young girls.

Dominique loves beer! It makes him happy! When he's happy, he sings and when he sings, he is satisfied. Filling his lungs full of air, it explodes from his mouth as if it were water breaking through a crack in a dam. It's the singing that sends shivers through the spines of the tavern's patrons because invariably it means he's been drinking and is ready to smash someone's face. For Dominique's sake, and for the business, we don't bring beer onto the premises... at least not during working hours.

Life in our little village was uncomplicated and if not prosperous, most people were secure. Even the weather, which was about the only aspect of life to vary, was predictable. However, looming on the horizon was change. We didn't see it, could not have done anything about it, but it would impact on our village in ways none of us anticipated as we toiled in the heat and dust of our mill.

This is our busiest time. Farmers don't have storage capacity, so they load their wagons and bring their recently harvested grain. Farmers can't afford to be idle, there is always something on their farms requiring their immediate attention. So queuing into lines, waiting for settlement from those ahead of them, suffering the arguments over the amount of grain provided, as confirmed by the weighing scale, and the amount of grain the farmer insisted he brought to the mill, soon tries the patience of those in line. Like my father's brother, who runs a mill south of us in *Awirs*, the farmers who bring the grain have already negotiated the price by weight. So the arguments with us are always over the accuracy of the scale which we constantly have to validate.



Mill stones with the processing mechanical tools



Interior of the mill

It's critical to our livelihood that the farmer believes we're fair and when he departs he knows he's gotten the best price available for his labor. It's the confidence they have in the fairness of the scale that makes the mill of Jean-Remy Remouchamps their choice. What they don't understand is that my father has already established the price for the milled flour with his customers in *Liège*.

After weighing the grain and providing the farmer with a receipt, my men offload the grain onto a hoist at the entrance of the mill and lift the sacks to the mill's upper floor. There the grain is ground into flour through the mill-stone driven by the mill's water wheel.¹³ Grains are mixed and milled

¹³ Pictures in this chapter: Wikipedia

according to the desired end product. Once the concoction is ground to the desired coarseness, the mixture is conveyed through a narrow gutter back down to the ground floor where the fine flour is collected into bags.

It's nasty work as flour dust fills the air and blankets everything upon which it settles. The insidious stuff finds every opening in clothing, covers exposed arms and hands, seeps through the thickest head of hair to the scalp and coats everyone's eyelashes to the point when blinking becomes difficult.

I'm responsible for both the milling and the packaging, so almost constantly on the run, up and down the stairs. I tried once to count? counting the number of trips on those stairs, but became weary of the effort. On the plus side, it made me feel as strong as the beasts I see plowing the fields.

During the harvest we could work seven days out of seven, but thankfully, the village priest insists upon honoring the Sabbath. Besides, the Saturday drinking contests at the village tavern make a day of rest necessary, even if for no other reason than to peacefully deal with the hangovers and recover from the bruises most of the village men, some women too, receive during the brawls which always occur just as the last keg is drained. The six days of work begin at 06:00 and usually end well after dusk. Every farmer queued for depositing his grain, is serviced. We never close the mill before late in the evening when a customer is at our doors with a laden cart. Never!

I'm thankful the workday is filled with non-stop activity. There are no breaks. Even lunch is managed amid the unloading, milling and sacking of flour. The mill is in our blood. My grandfather even designed a family crest which incorporates the symbols of grain and water, without which our mills couldn't exist.

Today, the crest is hung in a place of honor over the fireplace.



Mr. Dr. Van Voorst van Beest

It is during the evening hours that I contemplate the world beyond *Hollogne-aux-Pierres*. Alone, either in my room by candle light or in the garden behind my parent's house, I would introduce myself to the outside world by reading my tales of adventure. My favorite journeys are those I 'make' with Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, Pizarro, Marco Polo, James Bruce, Mungo Park, Robinson Crusoe and William Bligh. I

can read several foreign languages, thanks to my interest in written histories of men's search for adventure and to my university studies under the supervision of Doctor Van Voorst van Beest, a Flemish professor at the Catholic University in *Leuven*. I eschewed my dalliances at the tavern on the evenings preceding his classes; such was my interest in the subjects he so artfully taught. His classes were more drama than lecture. He stimulated our imaginations by painting verbal masterpieces of epic battles. When the elephants stampeded in anger, the lecture hall seemed to shake. We could sense the fear and excitement of the cavalry horses as they charged against infantry bayonets. We marveled at the full sails propelling Marco Polo on his journey to the Orient and savored the exotic smells of the spices he introduced to Europe upon his return. Most vividly though, we felt ourselves mired knee deep in the blood and gore of the battlefields of Alexander at Thermopylae, and the stench of combatants sweat of Alcibiades misadventure in Sicily and Hannibal's thrashing of the Romans at *Cannae* and *Lake Trasimene*. It was Van Voorst's lectures and my reading during the evenings at home which stimulated my desire for a soldier's life. In short, a profound storyteller; not only gifted to make history alive, but also able to motivate the audience.



Chapter 3

Mid July 1811

Remy's first taste of the world

It was during the evening hours that I contemplated the world beyond *Hollogne-aux-Pierres*.

Other than the mill, village life bored me. The horizon was limited. Drinking in the tavern on Saturday evenings, followed by alcohol induced fistfights among friends, trysts with bored neighbor's wives and work. That's what my future in the village held and I wanted more. It was futile to discuss my desire to see the world beyond the *Département de l'Ourthe* with my parents. My father saw me in due time taking the business from him. Marriage was just something one did. Romance and love were concepts for poets; and there were no poets in my village. My mother wanted me to marry a local girl who could make life as miserable for me as she made it for my father. She knew about my popularity with the village women and it made her even more determined to find me a bride to settle down with and make her some grandchildren.

But village girls were a problem. First, when in need for female companionship, I could rely on the married women. They were bored, all of them. And like the forbidden fruit, I excited them.

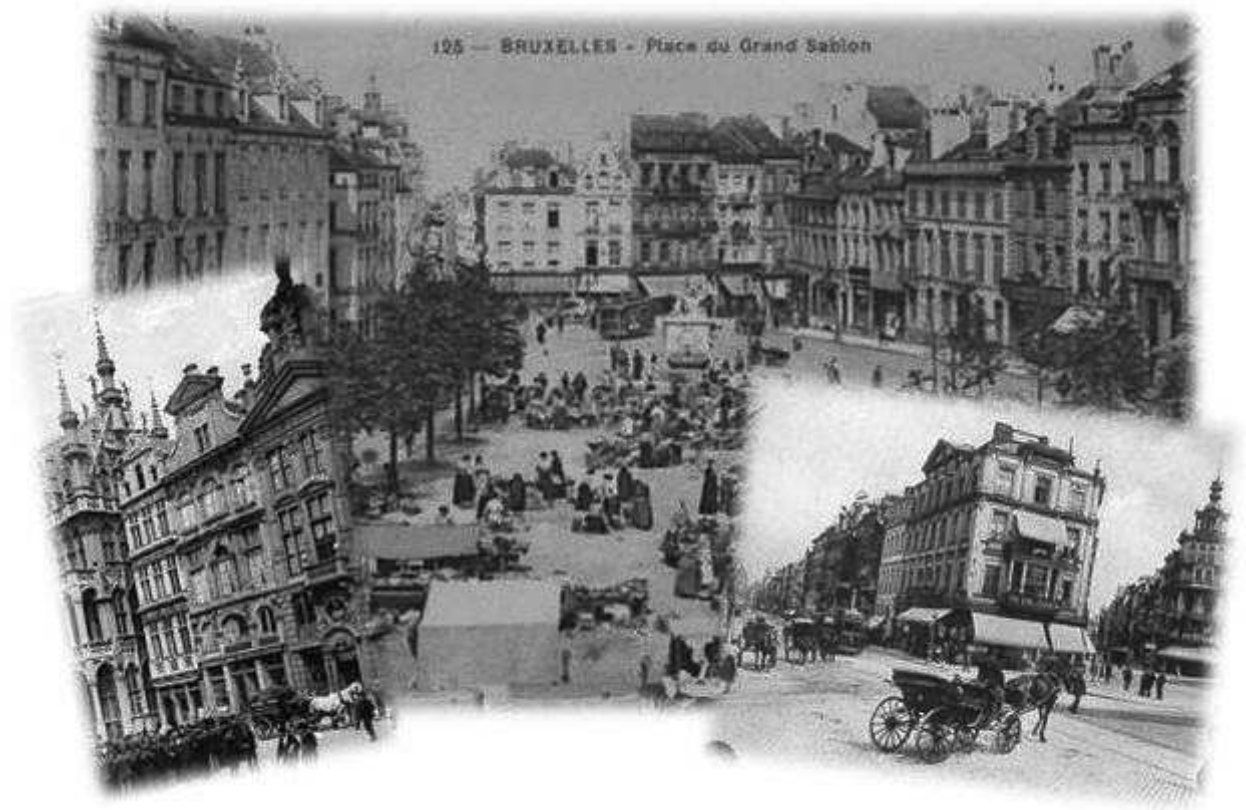
Second, I was financially secure and therefore didn't need to court the lasses in order to have something to call my own. I had a future in the mill and it was doubtful that even I could reverse its fortunes. And if I managed to drive the mill into bankruptcy, I could always rely upon the property my mother received as her dowry. But most importantly, there really were no lasses in my age group who interested me.

In my spare free hours I often dream away and travel to distant regions and in my imagination, borrowed from the illustration of the books I mentioned before, I see a part of the world that is in enormous contrast with the boring living environment and possibilities in this part of France. Where everyone, almost to the most shocking details, knows about each other's lives. Stories about excessive drinking, family quarrels, the constant cycle of births and deaths, juicy details about romantic

adventures and the many extramarital "sidesteps" of neighbors. Shocking backbiting, narcissistic self-delusion or jealousy, are often the triggers for gossip. When I have to listen to a variant of these stories for the umpteenth time, I sometimes feel that I can hardly breathe. Sometimes I discuss my current situation and my future with my parents. My mother has no understanding whatsoever for my ideas about the hopelessness of my daily life, my complaints about the strangling effects the entire environment has on my mind, the lacking possibilities to experience different aspects in life, the aimlessness of my future profession as a miller and all limitations to develop my capacities/talents and the lack/absence of seeing something of the world besides the medieval structure of the *Département de l'Ourthe*. Mother is only interested in seeing me married as soon as possible with a woman of our own social class- or better, if possible- and the production of as many grandchildren as possible. I told my mother many times that I had no intention of getting married on short notice and that I have searched but not found a girl in whom I was really interested. I try to silence my mother by stating that, like wine or a good French cheese, my personal quality improves constantly over time. My father seems to have a bit more understanding for my ideas and dreams, but he warns me every time that I will have to take over the firm and the mills in the future when he gets too old to deal with the busy life of an entrepreneur and the life-shortening job as a miller, working in an unhealthy environment for a long period of time. I do understand my father's justification.

He was brought up in a period where love was a luxury and economic survival the key drive in life. Philosophical experiments like "Listen before you speak, earn before you spend, think before you write, try before you quit and live before you die", sound all very cozy and nice, but "live before you die" is simply a privilege of the rich.

'It is not somebody's fault being born poor, but when your future father-in-law is also poor, it is your own fault', is my father practical way of thinking. He had married with the same philosophy and under the same conditions when he was introduced to my mother on his eighteenth birthday. But to his and to my mother's pleasant surprise the marriage was successful. "Love" is too much to ask for, but a mutual appreciation was the base, which later even lead to affection. Mother brought a nice sum of money as a wedding gift and two big pieces of land on both sides of the *Mahay* river that runs through *Hollogne*.



The money and the property mother brought in, plus his own savings, allowed him to build his first mill.

He compensated the initial lack of love by working more than seventy hours per week to create his enterprise and meanwhile my parents are well off.

Which slightly prevents the urge to “marry the proper kind of woman” and I have the luxury to postpone my wedding plans a bit. I decided for myself that I will only marry after I have satisfied some of my dreams.

Since my return from the debauchery I experienced at Leuven University two years ago, I’ve primarily limited my travel to Liège except for one notable trip to *Brussels*, the provincial capital and the major city in the southern *Pays Bas*/Netherlands. The occasion for that trip was my twenty-first birthday. I was legally a man. The journey consumed an entire day. But having departed *Hollogne-aux-Pierres* on horseback at the crack of dawn, my arrival in *Brussels*¹⁴ coincided with the tapping of the evening’s first keg at the first tavern my path crossed. I must have had a grand time because my memory only recalls waking up with a naked and hardly nice-looking wench in my bed, a splitting headache and a mouth dry as the Sahara.

After paying the lass, sorting myself and imposing upon the landlord to brew me a jug of coffee and ply me with sustenance, I ventured into the city center. I was

¹⁴ Pictures: Wikipedia

overwhelmed by the buildings and *ambiance*. Cosmopolitan and vibrant! French was the language of the restaurants which ringed the city's *Grande Place* replete with its magnificent town hall, bourse, sidewalk restaurants and breweries. The men wore jackets, trousers were tucked into knee length boots and top hats adorned their heads. The women's gloved hands carried parasols to shade their bare shoulders, skirt hoops made a whooshing sound as their iron-heeled boots echoed off the cobblestones that paved the plaza. And there I was, woozy headed, caked in dust from the previous day's ride, looking like a lost village bumpkin amid the civilized citizenry of the region's commercial and political center. One of the most striking images where the many Jewish people, walking on the streets. They were dressed somewhat funny with their long black kaftans, the big black hats and their long curls on each side of their heads. When I asked my father somewhat cynical about their, in my eyes, funny outfit, I got a harsh lesson about social decency.

'What's, funny, son? Never forget that Jewish citizens are members of a centuries old community. A minority of this group excels in medicine, art and science. Another quality is their capacity to do business and there are many Jews that have been very successful in this area. One of the negative results of their success is that it is the source of a lot of jealousy. Jealous people who wanted to minimize the success of these Jews started to blame them for every nature-related or even men-made disaster. And the result was, that they were expelled from many countries. They were forcibly driven out of Portugal, Spain and they escaped to countries that were more welcoming like the Netherlands and France. Never forget that the majority of the Jewish population is simple hard-working people with the same habits, wishes and desires as every other person in the world. The only difference is their religion. But when you accept them as such, they will become best friends and colleagues. My grandfather even married a Jewish woman, the warmest woman I ever met and through her, I inherited probably the capability to do business a bit better than others. So, there is nothing "funny" about their looks. They probably look at you and judge your looks the same way!

Another astonishing surprise was the traffic!

I have never seen that many horse drawn carts transporting goods, nor have I had to navigate around so many of their droppings.

white teeth stood in stark contrast to their midnight skin. Spices from the orient

were sold by Chinese merchants and Arabs and Hebrews plied their exotic handicrafts and colorful, hand woven carpets. Very unlike my village community! Little did I know then about the profound impact the French revolution had in giving rise to the dictator whose quest to conquer Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals, the Mediterranean to the Baltic and eventually was to have on my little village and on me.

Brussels was the kind of place about which I wanted to know more and to see more, since *Hollogne* can be compared with a medieval settlement where the people still hunt with bow and arrows. In *Hollogne* the political changes of the French revolution and the social changes have had hardly any effect on the still very conservative society.

Brussels, I have decided that I must break with my current pre-planned life and see the world before I will drown in the unavoidable monotonous and boring everyday life. Little did I know then that the French revolution and the dictator it spawned would give me the means to venture into the world beyond sleepy *Hollogne*. The result was an eruption of entrepreneurs that wanted to use the new rules to start successfully new enterprises and shops. The number of new entrepreneurs is limited in *Hollogne*, but my father is one of them. Of course Remouchamps is a firm supporter of the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. Not as a head of state or even as a military commander, but as a catalyst for social change.

Napoleon was the driving force to limit or even destroy the power of the existing social structures: The nobility, the Church and the guilds.

According to my father, Napoleon is the key figure to introduce and protect the most rigorous changes in the existing archaic social structure since the beginning of the French Republic. From that moment on, many entrepreneurs got the opportunity to start new businesses, using their own money and their initiative. Jewish money-lenders in *Liège* who used the opportunity to make a fortune, provided the necessary capital when the noble families were not willing or able to support the new developments.

I do not want to swop *Hollogne* for *Brussels*, *Berlin* or *Rome*. Although I would give a fortune to have the possibility to see those cities with my own eyes; unfortunately this will remain a dream for the moment.

▪

Chapter 4

17th of August 1811

The tavern and Léon's return

The church bells announce the evening Angelus.¹⁵ Tonight's Angelus also marks the end of the week! Saturday! My escape from the mills' grime, noise and chaos begins as soon as we have cleaned the place up. I broom out the reception area as Dominique and André take to the grinding and storage areas. Motivated by the knowledge that my approval is the only thing keeping them away from the tavern, they work like mad men.

I nod my satisfaction and they're off.

I head to the washroom behind the mill. On the wood bench just inside the door, I place a change of clothes and grab the two buckets always there. From the pump, I draw icy cold river water for my weekly bath. In the twilight I strip to my birth suit and dump the first bucket over my head. When you bathe in icy water, it's best to just get to it. I lather up with a bar of lye soap; beginning with my hair I feverishly work the suds. In addition to ensuring the dirt of the week's work no longer resides an alien element on my body, the brisk activity counters the effects of the cold water.

Toweled off, with clean clothes and money in my pocket, I head to Henri Deflosse's tavern. It seems as if most of the town's men are going to join me. Everyone is in a collective good mood. Lots of chatter, some are singing. It's going to be a great night. Deflosse brews a great fine ale and has never failed to slake a customer's thirst.

As I reach for the door handle and begin want to step in, I find myself slammed from behind into the door jam. My left hand automatically forms into a fist as I square to look my attacker in the eyes. Nose to nose, I recognize that oaf Dominique.

'Dominique,' I blurt out?

'Is your thirst greater than mine?'

'Sorry,' he stammers, 'But when the horse smells the stable? Well you know!'

'Yeah,' I reply, 'I know'.

Guess it holds true for a jackass too. Find us a place to sit. The first one is on me.' Dominique makes his way to the big circular table in the corner of the room. The *Stammtisch*. Taking the habits of the region, Henri reserves this table for his best

¹⁵ A moment during the day, when the work is interrupted for a short prayer. The Angelus was held at 6 o'clock in the morning, 12 o'clock at midday in the afternoon and six o'clock before the evening started.

customers. I don't fit that category, neither does Dominique. No worry. Dominique taps a couple regulars on their shoulders and they suddenly determine they'd prefer to stand by the bar. Our place at the table is secured! Seated, I have the opportunity to look around for female company, but my search is disappointing. The girl of interest for me is the daughter of the landlord, Jeanette. In my judgment, she's the village's most beautiful and clever girl. The only problem is that she is only seventeen years old. In our social structure that's a bit too young for a 24 year old bachelor! But still, it does not stop me from looking!



*Hubert's Pub, 60 years later.
Nothing has changed much*



*Hubert's counter. His pride
and joy*

My reverie is broken when Dominique returns with our evening's first two pints.

The tavern is warm and cozy. It's main feature is the hand-hewn oak bar. Solid and heavy it's centered in front of the back wall; it looks as if the tavern was built around it. *Hollogne's* crest is carved into the front, courtesy of my grandfather. The counter top is smooth and shiny, not from polish but from the thousands of coat sleeves that have brushed across it over the years. Mounted in the middle are the handles Henri uses to pull his ale into waiting steins. Otherwise the bar is unadorned. The smoke from the pipes almost everyone pulls on, has seeped into the walls, floor and ceiling giving the tavern a permanent atmosphere of burnt tobacco.

A large chandelier with a score of large candles hangs from the apex of the ceiling. Its flickering

light casts shadows throughout the open room. Lanterns adorn the walls. When the room is packed, as it is tonight, there's no a breath of fresh air to be drawn. No one seems to mind.

The shelves behind the bar reach to the ceiling and are crammed with bottles giving the unaware sense that Henri has gone to great lengths to provide us with the world's finest whisky, rum and cognacs. They would discover the content is colored water. The regulars always enjoy it when the rare visitor attempts to order a select cognac, only to watch the argument the traveler engages Henri when he learns that this particular 'delight' is not for sale. Nonetheless, Henri likes to give the impression that he runs a well-stocked bar. None of which makes an impression on the crowd, but they remind him of the brasseries he frequented in *Paris* in what, for him, was another life.

My thoughts are elsewhere. I've learned that my childhood friend Léon is home on

leave from the army and we've made plans to meet here tonight. In anticipation of his arrival, I've decided to have a pint waiting for him.

With Dominique blabbing in my ear, I finish my pint and make my way to the bar for a second one for each of us and a fresh one for Léon. I watch the door as I push through the crowded tavern. I signal Henri and he fills our mugs with his midnight black brew and draws a third for Léon. Unable to be heard, I motion to Dominique that I'm moving to the "Biergarten" just outside, where a growing number of customers have escaped to enjoy their beer and breathe the fresh evening air.

Though a poorer example of a proper beer drinking "garten" would be hard to find, it suits my purpose and I find an empty table, a discarded crate, and a couple of tree stumps. No sooner than I seated myself I am waiting for Léon.

It is almost seven o'clock, suddenly, somebody at the door shouts: 'There he is!'

He's easy enough to spot; wearing his dress uniform, he's impressive! Long white trousers, knee-high boots shined so highly that they gleam as he passes along the torches marking the approach to the tavern. In the fading light, I identify his blue uniform jacket with a red collar and the large red epaulets on each shoulder. His unbuttoned jacket reveals a white vest and two broad white leather scarfs are visible. On his chest is a shiny big medal on a small red ribbon. Léon looks as if he's just come from the parade field. In contrast, we look like country bumpkins in our drab grey and black rough wear.

I move to intercept him but he's immediately mobbed by the crowd. Jostling him about, they somehow manage to squeeze themselves back into the tavern.

'Wait you dummies!' Léon shouts. 'First things first! I've been dreaming of Henri's brew and it's time to end the dream! Give me a pint...and keep them coming!'

Léon empties the first almost before Henri has finished pulling it from the keg. He is on to his second in flash. If nothing else, the army taught him to drink.

No longer soft and pudgy, Léon now has broad shoulders and his belly is flat. His chin is square and his cheeks sculpted. He still has a full head of red hair and his ears still stick out so far that they actually flatten when he walks into a strong wind.

Not yet ready to reveal the secret of the chest, Léon turns to Henri and orders 'a round on me!'

His generosity is greeted with a deafening cheer and a rush to the bar.

It takes several minutes to refill each mug. During this interlude, Léon is somewhat ignored. Before attempting to muscle my way through the crowd to greet my friend, I take a moment to scrutinize him. He seems to be staring at something not



in the room and as he lifts his mug to take a sip, his hand trembles.

My observations are dashed as soon as the mugs are charged.

And Léon starts to tell about his adventures.

His training period in *Liège*, the march through the German states, ending up in Austria, and the battle in which he participated.¹⁶

He tells how he got severely wounded and suffered injuries to his stomach and his legs. But he was lucky to be treated in a local hospital in the *Duchy of Berg*, run by Roman Catholic nuns.

¹⁶ Léon has just returned from Napoleon's war against the Austrian Emperor, after he participated in the battle of Esslingen and Wagram in 1809, where he got wounded, but survived. It took a long time of recovery in local hospitals. Contrary to many of his colleagues of whom some 25.000 died and some 10.000 got missing or were taken prisoner. Staggering losses; almost 1 in 4!

Chapter 5

August 18, 1811

Home

A lone in my room I realize I've made my decision! I expect my mother to do everything she can to change my mind. But even her son must do his duty. How else can he live a worthy life? How else can he settle with a wife, raise children and build his community if he has shirked his responsibility to serve his nation!

But, to be honest, I dread having this conversation with my mother. By comparison, the drudgery, grime and grit of the mill are more appealing.

By the time I emerge from my room, lunch is over. My parents are sitting in the living area, father is smoking a pipe and mother is knitting. She looks up when I enter and tells me she left the luncheon stew in the pot, simmering on the stove warmed by the dying embers under the burner.

Ravished, I grab a bowl and ladle a heaping portion of the meat, gravy and potatoes into it. I break off a chunk of bread before plopping down at the kitchen table.

As I eat, my parents chat about the weather, the mill and the local gossip. Nothing in their conversation indicates they've heard anything in the church about Léon's encounter with De Fléhout.

Spooning my way through the stew, I struggle on how to announce my intention to volunteer for service in the Emperor's army. Reaching the bottom of the bowl, I decide that it's best to deal with the issue in a straightforward manner. Too much drama on my part will only encourage emotions on my mother's part.

'I'm going to enlist in the *Grande Armée*,' I announce somewhat timidly. Mother and Father have stopped their chatting and are looking at me. Father is sitting still, holding his pipe. His face is blank. Mother's eyes are wide open but for a moment she's silent as if waiting for me to confirm what I just said.

'I intend to go to the recruitment agency in *Liège*, located in the 'Lancers Barracks' and join straight away. Léon told me last night that they will enlist a new group of conscripts very soon and that they are also looking for additional volunteers. I'm going to be part of this recruitment,' I continue in a by now steady voice.

Emboldened by having made the announcement, I walk into the living area and standing in front of my parents, I look at each of them and repeat, 'I have decided to

volunteer in for? The Army.'

'Are you out of your bloody mind?', yells Mother. 'Enlist as a volunteer? And who will supervise that ox Dominique? Have you thought about that? No, like always, the rest of us don't exist," she babbles. I know her words aren't meant to be critical, rather she's simply trying to deal with the shock of the news.

Father remains silent. He sits staring straight ahead giving nothing away.

Meanwhile, I attempt to calm mother by reminding her that I have two brothers, either of whom can take my place.

'Well Mathieu already has a job in *Liège*,' counters mother. 'Just what is he supposed to do, quit and come here just because you decide to follow the Emperor to who knows where?'

'And Jean Jacques,' she continues, 'is hardly capable of replacing you.'

'But Jean Jacques is already twenty. How much longer does he get to avoid the responsibilities of manhood?'

'Mother,' I attempt to reason, 'I know this is a surprise and a shock. But I have no control over the state of the world. I do, however, have a citizen's responsibility to serve. It's not as if I'm running away and leaving you with no alternatives.'

At this point, mouth agape, mother turned to father and sputtered, 'Are you just going to sit there and stare at the fireplace while your son tells us he's leaving?'

Turning his head to look at mother, he smiles weakly and holds her gaze for a few moments before speaking. 'Dear, I can't say Remy's decision comes as a surprise. He's always been the adventurous one. You know what he reads; you know what he dreams about. You know he's no scholar. You also know he has given us honest, dedicated work in a dirty job which holds little opportunity to venture beyond our immediate surroundings.'

Continuing, father told her 'you haven't heard and I've not chosen to share with you the news that few if any families will escape the reach of the Emperor's recruiters. He is restless and maniacal. His thirst for power is unquenchable. He seeks to control the European landmasses and once he has that, then he will venture again to the lands on the Mediterranean.'

'Remy's decision means that we don't have to choose which of our sons the Emperor gets.'

At this point, with tears welling in his eyes, my father stood and stepped to me. Grasping me, he pulls me against his breast and throws his arms around me. By now, I could feel his tears streaming down onto my collar. His body convulsed in sobs. Finally, pulling himself away, he asks: 'When will you be leaving?'

'I will finish work this week and depart for *Liège* the following Sunday.'



The Lancers Barracks. Nowadays called the "Fonck kazerne"

The open week will give me time to prepare for my farewell and to explain Jean Jacques about his responsibilities in the mill. In *Liège* I will be evaluated medically and then, of course, there will be forms to complete before the training starts. I hope to enlist into Léon's unit. His friendship and experience will be welcomed. Father is quite close to the regiment's forager and maybe he can twist some arms. After all, I am somewhat older than most volunteers and assume that my experience in the mill as a "chef" should make me an attractive candidate for the position. Work in the mill has helped in another important area. I'm strong and fit and, perhaps most importantly, I speak French, Flemish and passable German. With these qualifications, I have visions of rapid advancement to corporal or maybe even sergeant. Who knows, a field-commission as a junior officer is might be possible. To dream of becoming a professional officer or eventually a general is however closed to anyone without noble blood or not residing in the elites' inner circles. Opportunities created by the French Revolution for the common man to rise to

positions once reserved exclusively for blue bloods, are rapidly closing. Napoleon benefitted by the revolutionaries quest for equality but immediately slammed the door on that notion once he became dictator for life. As a result, it's been his generalship and not the competence of his commanders, which can claim the battlefield successes of the Empire. In the past, the army put grown men under the command of sixteen year-old majors and fourteen year-old captains, all of course products of the cronyism the revolution attempted to erase.¹⁷ Currently, social background does not provide any preference to acquire a certain rank and to become a military leader.

¹⁷ Some examples are well known: Marshall Joachim Murat, son of an innkeeper. Marshall Jean Baptist Jourdan was the son of a silk merchant. Marshall Massena, son of a Jewish shopkeeper and Jean Marie Bernadotte, son of an administrator, even became King of Sweden!

Chapter 6

August 24, 1811

Dominique

Mercifully, it's Saturday again! All week I listened to rumors of war circulated among the farmers as they congregated at the mill, waiting for us to process their harvests. The village shopkeepers continue to warn their customers about possible shortages in meat and wine. Women washing their clothes in the stream, create another center of gossip. I, because of my decision to enlist in the *Grande Armée*, was also the focus of much discussion. At work, Dominique and the others incessantly peppered me with their questions about my decision to leave my comfortable and secure future in the mill and risk my life following the Emperor in his quest to achieve immortality in the East.

None understands why I'd leave everything life has to offer me; things beyond the reach of most men in my village. It can't be for the money, they claim. 'Surely, the Remouchamps family has money enough', they say.

'Is it the lure of the spoils of conquest or was it Léon's performance last Saturday? Could it be the uniform?'

Soberly, Dominique reminds me that this decision could prove fatal.

'And who,' he continues, 'will replace you when you leave?'

It appears it'll be my younger brother Jean Jacques. Even though he's met a girl and has never had an interest in working in the mill, the job will surely be his by default if the business is to remain in the family, should something happen to me.

However, Jean Jacques protested to me that working at the mill would consume all of his time and his relationship wasn't going to survive on a part-time basis. 'If I take your place in the mill, I'll end up as a bachelor like you, Remy,' he moans.

At least, since today is Saturday, I'll be able to fend these endless questions in the company of Hubert's finest ale.

As I suspected, the moment I entered the tavern, I was bombarded with more of the same queries. They just can't comprehend that I'm bored. I'm crushed by the monotony which dominates my life. As a soldier I'll march, musket at the ready, into the heart of the enemy. I'll serve in an invincible army, Europe's greatest. Nothing can stand in our way. With my comrades, I will march shoulder to shoulder to conquest under the generalship of the greatest conqueror the world has ever known. We will impose our will on untold millions.

The glory of victory is a lure I can't escape.

I want you fools, to feel alive while I'm young and healthy.

The world waits for me! Why is this so hard to understand?

The conversation moves from my motives to the reality of army life and the Emperor.

'Do you know how many deaths this man is responsible for?', someone asks. Without waiting for my response, the factoid follows with statistics from the Austrian campaign.

'More than 20,000 Frenchmen died', we learn from him his source!

'Do you know how many victims from our region did not return?' he continues.

'And how many wounded are now crippled for the rest of their life?'

'Have you any idea what happens to those broken soldiers who end up in *Liège's* homes for the insane?'

'Do you realize, that when you are confined in one of those nut houses, that you'll live in your own shit? You'll be unable to clean yourself and you think some poor, caring soul will wash you every time you soil yourself?'

Finally, someone breaks into the doom and gloom by announcing Luigi Bazan's arrival.

Someone else informs the group that Bazan's older brother, a poor sod who also marched to the beat of the drums until war's realities visited upon him, came home last week. Unlike Léon, this broken man now sits at home in a special chair.

Blind and deaf, he gums his porridge with the half of his jaw, which remains attached.

'Glory? You should put reality into your dreams. Think about spending the remainder of your youth like this poor, miserable bastard.'

'Where was Léon's loot?'

'Did you see anything last Saturday except for that small stupid medal?'

'You must be really out of your mind, Remy!'

Their attempts to dissuade me fell on deaf ears. I realize that much of what they say is rooted in envy. Most, particularly those, passionately attempting to get me to change my mind, would love to join me. They fear the unknown. Their sense of adventure ends at the bank of the river *Mahay*.

In some cases, though, reality is that their family is solely dependent upon the household's lone adult male. For them, the army is simply out of the question. For those, I have sympathy. This, fortunately, isn't a consideration for me.

The mill will continue as I march with the army. Farmers will raise crops and the mill will grind the grain into flour. In a twist of irony, Napoleon's ventures bolster the community that despises him.

The army must, after all, eat and the Emperor buys the food!

I use this logic to sway my drinking mates. To re-enforce my words, I slam my ale tankard on the table, spraying the golden liquid into the faces of those closest to

the impact point. 'Thanks to Napoleon, we live in a time where everybody can work to improve his own future. We are no longer subject to a small group of profiteers, like that old crook, Baron De Fléhout here in *Hollogne*. After generations of being exploited by the privileged, we've broken the chains that bind us.

Now, in the post-revolution era, every man has an equal chance to improve his fate and prepare the way for his children to do the same. Unlike your fathers, you choose your destiny.'

My outburst quieted the lot. Though their faces show that I've not convinced everyone, it is evident they were impressed with my enthusiasm and by the power of my convictions.

Then, from the man I least expected to challenge me, comes a response.

Demonstrating that he's more than just muscle, Dominique shows that he has listened carefully to my explanation.

He begins; 'That all sounds very interesting, Remy. The revolution embraced the notions of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*.¹⁸

So how, though, do you square this with the low-life, scum of the earth; Theofiel de Fléhout and his recent appointment as an officer? His father used connections with the chairman of the advisory board to secure the appointment. Everyone knows that Theofiel isn't physically fit to wear the uniform and indeed, his initial application for service was rejected on those very grounds. Now, however, because of a "conversation" between senior and his friend, and cash under the table, he's suddenly deemed fit to lead men!

And you, Remy, are not only respected by those of us who know you, but you have demonstrated leadership qualities. You inspire us to perform in the most challenging work conditions. Every day we emerge, miserable, covered in flour yet happy. Happy with the job we accomplish and the way we're treated.

But you're not even considered for military leadership. You're working class so automatically; you qualified only as a soldier. Didn't the lessons of the revolution reach us?'

I'm stunned. As he continues: 'I shall remain the same poor bastard I was ten years ago at the height summit of the revolution. Even in the cemetery, the lower class is still buried on ground looking up to the plots of the wealthy. Born at the bottom, we live at the bottom and even in death they ensure we remain there. The high ground is occupied in life and in death by those who rule over us. They get the impressive marble headstones, while my father and two of my uncles we lucky to get their resting places marked by simple wooden crosses.'

I clear my throat to respond, but am cut off before uttering a syllable.

¹⁸ The national motto of France.

Raising his hand, Dominique states: 'I have not finished. At the mill, who will replace you as foreman? Your younger brother, a clerk lacking a basic understanding of the work we do. None of us who worked by your side and under your supervision has a chance to advance.

Liberté, égalité, fraternité? My ass!

For me,' he continues, 'nothing changed. I will carry flour bags until I die.

The fact is that some people are more equal than other people'.¹⁹

I reflect upon his words. The revolution has removed a king but simply replaced him with a tyrant. This Emperor treats us like negligible subjects and controls the property, which is ours!

Dominique's words hang heavy in the air! The room, from which I've become detached, is silent. Dominique is spent emotionally and our steins remain untouched. His words reach each man's soul.

He is right. The Emperor's conquests provide him, and those like him, nothing. The tyrant decides who benefits and who remains under the lash. The only spoils of conquest this village will receive, is additional work for the undertaker. What do we get for our troubles? If we're lucky, we might keep our limbs and our lives...And maybe a piece of tin attached to a colorful ribbon.

Dominique's wasn't blaming me. He was lashing out at life and its cruel edges.

He's right, the glorious revolution simply replaced one tyrant for another.

Most of us remain as mud on the soles of the shoes of the empowered.

Scum like De Fléhout remain atop the social ladder in our village.

Everywhere it's the same.

I empty my glass, forget about the cheese and depart for home after first paying Hubert for the drinks and cheese.

¹⁹ So, it is clear for the reader that the novel "Animal Farm" written by Georg Orwell in 1945 has "borrowed" this line from Dominique in 1811.

Chapter 7

25 of Augustus 1811

Léon's visit

Mother, I learn to my chagrin, has invited Léon to our home for dinner. She tells me, I can't put Dominique's concerns about military service to rest and figures Léon is the one with whom I need to discuss my options. He's seen the ugly reality of war and will give me his honest assessment. My mother is ecstatic. She counts on Léon for candor, which she hopes, will disabuse me of the romantic notions, she believes I hold regarding the life of a soldier in the Emperor's army.

Mother's plan is to shock me out of my decision by asking Léon how many of his friends remain in hospital, nursing wounds, how many now need a crutch to compensate for a lost leg, how many are buried in mass graves in the east and so forth. If Léon anticipates an evening of polite conversation around good food and drink, he's going to be sorely disappointed.

I'd try and convince Léon to make an excuse and avoid the trap my mother has set, but I learn he's already accepted. *C'est dommage!* At least I can count on father, because he's accepted my decision, to steer the conversation clear from mother's histrionics.

Léon arrives on time but this time he's not wearing his uniform. Rather he's clad in simple civilian clothes that now do not really fit him. He no longer resembles the war hero but rather a simple villager who has come to spend an evening with friends.

Mother is obviously nervous. She hopes that talking of the misery of a soldier's daily life, the lack of food and clean water, the absence of medical treatment and the possibility of getting wounded or dying in a muddy battlefield far from home will cause me a change of heart.

To take the edge of what is surely to be more of an inquisition than a meal with friends; father placed two bottles of his best Burgundy on the table and seizes the moment by turning the discussion to the wine.

While filling the glasses, he extolls the virtues of the pinot noir grape, father's calm and light-hearted mood is in sharp contrast to mother's anxiousness.

Hardly have we finished blessing the food and toasting our guest, when mother takes over.

Before Léon's first forkful of food clears his plate, mother begins her assault.

'Why should we, living quite comfortable in a small, remote and peaceful village in France, join a campaign that will bring nothing to improve the standards of living of

the people in *Hollogne*? What do we get from venturing into Austria?’

And so it goes on as I sit in silence.

Léon, however, seems to ignore her as he turns his full attention to the food in front of him. I suspect that he isn't being rude but rather, having learned as a soldier to eat when the food is hot, is simply prioritizing food over conversation.

As she continues, it becomes clear that her real fear isn't our meddling into the affairs of the already conquered Austro-Hungarian Empire, but rather the persistent rumors that the *Grande Armée* will next march to Russia, even as it has engaged already Wellington beyond the Pyrenees in Spain.

‘What's the purpose,’ she asks, ‘in spilling our blood to sate this narcissistic idiot's quest for personal glory? Besides,’ she continues, ‘I'm hearing that the Emperor, after cleaning out all orphanages in the entire country, has more than enough conscripts to confront the Spanish king and the Russian Tsar.

So, Léon, what differences will Remy make?’

Léon, having politely listened to mother, and by now cleaned his plate, responds.

‘Madame, my mother shared your sentiments two years ago as my decision to serve put her in the same shoes you now stand. You might have noticed that since the Emperor's ascendancy living conditions for the common working class Frenchman have improved significantly. Just consider how much better off you, your family and the nation has been since he took control of the nation and our army.

Since the Emperor pulls the reins of power he's instituted great changes for the average citizen. Now, every common Frenchman can take control of his life, start a business, do whatever it is that he fancies. Look how you live now, and how your mill has prospered. Your clients have made you better off because they are better off. Thanks to the Emperor, all kinds of medieval restrictions and privileges have been abandoned. The common man is far freer than in the past, *Madame*. Here in Hollogne, for example, people like De Fléhout find themselves being thrown out of taverns and into the street by laborers without fear of reprisal.’

‘To the east, the old habits remain. People live under the yoke of the privileged.

The autocratic aristocrats' rules remain a chain around the neck of the serf.’

‘Léon,’ counters mother who is not to be easily dissuaded, ‘that is nothing but political poppycock and you know it!’

Continuing on a rising torrent of emotion and fear, she cries, ‘What has changed in Austria? Has Austria now gotten the same Civil Code²⁰ *Code civil* as us?’

NO WAY! The same laws that existed in Austria before the carnage of *Wagram* remain in place. The people are no more than serfs in the service of the Austrian Emperor who has been chastened by Napoleon.’

‘I agree *Madame*, but the power of the autocratic Austrian Emperor has been

²⁰ The rewriting of the French laws (1804) – in total 36 - with the basic principle that everybody was treated the same way and everybody was entitled to have the support of a lawyer.