

A CHAPLAIN IN THE CZECH LEGION: REV. ALPHONSE BISKUP, O.S.B., 1918-19

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Mention of the Czech Legion usually brings to mind the Trans-Siberian Railroad and the involvement of thousands of stranded Czech soldiers in the Russian Civil War. But the Allies during the First World War recruited Czech (and Slovak) forces for the trenches in France and Italy as well as for those in Russia. The contingents in the West were smaller than the Czech Legion in Russia and were fated to play a less dramatic role on the world stage, but they nonetheless form an important part of the "pre-history" of the Czechoslovak Republic. An American Benedictine priest, Father Alphonse Biskup of St. Procopius Abbey, served as a chaplain with one of these units. This is his story, based upon his written memories and other documents within the St. Procopius Abbey Archives.¹

ORIGINS OF THE CZECH LEGION IN FRANCE

For many Bohemians and Moravians, some living in the Czech homeland and some who had emigrated to America and other places, the outbreak of the First World War in the summer of 1914 gave rise to hopes of national independence. The ancient Habsburg Empire, the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary, had seemed ripe for dissolution since 1848, if not before. Nationalists of more than one region thought it reasonable to expect that the strains of a major war would prove to be the old empire's death-blow and the opportunity for such subject peoples as the Czechs to take control of their own destiny. Certain prominent exiles, notably Thomas Masaryk and Eduard Beneš agitated from the first

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among the Entente Powers and sought for ways to advance the Czech cause.²

The nationalist leaders quickly perceived that one of the best ways to attract favorable notice would be to supply troops for what had become a lengthy and bloody struggle on both the Eastern and Western Fronts. Czech and Slovak prisoner-of-war camps became a fertile field of recruitment for the Russian Empire, which was engaged in head-to-head combat with the Dual Monarchy along a front many hundreds of miles long. A large Czech Legion came into existence fairly soon and played an important role both on the Eastern Front and later, as has been noted, in the Russian Civil War. Once Italy entered the war in 1915, a new front against Austria-Hungary was opened, and a Czech Legion was formed by the Italians as well.³

The situation was a bit different on the Western Front, in France, where the Austro-Hungarian Army was only minimally engaged. There was a Czech colony in France, and about three hundred men volunteered for military service. Placed in the French Foreign Legion, they were organized into a company, which was soon decimated in the trenches.⁴ No large-scale replacement was possible until the entry of the United States into World War I in April 1917.

Bohemians and Moravians had emigrated to America in increasingly large numbers from the 1850s, and by 1914 there were over half a million Czechs of the first or second generation in the United States.⁵ The identification of Catholicism with Habsburg rule had resulted in a long-lasting and bitter split within the

²For a general account of the independence movement, see Josef Kalvoda, *The Genesis of Czechoslovakia* (New York: Columbia U 1986). The two leading advocates of Czech independence composed accounts of their activities: Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, *The Making of a State: Memories and Observations, 1914-1918*, prepared by Henry Wickham Steed (New York: Frederick A. Stokes 1927); Édouard Beneš, *Souvenirs de Guerre et de Révolution (1914-18): La Lutte pour l'Indépendance des Peuples*, 2 vols. (Paris: Ernest Leroux 1928-29). There is also an English version, in one volume and somewhat abridged. Dr. Eduard Beneš, *My War Memories*, trans. Paul Selver (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin 1928).

³In time, the Czech Legion in Italy would grow to a strength of about 24,000 men, while that of Russia would reach 92,000. Masaryk 288.

⁴Kalvoda 70, 137.

⁵Joseph Cada, *Czech-American Catholics, 1850-1920* (Lisle, IL: Center for Slav Culture 1964) 47.

Czech population between those who adhered to the traditional faith and those (often called "Freethinkers") who angrily rejected it in favor of some combination of freemasonry, atheism, and socialism. Conflict was therefore all but inevitable between Free-thinker groups and the Benedictine monks of St. Procopius Abbey, founded in Chicago in 1885 by Archabbot Boniface Wimmer of St. Vincent Abbey. The new community's purpose being to preserve the Catholic faith among the Czechs, the Bohemian Benedictine Press which the monks founded in 1889 was frequently in polemical battles of one sort or another with the Free-thinker publications, and these often spilled over into the courts by means of lengthy and wearying libel suits.⁶

The conflict in Europe and the growing possibility of Czech independence if the Entente won did much to overcome the mutual hostility between Catholics and Freethinkers, although some Catholics long remained hesitant about cooperation with unbelievers.⁷ But a positive impression was made by the Entente response to President Woodrow Wilson's December, 1916, request that all belligerents declare their war aims, a response which declared that one aim was "the liberation of the Italians, as also of the Slavs, Rumanes, and Czecho-Slovaks from foreign domination."⁸ The American declaration of war upon Germany in April, 1917, then opened a way in which Czech-American Catholics could in good conscience work for the independence of their homeland in the context of patriotic Americanism. For, even though the United States would not declare war upon Austria-Hungary until December 11, 1917,⁹ any assistance that Czechs could provide against Germany on the Western Front in France would no

⁶A great deal on these disputes can be found in Vitus Buresh, O.S.B., *The Procopian Chronicle: St. Procopius Abbey, 1885-1985* (Lisle, IL: 1985) 31-43.

⁷Masaryk 219-20; Thomas Capek, *The Čechs (Bohemians) in America: A Study of their National, Cultural, Political, Social, Economic, and Religious Life* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin 1920) 275. Hesitancy among Catholics about full independence, as opposed to greater political and cultural autonomy, is discussed by Cada 90-91.

⁸The reply, dated January 10, 1917, is printed in W. Henry Cooke and Edith P. Stickney, eds., *Readings in European International Relations Since 1879* (New York and London: Harper 1931) 482-84.

⁹This was the date on which President Wilson signed the declaration of war which had been passed by both houses of Congress on December 7, in response to his request on December 4.

doubt be viewed with favor by the American Government and its Allies when the time came to negotiate peace treaties.

In the course of 1917, the "Alliance of Czech Catholics in the Chicago Archdiocese," founded in 1912 by, among others, Father Valentine Kohlbeck, O.S.B., editor of the Bohemian Benedictine Press, was transformed into the "National Alliance of Czech Catholics."¹⁰ This body entered into a certain amount of cooperation with the Bohemian National Alliance, formed by pro-independence Freethinkers in 1914, but which had since broadened its base and was willing to work together with Catholic Czechs and Slovaks for the creation of a new nation.¹¹ On July 4, 1917, the Bohemian National Alliance and the National Alliance of Czech Catholics agreed to submit to the political and national leadership of the Czechoslovak National Council which Masaryk, Beneš, and their allies had set up in Paris.¹²

The previous month, one of these collaborators, Milan Štefánik, a Slovak, had arrived in the United States to recruit Czechs and Slovaks for the Western Front on behalf of the Czechoslovak National Council. Though he had dreamed of bringing across the Atlantic as many as twenty thousand recruits,¹³ he found himself somewhat hampered by the United States Government, which, naturally, believed that its citizens, no matter what their ethnic background, should join the American Army. So Štefánik was permitted to enlist only non-citizens or American citizens over the age of thirty.¹⁴

Recruitment accordingly was sparse, and the first contingent of Czechoslovaks to cross the Atlantic (in November, 1917) numbered only one hundred men. By the end of the war, the total had risen to 2300, while another 30,000 men of Czech or Slovak background served in the U.S. Army.¹⁵ By drawing troops from other

¹⁰Cada 90-92.

¹¹Kalvoda 69.

¹²Kalvoda 280.

¹³Beneš, *Souvenirs de Guerre* 1.369.

¹⁴Kalvoda 196. He was also obliged to conduct his recruiting in such a way as would not cause offense to Austria-Hungary, with which the United States was not yet at war. Victor S. Mamatey, *The United States and East Central Europe, 1914-1918: A Study in Wilsonian Diplomacy and Propaganda* (Fort Washington, NY: Kennikat 1972) 131-32.

¹⁵Kalvoda 196-97.

sources (Rumania, Italy, the Balkans, and, to a far lesser extent than desired, Russia), Masaryk, Beneš and Štefánik were eventually able to form in France four regiments totalling 10,000 troops.¹⁶

The precise status of these Czechoslovak military units was the subject of considerable negotiations between Beneš, especially, and the French Government.¹⁷ At length, on December 16, 1917, the French President (Poincaré), Prime Minister (Clemenceau), and Foreign Minister (Pichon) issued a decree which began: "The Czechoslovaks, organized in an independent army, and acknowledging the authority of the supreme French command in military affairs, will fight under their own flag against the Central Powers." Politically, the management of this "army" was consigned to the Czechoslovak National Council, while France agreed to look after all equipment needs.¹⁸

SELECTION OF A CHAPLAIN

The National Alliance of Czech Catholics naturally desired that a chaplain accompany the men going to the trenches, but efforts to obtain a secular priest from among the Czech Catholics in America were unsuccessful.¹⁹ On December 3, 1917, therefore, a letter was addressed to Abbot John Nepomucene Jaeger of St. Procopius Abbey. Stating the hope that by the following June or July a functioning Czechoslovak army would be formed in France, they asked the Benedictines to provide a chaplain to look after the spiritual needs of the troops.²⁰

Abbot Nepomuk (as he was usually called) had governed St. Procopius since its foundation as a priory in 1885, and he had

¹⁶Beneš, *Souvenirs de Guerre* 2.15-28. This fell far short of the optimistic prediction of Masaryk in May 1918 that the arrival of Czech troops from Russia and other areas would lead to an army of 100,000-120,000 on the Western Front. Kalvoda 287.

¹⁷Beneš, *Souvenirs de Guerre* 1.374-401, 2.3-15.

¹⁸An English translation of the decree is printed in Beneš, *My War Memories* 266; Thomas Capek, *Origins of the Czechoslovak State* (Revell 1926) 78-79.

¹⁹František Šindelář, *Z boje za svobodu otčiny (The Struggle for the Freedom of Our Fatherland)* (Chicago: National Alliance of Czech Catholics 1924) 85.

²⁰Innocent Kestl and F. Šindelář to Abbot John Nepomucene Jaeger, December 3, 1917, Biskup file, St. Procopius Abbey Archives.

been named the monastery's first abbot when the community was raised to abbatial status in 1894. By 1917, however, the seventy-three-year-old abbot was enfeebled in mind and body, and direction of the Abbey was for all practical purposes in the hands of its energetic prior, Father Procopius Nežžil.

As was his wont, Prior Procopius acted quickly and decisively to accept a new missionary venture for the monastery. A meeting of the monastic chapter was called for December 5, and, as a result, the Prior was authorized to invite volunteers from the priests of the monastery. He did so in a letter on December 7, and, by the end of the month, five priest-monks had offered their services: Fathers Augustine Studený, Anthony Nouza, Francis Šindelář, Alphonse Biskup, and Cyril Ženíšek.²¹

The reasons for the selection of Father Alphonse are not known, but some guesses can be hazarded. Father Cyril was forty-three years old, three years past the age which was the upper limit for chaplains in the American Army.²² Father Anthony was pastor of a parish in Fifield, Wisconsin, and Father Augustine had a heavy teaching load in the monastery's schools in Lisle. Possibly neither could have been spared. Father Francis, though very eager to undertake the chaplaincy (and never reconciled to the eventual choice of Father Alphonse²³), had been ordained only the previous June, and was probably thought to be lacking in sufficient pastoral experience at this time.

²¹Augustine Študený to Abbot Nepomuk, December 10, 1917; Anthony Nouza to Prior Procopius, December 11, 1917; Francis Šindelář to Abbot Nepomuk, December 12, 1917; Alphonse Biskup to Abbot Nepomuk, December 16, 1917; Cyril Ženíšek to Prior Procopius, December 27, 1917. Fr. Augustine's letter mentions the date of the Chapter, while Fr. Anthony's letter gives the date of the Prior's invitation. All five letters were found in the Jaeger Papers, St. Procopius Abbey Archives.

²²A letter to Abbot Nepomuk from Rev. Louis J. O'Hern, C.S.P., of the Catholic Army and Navy Chaplain Bureau, on November 26, 1917, had both requested chaplains and set down qualifications, which included being under forty, an American citizen, and, if a naturalized citizen, not from enemy territory. While these applied to chaplains for the American armed forces, it is likely that the National Alliance and the monastery thought it wise to conform to them for the Czech Legion as well. If so, the last condition above would have been a second disqualification for the Bohemian-born Fr. Cyril, once war had been declared on Austria-Hungary (December 11). The other four applicants were born in the United States. The letter from Fr. O'Hern may be found in the Biskup file, St. Procopius Abbey Archives.

²³Information supplied by Abbot Valentine Skluzacek, O.S.B., March 1996.

Born Charles Biskup in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, on January 17, 1887, Father Alphonse came to the Lisle schools in 1903, professed his monastic vows in 1909, and was ordained to the priesthood in 1914. Both before and after his service with the Czech Legion, he would have numerous changes of assignments, usually preceded by a sense that he had been insufficiently prepared for what his superior was asking him to do. Perhaps he looked upon military service as an opportunity to make good on his own.

Early in 1918, Father Alphonse's application was accepted,²⁴ and, after visits to the Abbey and to his parents in Cedar Rapids,²⁵ he made ready to set out for Europe. In early May,²⁶ he travelled to New York, spending a few days along the way at St. Vincent Archabbey, the motherhouse of St. Procopius. In New York, he met with Bishop Patrick Hayes, Bishop Ordinary of U.S. Army and Navy Chaplains, and from him received advice, various faculties, and a "chaplain's kit."²⁷ He next journeyed to Washington, where he met Count Dumontal, a French army attaché, who had promised the National Alliance of Czech Catholics that their chaplain would receive the rank of captain.²⁸ The new chaplain returned to New York for his May 23 departure for Europe on the *Chicago*.

²⁴Exactly when this was done is not certain, but there is a note in the Minutes of the Council of Seniors' meeting on February 9, 1918, that Prior Procopius gave a report on the chaplaincy for the Czecho-Slovak Army in France.

²⁵Oběžník Národního Svazu Českých Katolíků [Publication of the National Alliance of Czech Catholics] May 14, 1918. This appears to be a bulletin for the Chicago branch of the National Alliance.

²⁶Fr. Alphonse tells of his time in New York and Washington in a May 20, 1918, letter to Prior Procopius. Biskup file, St. Procopius Abbey Archives.

²⁷On February 27, the Bishop's secretary had written Abbot Nepomuk that Bishop Hayes was disposed to credit St. Procopius for Fr. Alphonse's services as if they had been tendered to the U.S. Army. Biskup file, St. Procopius Abbey Archives. Accordingly, the Czech Benedictine would later be listed in *United States Catholic Chaplains in the World War* (New York: Ordinate, Army and Navy Chaplains 1924) 12.

²⁸Šindelář 86. Fr. Alphonse created some irritation by not arranging this visit through Charles Pergler, representing the Czechoslovak National Council in Washington. The dispute was patched up before the priest left the capital. Fr. Alphonse to Prior Procopius, May 20, 1918, Biskup file, St. Procopius Abbey Archives. Pergler later authored *America in the Struggle for Czechoslovak Independence* (Philadelphia: Dorrance 1926).

Upon arriving in Bordeaux after an uneventful voyage,²⁹ Father Alphonse went on to Paris, where he learned that there was going to be difficulty about his status. He described the problem and his initial efforts to resolve it in some memoirs³⁰ he wrote about thirty years later:

One difficulty was, that the Czechoslovak unit was considered a foreign legion.³¹ That meant that I had to join them as a private. I did not bother about the rank, but what I feared was that if I now joined them as a private, later on they may put a gun in my hand, as the government did to many [French] Catholic priests. I did not see how I could volunteer under these conditions. I went to see Beneš, the representative of the provisional Czechoslovak government in France. He received me kindly. I wanted an official and a written assurance that I will not have to carry arms. He told me that officially he cannot give me this guarantee. [But he added] in all sincerity I assure you that you will be a chaplain and that never will you have to carry arms.

Beneš went on to explain that Father Alphonse's job would be a difficult one, as many of the soldiers of the Czech Legion were battle-hardened veterans from the Russian or Serbian campaigns, and some were Hussites, rather than Catholics.

In retrospect, Father Alphonse believed that Dr. Beneš had acted honorably,³² and he rejected any notion that the Czech

²⁹In a letter of June 19, 1918, written to Fr. Valentine Kohlbeck, editor of the Bohemian Benedictine Press, Fr. Alphonse states that no signs of German submarines were seen. Biskup file, St. Procopius Abbey Archives.

³⁰These may be found in the Biskup file, St. Procopius Abbey Archives. The passage of time, unsurprisingly, led to some slips of memory on Fr. Alphonse's part. For example, he states that he had arrived in France on May 17, when in fact (according to his letter written at the time) the *Chicago* did not leave America until six days later.

If other documents are not cited, the information on Fr. Alphonse's activities related in the remainder of the article is taken from these memoirs.

³¹The ambiguous status of the Czech Legion is clear from the fact that Fr. Alphonse would often, even in his writings many years later, identify himself as a chaplain in the French Foreign Legion. The Czechoslovak National Council preferred to look upon the troops as part of the army of a country striving to be re-born.

³²In truth, Beneš was finding it difficult to convince the French Government and military to commission any Czechoslovak officers, even those who had served in campaigns in central or eastern Europe. Again, the complications of being, on the one hand, an "independent" army and, on the other,

leader was operating out of an animus for Catholicism.³³ At the time, however, he was disturbed and even angry, believing that he was being treated far differently than the Czechoslovak and French officials in America had led him to expect. Stating to Prior Procopius, "I will not trust Dr. Beneš," he decided to explore the possibility of serving as a Knights of Columbus chaplain and ministering to the Czech Legion under that body's aegis.³⁴

However, he soon learned that, since he would not be serving soldiers of the U.S. Army, the Knights of Columbus did not feel they could sponsor him. At this point, Father Alphonse decided to accept the assurance Beneš had obtained—that he would not be obliged to carry arms and would be promoted from private to captain once the Czech forces had reached a size which would justify a chaplain in the eyes of French military officialdom.³⁵ To gain the remaining faculties he needed, Father Alphonse secured an interview with the Archbishop of Paris, Léon Cardinal Amette. The Cardinal was a bit bewildered at the idea of an American priest coming to France to work among Czechs, but he finally declared that he was giving all the faculties he could. As for the rest, "Ecclesia supplet!"

So, on June 29 or thereabouts,³⁶ Father Alphonse came to the main Czechoslovak camp at Cognac, about sixty miles north of

under the military control of the French high command, were a constant source of hurt feelings and even anger. Beneš, *Souvenirs de Guerre* 2.17-22.

³³Fr. Alphonse recalled with pleasure Beneš' parting words: "I am glad that my boys will have a chaplain and a good one." He also stated that Beneš had tried without success to obtain a Slovak priest from America for the troops. By contrast, a Protestant preacher from Chicago obtained no recognition from the Czech officials, and Fr. Alphonse found him working among the cooks.

³⁴Fr. Alphonse to Prior Procopius, June 14, 1918. Biskup file, St. Procopius Abbey Archives. Accordingly, Fr. Alphonse contacted Msgr. James S. Connolly, stationed in Paris as Vicar-General of U.S. Army and Navy Chaplains, about affiliation with the Knights.

³⁵Fr. Alphonse to Prior Procopius, June 19 and June 25, 1918. Biskup file, St. Procopius Abbey Archives. Once the National Alliance of Czech Catholic officials learned of Fr. Alphonse's situation, they both sent some money to tide him over and contacted Masaryk, who agreed that the priest should have officer status. By that time, Fr. Alphonse had already joined as a private, which rank he retained until later that summer. Šindelář 86-87.

³⁶In his June 25 letter to Prior Procopius, Father Alphonse wrote of leaving for camp the following day. In his written account thirty or more years later, he spoke of arriving on "Saturday." June 29 was a Saturday in 1918.

Bordeaux and so very far from the front. He received his uniform (as a private) and soon (probably on Monday, July 1) set off for Darney, near the border of Alsace. The trip took five days, and since the troops had been given rations only for three, there was some use of restaurants during stops. There Father Alphonse had his first experience of horse-flesh, which he found he could tolerate.

Darney was the headquarters of the 21st Czechoslovak Regiment, about to be the first to go into combat, having been formally presented with colors on June 30 by President Poincaré of France.³⁷ The regiment soon entered the trenches in what was called the Vosges Front, east of the fortress-city of Belfort. In the midst of hilly country, this region had not been considered suitable for breakthroughs, and so the lines had remained stable and relatively quiet since 1914. Accordingly, it seemed like a good spot for new units to become accustomed to the rigors of trench life before being transferred to more active sectors.

For the same reason, many of the new American divisions which had been crossing the Atlantic were first assigned to this area. Just to the right (i.e., south) of the Czechoslovak regiment was the 32nd Division, formed from the Michigan and Wisconsin National Guard, whose commander (Major General William G. Haan) was determined that his men would gain useful military experience. The front accordingly became much more active than before.³⁸ As Father Alphonse put it, "There was not an hour that shooting [of artillery] would not be going on someplace. The Germans were answering shot for shot, so that it was a lively front. So much so that the people who lived peaceably in the village from the beginning of the war were ordered to leave."

Father Alphonse, since he bore no arms,³⁹ was at first not al-

³⁷Beneš, *Souvenirs de Guerre* 2.233-35. The previous day, the French Government had formally recognized the Czechoslovak National Council as representing the sovereignty of the nation and had promised to do its utmost to satisfy the aspirations of the Czechoslovaks for independence. France was thus the first of the Entente Powers formally to commit itself to full independence, i.e., to the dismemberment of Austria-Hungary.

³⁸"The natural enthusiasm of the American troops and their inherent desire to start active operations as quickly as possible usually produced a marked increase in the fighting in these normally quiet sectors." *American Armies and Battlefields in Europe* (Washington, D.C: Center of Military History, United States Army 1992) 421.

³⁹He was attached, apparently, to a hospital unit. Šindelář 87.

lowed into the trenches.⁴⁰ The Czech commanders were uncertain whether those taken captive by the Germans would be treated as prisoners or as traitors to the Emperor of Austria, and unarmed men seemed particularly at risk. However, even behind the lines, he soon was exposed to danger, as he explains:

It was about 8:30 P.M. and it was getting dark. I was taught one lesson; if you go through a town within range of the German guns, never walk in the center of the road but near the buildings. I did that night and it saved my life. I was going along the side of a building when suddenly with a terrific blast and as a big flash of lightning, two shrapnels exploded in the yard about 40 feet ahead of me. . . . Had I been walking in the middle of the street or had I been 15 feet ahead, I am sure that I would have been torn to pieces.

He arrived safely at a tunnel-like first aid station, while outside the troops experienced three more artillery bombardments and a gas attack in the course of the night.

For the most part, Father Alphonse got along well with the soldiers. Although, as Beneš had warned, most were fallen-away Catholics, the priest learned that few would refuse the sacraments when they were wounded or ill. He was also pleased to see them treat captured Germans decently. Though, in the democratic spirit of the times, they referred to him as "brother chaplain," he remarked that, in truth, they did treat him as a brother. "I was glad that I volunteered for this outfit."

In the second half of July, the 32nd American Division was transferred to a far more active front in the area of the Aisne and Marne rivers.⁴¹ Father Alphonse remarked that, with a French division replacing the Americans, this sector of the front resumed its quieter tone, and the civilians were able to return to their homes. But quiet fronts had their own perils:

One Sunday I almost met the inglorious death of being bayoneted by a French soldier. I said Mass near the trenches, I was preparing to go home. I hung my Mass kit (it was rather heavy because it also contained an altar stone) on my shoulders, got on my bicycle and started for the rear for the regimental headquarters. I was going down a steep hill . . . and going very fast, when very suddenly a French soldier, who was on guard, but at that time dozing pleasantly by the roadside, got

⁴⁰Towards the end of the war, when engaged in the first aid work to be described below, Fr. Alphonse acquired a pistol from a dead German officer.

⁴¹*United States Army in the World War, 1917-1919*, 17 vols. (Washington: Center of Military History, United States Army 1988-92) 3.664.

up hurriedly, braced himself for an attack, pointed his bayonet toward me and called 'Halt!' I could not halt immediately because I was going very fast and I had my Mass kit fastened on my back. When I finally stopped, the guard noticed that I did not have on a German uniform but the uniform of the French Foreign Legion. He quickly drew back his bayonet and he started to talk in French. At that time my knowledge of the French language was very limited but I succeeded in telling him that, "Je suis aumonier de la legion etrangere." That I am the chaplain of the French Foreign Legion. That visibly upset him. He took off his steel helmet and with his handkerchief started to wipe his brow. . . . Then with great kindness and solicitude, he started to speak rapidly in French. I imagine he was begging pardon and giving me good advice for the future. I regretted that I did not know enough French to tell him that when he is on guard duty he should not sleep.

His hazy status still rankled somewhat with Father Alphonse. In a letter of August 4,⁴² he noted that as a private, he was paid the equivalent of five American cents a day. Even a subsidy from the Czechoslovak National Council brought his income only to twenty-three cents a day, with which he had to cover both his chaplain's expenses and the lodging he had obtained with a French family. On the other hand, he found the army fare quite good and he felt both accepted and treated kindly by the troops. But the promises which had been made to Father Alphonse and his superiors by the Czechoslovak authorities had turned out to be, in his words, "pie crust." The anomalous nature of his position was noted by Dr. J.L. Fisher of the Bohemian National Alliance, who visited the camp in late July and promised to do what he could for the priest.

In August or September,⁴³ the now somewhat battle-tested

⁴²Addressed to "Right Reverend and Dear Father," this letter, which clearly hoped for a reply which would certainly have been beyond the capacity of Abbot Nepomuk, was presumably intended for Prior Procopius. Biskup file, St. Procopius Abbey Archives.

⁴³There are some irreconcilable discrepancies in the chronology of Fr. Alphonse's recollections, set down several decades later. He says there that the transfer took place at the beginning of September. He then goes on to state that he witnessed from a hill the breakthrough of the 32nd American Division which led to the capture of Fismes. But Fismes was captured in early August, though some mopping-up in the area continued into the middle of the month. I rely on the account of the 32nd Division in *Order of Battle of the United States Land Forces in the World War*, 5 vols. (Washington: Center of Military History, United States Army 1988) 2.183. In his August 4 letter, cited above, Fr. Alphonse is still in Alsace and not yet an officer (which promotion, he later writes, arrived while he was still in that region).

Czechoslovak regiment was transferred to Épernay, about twenty miles south of Reims, in the Champagne region. Just before the move (which took about a week, in box cars and flat cars), Father Alphonse at last became an officer, a "sous-lieutenant." This allowed him to mess with the staff—not an inconsiderable advantage, since the liquid products of Champagne formed part of the menu at meals!

The more pleasant aspects of French culture, however, were soon forgotten in the midst of the concluding battles of the war. The great German offensives of early 1918 had petered out by July, and the Allied armies were now on the offensive. The Czech Legion and Father Alphonse would have only a minor role in the events leading up to the Armistice on November 11, but the contribution they did make served its intended purpose of giving the Czechoslovak leadership grounds for claiming the support of the Allies for national independence.

The 21st Regiment was assigned to the 53rd French Infantry Division,⁴⁴ part of General Gourard's Fourth Army, positioned to the left (west) of the First American Army and providing support to that body as it engaged in its great Argonne offensive of September-November 1918. In mid-October, the Czechs took part in an attack upon German defenses along the river Aisne, at the town of Terron, about thirty miles east by northeast of Reims.

On the day the attack began (Father Alphonse says "Sunday," probably October 20),⁴⁵ the chaplain was placed in charge of thirty-six stretcher-bearers assigned to bring wounded soldiers to the rear, a task complicated by the flooding of a meadow by the Germans as a defensive measure. Father Alphonse describes his role:

The attack took place at 4 P.M. Sunday and we were busy with the wounded all Sunday night [and] all day Monday till about eleven P.M.

If his written recollection that the trip took a week is correct, there would hardly have been time for the priest to have seen the 32nd Division in action around Fismes.

⁴⁴According to Beneš, *Souvenirs de Guerre* 2.33, the Czechs were attached to the division commanded by General Boissoudy. Fr. Alphonse's eventual citation (in November 1918) would be issued by General Guillemin, as commander of the 53rd Division.

⁴⁵The eventual French High Command citation of the 21st and 22nd Czechoslovak regiments stated that the attacks, and then the repulse of three German counter-attacks, took place from October 19-25. Beneš, *Souvenirs de Guerre* 2.462fn.

Monday when I went to [battalion commander] Husák's headquarters in Terron for further orders. . . . He told me to establish a central aid station in Vandy [south of the Aisne]. And on my way to Vandy to stop at the station in Terron and to tell them to forward all the wounded to Vandy. . . . So I started out for Vandy about 4 kilometres to the South.

Once there, Father Alphonse and two companions, none of whom had slept for nearly two days, collapsed with exhaustion in a cellar. Neither shelling nor reports of a gas attack could rouse them until Tuesday morning, when wounded from Terron began to arrive. Father Alphonse tried to see to their care and then their further removal to Vrizy, a bit back from the front.

On one of these trips, he had a close call:

We had a soldier whose arm was shattered. He bled profusely. Since he was willing to walk I took him to the rear. The Germans were shelling the road at frequent intervals. Coming back . . . the Germans started to lay down a barrage Vandy toward Vrizy. Those cannons could fire several shells a minute and a battery of four guns were [sic] laying down the barrage. I could not beat the barrage . . . and there was water on both sides of the road. So about the only thing I had time to do was to crouch on the side of the road which was about a foot above the level of the water. And the shell that fell so close that it splashed water on me did not explode—it was a dud. That time I felt sure that many people were praying for me.

Dodging other barrages, Father Alphonse visited the various Czech units, offering to hear confessions. Once, at a crossroads, he had to decide whether he should see first to soldiers further along the road or to those positioned in some nearby woods. He chose the latter, fortunately, as it turned out:

I don't think that I went a hundred feet when I heard the hum of aeroplane motors. Five German aeroplanes were flying toward us and they were flying low. I was among the trees already and not afraid, so I watched them. When they came to the road they went low and followed the road and machine-gunned it. Somehow they found out that our boys were encamped there. I was sure that some of our boys were killed so I rushed there and found them all safe but scared and excited. At that place the road cut through a hill and each soldier had his own individual dugout, in the side of the hill. Had I went [sic] to them first I would have been an open target because I had no dugout.

On October 31 or thereabouts,⁴⁶ the Czech troops, having lost

⁴⁶Fr. Alphonse's account states "Saturday morning October 31." But October 31 was a Thursday that year.

203 dead, 876 wounded, and 69 missing,⁴⁷ received the happy news that they were being relieved and sent to the rear. During the months since July, while the Allied armies on the Western Front went on the offensive and advanced methodically despite a still stubborn German resistance, the overall situation of the war was changing rapidly. The breakthrough on the Macedonian front in September led to the withdrawal first of Bulgaria, then of the Ottoman Empire, from the war. As the Allied armies moved north through the Balkans, the military collapse of Austria-Hungary was clearly imminent.

In an effort to negate all last-ditch Habsburg efforts to ward off disaster by granting autonomy to the minority populations in the Dual Empire, the Czechoslovak National Council on October 14 declared itself to be a Provisional Government. Four days later, a declaration of independence was issued by this body. On October 28, revolution broke out in Prague, and on November 4 an armistice went into effect between the Allied Powers and an Austro-Hungarian Empire which, to all intents and purposes, had already ceased to exist.

For the Czech troops in France, this meant not only that they had now a nation in fact, as opposed to theory or sentiment, but that they could look forward to going there.

TO CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND THEN HOME

On November 9, two days before the Armistice with Germany, Father Alphonse wrote to an unidentified confrere⁴⁸ about his part in the recent battle. He noted both the assistance he was able to provide the wounded and the even more gratifying fact that none of the seriously-injured had refused the sacraments. "I can now say that I am happy and I am glad that I joined the army."

He recorded the visit made the 21st Regiment the previous day by Dr. Beneš (now Foreign Minister of the Provisional Government) and General Gourard. A number of officers and men were

⁴⁷Beneš, *Souvenirs de Guerre* 2.462fn.

⁴⁸He addresses the letter "Dear Reverend Father," a lesser title than he would have used for Abbot Nepomuk or Prior Procopius. Since he states that the confrere was probably expecting some report from him upon the recent battles, and that he had sent a telegram to allay concerns, I would speculate that the recipient was Fr. Valentine Kohlbeck, editor of the Bohemian Benedictine Press.

decorated,⁴⁹ and Father Alphonse was cited in the 53rd Division's order of the day for the care he bestowed, on the front lines and under enemy fire, without concern for danger.⁵⁰ Beneš announced that preparations were underway to transfer the Czech Legion to Bohemia, from which Marshal Foch was planning a thrust into the heart of Germany, if this were necessary to end the war.⁵¹

The armistice with Germany, which went into effect on November 11, put an end to these invasion plans and perhaps reduced the urgency—at least as far as the French were concerned—of shipping the Czechoslovak troops to their new country.⁵² On December 30, Father Alphonse wrote Prior Procopius from Darney again, in the Vosges region, which, he noted, held many happy memories for the 21st Regiment. There they had undergone their final training for battle, had received their colors from the President of France, and had set out for the front.⁵³

In this letter, the chaplain reported that he had been promoted to lieutenant, and there had been indications that he might soon be promoted again. But, with the war now over, Father Alphonse (and his superiors) had no intention of making the Czechoslovak Army his career. He planned to leave the military as soon as possible, though he warned that it would be at least six months before he was released.

In his later reminiscences, Father Alphonse recorded a haunting incident which took place during this time of waiting:

I had a very sad funeral in Darney. A Czech married man, who [had] served in the Austrian army, was fighting in Serbia. It was a hand to hand fight, when he bayoneted a Serbian soldier who was a father of three children. When the soldier was bayoneted and falled [sic] he cried: "Moja traja dieta." My three children. This Czech soldier could

⁴⁹Likely enough, it was on this occasion that Fr. Alphonse himself received the French Croix de Guerre, which decoration is now preserved in the Biskup file, St. Procopius Abbey Archives.

⁵⁰The citation says that he "a prodigué des soins en première ligne et au poste de secours, sous le feu ennemi, s'est dispensé sans compter, bravant le danger." A copy of the citation is in the Biskup file, St. Procopius Abbey Archives.

⁵¹Beneš discusses Foch's plans and his own visit to the troops in *Souvenirs de Guerre* 2.455-57, 462-64.

⁵²Beneš discusses both his frustration and his persistent efforts to arrange transportation from France (and Italy) *Souvenirs de Guerre* 2.482-83, 507-09.

⁵³Biskup file, St. Procopius Abbey Archives.

never forget it. He was melancholy and many times during the night and day he would repeat: "Moja traja dieta." We tried to console him. We knew that we [were] going home soon and we hoped that at home he would forget his tragic experience and get cheerful thoughts. But on Christmas day he shot himself.

On December 31, as Father Alphonse had anticipated in his letter the previous day, the 21st Regiment left Darney. The terms of the armistice with Austria-Hungary had given Allied troops the rights of free passage and the occupation of what strategic points were deemed necessary, and so the Czech Legion would make its way through the old territories of the Dual Empire by way of Italy. Father Alphonse expected that about ten days would be spent in Padua while further transit was arranged.

Once in Czechoslovakia, Father Alphonse awaited the day when he could return to the United States and the work of his monastery. But, in the late spring of 1919, his regiment saw action during the brief conflict between the new Czechoslovak state and Hungary, which had since March been under the Communist regime of Bela Kun. Slovakia had been part of the Kingdom of Hungary prior to October-November 1918, and the exact demarcation line between that region and Hungary proper had become a major source of contention. Towards the end of May, open conflict broke out.⁵⁴

The struggle, which eventually ended with Hungarian withdrawal from the disputed territory, was described by Father Alphonse as "a comedy, a farce." Though he gave up a furlough he had begun and returned to his unit, his later memories suggest that he hardly need have bothered:

Our outfit numbered 1900 men. That is not even a full regiment. These 1900 men came from 5 different regiments. There was only one battalion from my 21st regiment and these were the only ones that were properly armed. They were the only ones who had machine guns. The rest of the soldiers of the outfit had Russian rifles and they used in them Austrian cartridges. Which meant that when they fired they had to use a knife or a small screw-driver to extricate the empty shell. The result was that our battalion was never attacked, and that when the units on our right or our left were attacked, they retreated, and there was danger that we [would] be surrounded. When we attacked, then the Hungarians retreated without putting up a fight. The reason

⁵⁴On all involved in this boundary dispute and "war," see D. Perman, *The Shaping of the Czechoslovak State: Diplomatic History of the Boundaries of Czechoslovakia, 1914-1920* (Leiden: E.J. Brill 1962) 219-26.

was that the Hungarians were not properly armed either. Once when we were retreating our staff was the last to leave the town. We left in a truck. The Hungarians were firing at us point-blank, but they could not hit us, because most likely they had no gun sights. We were in Slovakia about six weeks and our casualties were one killed and two wounded.

Having completed the Slovakian campaign, during which he was promoted to captain,⁵⁵ Father Alphonse hoped to be released from the Czechoslovak Army and return home as soon as possible. His wish was that he would receive a chaplaincy or small parish from the Abbey's new superior. The growing incapacity of Abbot Nepomuk had led to an extraordinary visitation in November 1918, as a result of which he had requested from the Holy See a coadjutor abbot. On March 25, 1919, Father Valentine Kohlbeck, up to then in charge of the Bohemian Benedictine Press, was elected to that office.

The concern of Abbot Valentine for the journalistic work which he had directed since 1898 led to an unwelcome surprise for Father Alphonse. On July 18 he received word from the new abbot that he was to take over management of the Press. Notwithstanding his reluctance to enter the world of journalism and publishing, this was the task he undertook after he returned to Chicago on September 10, 1919.⁵⁶ The several years he spent trying to run the Press were not easy ones, though this work did afford opportunities to reflect on his experiences in the Czech Legion.⁵⁷ Father Alphonse's later life was often difficult, as oversensitivity and possibly damaged nerves from his wartime service created difficulties in some of his many assignments. An air of sadness is evident in his written memories, composed about a decade before his death. But he concluded by recalling that God never forsook anyone "and was good to me." Father Alphonse Biskup died on February 22, 1958, aged seventy-one.

⁵⁵Fr. Alphonse to Abbot Valentine Kohlbeck, July 18, 1919, Biskup file, St. Procopius Abbey Archives.

⁵⁶The date is taken from Šindelář 87.

⁵⁷In the 1920 *Katolík Kalendář*, for example, Fr. Alphonse contributed a poignant article describing the funeral he conducted in Alsace for the first soldiers of the 21st Regiment to be killed in action.