

# WAR

## PORT PIRIE MAN'S STORY

Mr. Keith Murdoch, London correspondent of the Melbourne "Herald," tells the following exciting story:—

In the experiences of Alexander Sast, private in the 10th Battalion (South Australia) of the Australian Imperial Force, of Port Pirie and Broken Hill, romance and mystery are so interwoven that he may well claim them to be amongst the strangest of the war. He has been deep into enemy country, has suffered torture, and escaped; he has travelled through a bitter winter in Russia, where identification would have brought imprisonment and punishment; and having rejoined the colors he has been thrown into the guard-room under suspicion as a spy. Sast is a frank-faced, straight-eyed, plain-speaking young Russian, with a greater fondness for his adopted country of Australia than for all other countries on the earth. He possesses the two most notable characteristics of the Australian soldier—clean, strong, supple sinew, and a simple and generous affection for his distant home and the people who live out there.

### Death Faced Bravely.

His first great adventure was when he faced death. Thousands of young Australians have looked death bravely in the eye. Thousands have accepted it calmly and made it easier for Australians now and henceforward to live and die worthily in memory of their unflinching spirit. The strangeness of Sast's experience lay in the way death seemed inexorably to approach him, coming nearer and nearer, until the prick of the bayonet was in his chest, and his hands were bleeding as he tried to thrust it from him.

The story to that point is that of many members of the Australian armies. Sast was a mechanic employed in Port Pirie workshops. An accomplished engineer, though only 27 years of age, he knew how to take locomotives to pieces and put them together again. He earned £3 10<sup>s</sup> a week for eight hours a day, which meant easy times compared with his apprentice days in Odessa. He went to Broken Hill and thence joined Colonel Weir's "Glorious Tenth"—undoubtedly one of the most famous and glorious of Australian battalions.

Sast was in the first company to land on Gallipoli. Wounded the second day, he was sent to Mena Hospital, but five weeks saw him back again on the Peninsula, where his depleted battalion was holding the right flank south of Courtney's

Post, and Turkish snipers were taking their daily toll. There was specially one sniper whom no amount of searching could locate. His hidden post defied our machine guns and rifles; his unerring aim picked off those who searched for him at night, and made the slightest noise. Volunteers were invited to go out in fanlike movement to locate him, and Sast one night found himself several hundred yards in front of our line with a bullet in his leg, and the enemy sniper suspecting that he had been "winged." Sast scooped out a hole, and rolled helplessly into it, and it was there that three Turks, stealing forth to find their lamed quarry, surrounded him with their bayonets. They were for showing him no mercy. The foremost Turk lunged in the dark, and his bayonet came to Sast's very skin. With despairing efforts he seized it as it came, tore bayonet and rifle from the Turk's hands, and sank bleeding and exhausted into his poor lair.

### Scars as Evidence.

When he appeared before doubting boards of officers at Salisbury Plains in September Sast was able to show hands where the cuts of the knife were still deep and rough. Doctors say the bullet is still in the hip. Apart from these scars, Sast has little against the Turks. They carried him to their lines, where a German officer bathed and bandaged his wounds. For a day he was an object of interest to hundreds of Turkish soldiers, who crowded round him. They seemed to think him something uncanny. He was an Australian soldier—one of those reckless opponents who performed the impossible, and drew and shed blood with the generosity of dare-devils. Sast's story at this point has a special interest and importance, for he is the only Australian who has escaped from Turkish war prisons, and thus the only man who can tell accurately what the few Australians captured by the Turks have been through and how they have been treated.

Sast had good attention and much kindness for a fortnight. He was roughly examined by Turkish officers, but his sickness was obvious, and they did not press him unduly for information. They had him carried four miles behind the lines, then conveyed to the little railway near the Bulair lines, and then sent him by hospital train to a pretty hospital camp in Thrace. Here he was visited by three intelligence officers, one a German. He refused information. He was threatened with immediate death, with torture, with flogging. Still he refused. The German who wore Turkish uniform, but was fair as Sast himself, offered to let him off without punishment if he would but tell the numbers on the Australian front and the distribution of the battalions. Sast pleaded ignorance. He said he knew nothing more than what he had seen, as he had just come from Egypt, and had seen nothing there. He told them he would die rather than betray his comrades.

his comrades.

"You will die," said the German, "as soon as you come from this hospital. You will see me again."

#### Singled Out for Torment.

When sent from hospital to the Scutari camp for war prisoners, Sast soon with horror saw again this ill-omened German inquisitor. There were several hundreds of British prisoners at Scutari, mostly Royal Marine Light Infantry and sailors from the wrecked submarines. The Turks up to that time had taken only seven Australian "rankers," and Sast is positive that none of these had to go through his experiences. The inquisitor and torturer was suspicious of Sast because of his Russian origin, and seemed moreover to single out the Russian for special torments.

For a full day Sast was harangued and examined by the German, and every kind of moral pressure which wit of man could improvise was brought upon him. At length he was strung up to an iron ring by his thumbs, which were brought under his armpits to the middle of his back in such a way that his head was thrust forward and his toes were just off the ground. The agony after a few minutes was intense. Sast cried out to them to kill him, but they merely teased him the more. After four hours he fainted through sheer pain and fatigue, and remembered nothing until he found himself lying in bed with doctors over him.

For four days Sast was put through this moral and physical torture. He suffered excruciatingly in every bone and muscle in his body. He cried for hours for death.

Then they left him, and he became merely one of hundreds. But he and his few Australian comrades were always under special guard. Sentries slept beside them. They were not allowed to move without armed men by their side. Sast insists that no other Australian was tortured, but he never varies in his story that the Turks regarded the Australians as men apart. Their rations were detestable black bread, which sometimes had to be soaked for 30 minutes before it would give way to their teeth; bad meat and copious supplies of tea. It was poor stuff, but it seemed to be no worse than ordinary Turkish army fare, and all Turks appeared to be suffering from insufficiency of food.

#### German Troops Arrive.

Relief came from the Germans. Sast saw few Germans during his first weeks at Scutari, but as internal affairs became more unsettled in Constantinople more Germans came trooping southwards and more reached Scutari. At length the prisoners were ordered to collect all their goods and depart, because the German officers wanted the barracks for their new German troops. Sast describes the Scutari barracks as well-built brick buildings, similar to those of Cairo.

The Germans wanted the prisoners away for another reason also. They wanted them "lent" to Bulgaria. These hundreds of

captured British fighters were to serve the Germans' purpose by going to Bulgaria under Turkish guard, and imbuing a new and wholesome respect among the Bulgarians for the great Turkish army, which could "defeat" such men. The prisoners were herded in cattle trucks without windows or sanitary appliances, and for 36 hours they were kept locked inside, whilst a slow and rumbling train crept along the Balkan railway to Sofia. From here the prisoners were sent to Ruzhuk, where again they found themselves in barracks, this time under Bulgarian soldiers and with Bulgarian taskmasters setting them daily labors in road-making.

Sast's knowledge of his native Russian gave him enough common words for conversation with the Bulgarian sentries, and he found them sympathetic indeed towards his own countrymen. One sentry in particular brought him tobacco and wine. He talked much of his hatred of Germans, and his respect for the Russian liberators of his country. He brought friends, and they discussed with Sast the way the Russians had given Bulgaria a flag, and the way the Germans were bringing them to slavery. Sast made much of the point. He had managed to keep with him through all his experiences a skin belt he had brought from Australia with 23 sovereigns. One sovereign went a long way in supplying funds for his new friends and stimulating their friendship.

At length one agreed to run away with him. He brought Sast a Bulgarian uniform. He told him the password and sketched a plan for escape. Sast walked boldly out with him on a dark night and passed through Ruzhuk, unchallenged, to the outskirts of the city, where horse and vehicle were seized. The runaways put 18 miles between them and Ruzhuk before they discarded their horse, stole food from a farmhouse, and crept into a stack of hay to sleep throughout daylight. It was January, 4, 1916. Days were short; cold was bitter. Sast and his mate walked on that night for 18 miles. And then came the difficulty of passing the sentries on the frozen Danube.

#### Sentry's Shots Ring Out.

It was more by good luck than by management that they got across. One was a deserter, the other was an escaped enemy soldier from a war prison. Capture meant certain death for the one, severe punishment and solitary confinement for the other. And the Bulgarian bank was studded with sentries, posted to prevent desertions, whilst amidst the ice of the river were barges, and on the other bank were people who probably would hand the runaways over to the authorities.

Sast and his friend reached the ice, strode out boldly, and got some yards from the bank. Then a sentry's shots rang out. Sast says that as they ran across with desperate speed 30 shots whizzed past them, but none hit. The other bank was reached, and the men pushed on inland to a farm, where money

pushed on inland to a farm, where money again bought attention and comfort. Here Sast lay ill for a fortnight, feeding on hot Roumanian milk and cakes. His Bulgarian friend went off after three days to surrender himself to the authorities and he interned with 15,000 of his countrymen who had succeeded in crossing the frontier.

Sast's troubles were far from over, for he was in nearly as much peril from Russian as from Bulgarian authorities. He had left Russia in his late teens without permission and without passports, and as such was liable to severe punishment for escaping from military service. His whole resources were bent on the task of getting to an English port, and thence to the Australian force. He secured Roumanian peasant clothes from his benefactress, and, attired in a gaudy silk vest of many colors, and a short peasant jacket, made his way to Bucharest, where he fell in with a Russian former naval officer who had taken part in the bombardment of Odessa during the revolution of 1905, and whom he found full of fellow feeling.

#### Off to Archangel.

The Russian not only planned Sast's escape across the Roumanian frontier, but sketched his easiest course to Archangel. The difficulty of crossing the frontier lay in the fact that Russian officials were posted at each recognised crossing. Sast's friends found him a Roumanian Jew, who made his living out of smuggling men and goods across; and for a golden sovereign, which he insisted was all he possessed, Sast was safely landed on the Russian bank, within walking distance of Kichinev. By expending all his money, by traveling in military trains and by avoiding civil officials Sast passed safely through Kieff, Moscow, Petrograd, and Voludja, and reached Archangel, where at once he told his story to the British consul. He had now but a few shillings left. The consul agreed to keep his origin a secret, and to pass him to Hull. And Sast found himself signed on as a deck hand on the Wilson liner Toro, which landed him on June 14 at Hull, after two months and 14 days anxious voyaging amidst icebergs and in fear of German submarines. Sast's main duty was as forward watch, and during long hours he kept the look-out, first for bergs, and then for submarines—work which brought him more than £55 when he was paid off at Hull.

It was not the end of Sast's troubles, for fate had a stroke of ill-fortune in store as ironical as anything that has struck an Australian soldier. The M.L.O. at Hull passed the traveller on to London, where an Australian sergeant awaited him. And Sast was sent to the new Australian base at Tidworth, on Salisbury Plains, and there cast into military prison. For 22 days he was under arrest, for his story seemed too incredible for belief. Boards of enquiry sat upon the case, suspecting that Sast had been in league with the Turks, and was still in league with them. Sast's story was ultimately fully endorsed and believed. The courts judged him as sincere as he had been adventurous and daring. And to-day

courts judged him as sincere as he had been adventurous and daring. And to-day he drives the motor car of the Assistant Provost Marshal of the Australian Forces—the head of that military police system which had received him with cold suspicion.

I have had an hour with Sast and have read the court's notes and reports. The story cannot be faulted in detail, and has been corroborated at points. It is a record of strange daring and enterprise. But to meet Sast is to be convinced. He has the simple-heartedness of his race, and cross-examination serves only to brighten the shining quality of his nature—the quality of sincere feeling, which made any place other than in the ranks of fighters against his enemies distasteful to him.