

## THE SAGA OF WILLIAM SMITH REA, SMYRNA REFUGEE

William Smith Rea (40 years) accompanied by his wife Grace (37 years) and children Eileen M. (9 years); William (7 years); and John Alex (4 years) – all British subjects arrive in Malta on 16<sup>th</sup> September 1922 per s/s/ Bavarian having left Smyrna on Thursday evening, the 14<sup>th</sup> September 1922. In a list updated as 24 August 1923, he is listed as went to Smyrna (with address given c/o British Consul, while his wife Grace and 3 children are recorded as went to Greece in same return. In the return of refugees who left Malta at the expense of government, Rea is listed as having left during the half-year ending 31<sup>st</sup> December 1927 with the address as c/o T. Robinson & Son Flour Milling Engineers, 75.91 Harbour Street Sydney N.S.W. leaving:

Claim no B1013, amount of claimed £7,759 in respect of loss of property including live stock and cash and loss of two years' contract salary.

Advance and travelling expenses:

Passage etc. to Australia

£45

Advance by way of loan

£90 £135

9 October 1922

I left England on August 1<sup>st</sup> 1913, for the purpose of fulfilling a three years contract as manager of a flour milling plant at Smyrna, installed by Messrs Thomas Robinson and Son Ltd Rochdale. Five days after my arrival at Smyrna, I contacted cholera, which happened to be prevalent, but soon recovered, and all went well until the outbreak of war, when I was arrested on suspicion of being a spy for the British Government. My first 36 hours spent in prison without food or water, after which I was brought before a court martial composed of Turkish and German officers, and sentenced to death. With characteristic sang-froid, I requested that I might at least be given the satisfaction of dying with a full stomach. Thanks to the assiduous attention of Mr. L. Morris, the acting American Vice Consul at Smyrna, my sentence was commuted to one of imprisonment for the period of the war, and that was the beginning of a trouble that continued until it culminated in disaster. In 1915 my house was looted and burned, and everything of value was lost. At intervals I was switched by the Turks from one danger zone to another, in the hope that British or French bombers would relieve my captors of inconvenient prisons.

After the Armistice in 1918, my former employers came forward and brought me to return and re-arrange the flow of their mill, which had been completely altered by a succession of Greek, Turkish and German millers. After some persuasion, I signed on with the firm once more, at a monthly salary which seemed large, but which I explained was due to me respect of my former contract. All went well as the proverbial marriage bell for the next five years. In three years I amassed a tidy fortune, which unfortunately consisted of Turkish rugs, antiquities, live stock, together with a cash amount in mill office of 6445 Turkish liras and £500 Bank of England notes.

Then came the unlooked for and sudden retreat of the Greek army, with the Turks following closely behind, looting burning and all round. When the Greeks entered Smyrna in 1919, the Greeks who were Ottoman subjects behaved in a most rude manner, brutal and barbarous manner towards some of the most respectable Turkish families. I happened to be living in the country eight miles from Smyrna and eye-witness of many atrocities. Of course, I was surprised at the barbarity whatever on the side of the Greek nation who professed to be such devout Christians. When, however, Mustapha Kemal's troops entered Smyrna on Saturday, the 9<sup>th</sup> day of September 1922, they beat the Greeks by 200%, start at the infamous game of rape, loot and murder. I was in a position and place to witness one of the most horrible sights imaginable. Civilians were held up for their money - among them myself – others were shot, or their heads cut off with the swords; corps were stripped of their boots and clothing; girls were held up on the roadside, raped and then murdered.

I was surrounded by revengeful Turks and eight miles away from my wife and three children, who were alone in the country. I managed to get into touch with some French sailors who were protecting the railway works. I asked the officer for an escort, but he informed me that it was quite impossible to venture out amongst those angry Turks until such time as they had satisfied their lust for plunder and vengeance. I remained with the French until the sun set, when under cover of darkness; I made a journey of five miles, to

a village Cordelio.<sup>1</sup> I had yet three miles of country to traverse, but Turkish loot and savagery did not ease that night and I had to keep a lonely vigil in a vineyard until day break, when I once more ventured out amongst those Turks to go in search of a General or Pasha, one of whom I was lucky enough to find at 11 a.m. on Sunday, the 10<sup>th</sup>. After much beseeching and pleading, he called me to have a carriage and an escort of two cavalry men for the remaining three miles into the country.

What I saw on that three miles' journey is beyond description. At the end of it I found a house looted if everything – there were 13 bullet holes in the door and my wife, three children and maidservant hidden nearby in some shrubs. They were the only things Christians in the countryside for miles around. They were barefooted and naked – my wife wounded on her left forearm and my son, eight years old, wounded on the back of the right leg. I had arrived in the nick of time. For the Turks had started burning the shrubs and long grasses all over this particular countryside, so that those who might be in the hiding would have to bolt and be shot down like rabbits, on the return journey, I had to pass through villages namely, Thomaso and Pappas. Each containing 500 to 600 Christian inhabitants, but there was no sign of Christian life visible – men, women and children had been massacred, and their corpses strewn right and left and stripped of all outer clothing. On many occasions during the journey, I dragged a corpse from the middle of the roadway, as to allow the carriage sufficient room to pass without touching. At one house near the door (outside and inside) counted 12 girls aged about 16 to 24 years, all were quite naked and dead. Every house had its revolting tale to tell and Turkish men and women were diving in and out of each house in the search of valuables. Even the very escort who accompanied me on the journey could not resist the temptation – they entered several houses on the way and supplied themselves with articles of clothing etc. When I arrived at the end of the destination with my family naked and Turks laughing and jeering, I came across a personal acquaintance who was kind enough to let me have the use of a room, where I remained until Wednesday the 13<sup>th</sup> September, expecting the savage Turk at any moment to smash down the door and enter my place of refuge. At 3.30 p.m. that day, Smyrna was set on fire and then the Turk started looting and massacring in earnest. I gathered my wife and children round me and informed them that we must embark from Smyrna immediately. I managed to get on board the steamship *Bavarian* which did not leave Smyrna harbour until Thursday evening, the 14<sup>th</sup> September, so that I was an eyewitness to one of the most cruel and barbarous scenes which can ever be recorded in history and wherein thousands of people have perished.

The people of Malta, whither we drifted, deserve every credit for their great kindness to every refugee who was lucky enough to land amongst them. It is difficult to know how we can thank them enough when the time comes for our departure.

William Smith Rea, Smyrna  
Fort Manoel Hospital no 9, Malta  
9<sup>th</sup> October 1922

Copy:

Brief account of my experiences in Smyrna, which appeared in *Milling* dated 14 October 1922

Cottonera Hospital, 25<sup>th</sup> May 1923

Major Gatt, RMA

I, William Smith Rea, born at Muckamore County of Antrim (province of Ulster) Ireland, on 4<sup>th</sup> day of April 1882, am now desirous to return to Smyrna, in an endeavour to enter my former employment, and to complete the term of contract, as flour milling expert, for and on behalf of a firm of flour millers who I am sure will be certainly pleased to reinstate me in my former position (as their Technical Manager).

In case I do not succeed to find my former position and property in said flour mill I respectfully request that I may be allowed to leave Smyrna on the first available opportunity.

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<sup>1</sup> Cordelio (Karşıyaka (pronounced [kaɾʃu'jaka]) is a district of İzmir Province in Turkey. The district extends for twelve kilometres along the northern and eastern coastline of the tip of the Gulf of İzmir. Its centre is at a distance of 6 km (4 mi) to the north from the traditional centre of İzmir, which is Konak Square in Konak at the opposite coast.

If this request will be entertained, I will not fail to use best endeavour and abilities to give entire satisfaction to my employers.

William Smith Rea

P.S. The name of my Smyrna employers is:  
Messrs Sefandides and Melacopides,  
Daragatch, Smyrna

*Cottonera 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1923*

Major Gatt, RMA

I appeal to you on behalf of my family present trying circumstances and Mrs Rea's delicate state of health to place my case, together with the enclosed copies before the notice of Lieutenant Governor. You are also at liberty to verify Mrs Rea's made to you yesterday, with regard to my children's clothing, education and several other defaults that could have been arranged by the Smyrna Refugee Committee, who have up to the present been acting as representatives on behalf of our interests in the camp. Take for instance, this small item, and yet trivial complaint against them regarding the four copies of the Daily Malta Chronicle, which are being supplied by the editor free of charge, to this camp now would credit it, that I am not even allowed to read one of these chronicles. Of course it tends to show and add to bitter spite. Which Committee have got against me.

Therefore if you think that they are justified in all their insolent behaviour towards me or that I am other than a loyal British, please arrange my enclosed affairs, with the Lieutenant Governor and have me transferred over to the Ulster Government, this alone, will satisfy the wishes of the said committee and so end the snubs and suffering, which I have been endured at their hands for some months past, Have I not already had my share of suffering and losses during my nine years sojourn in Smyrna.

Mrs. Rea's nervous breakdown in 1916 which lasted for one year and 6 months, during which period she did not recognize either myself or her children. A return of the said illness, under circumstances, I how dread and am at present engaged during my utmost to ward off, as Dr Busutil can certify.

My having been engaged on contract in Smyrna, will convince you that I was no loafer or imposter out there, and if necessary I can furnish you with letter of reference from Messrs Thomas Robinson & Sons Ltd Rockdale England. On the other hand, Mr. L. Morris American Consul General in Salonica Greece can furnish you with all particulars and records, regarding my behaviour and sufferings at Smyrna at Smyrna 1914,1918,

I hereby respectfully submit to your kind consideration my case trusting that will meet with your due regard for which I thank you in anticipation.

William Smith Rea

P.S. attached copies enclosed with letter were from the committee, and I presume are still in the custody of Major Gatt, RMA

Poste Restante, Malta, 10<sup>th</sup> August 1923

The Under-Secretary of State,  
Foreign Office, London S.W. 1.

I have the honour to request that you may be so good to place before the proper authorities, the attached copies of letters dated the 25<sup>th</sup> May and 20<sup>th</sup> June and addressed to Major Gatt R.M.A., officer in charge Refugee Camp, to which I have not yet had a reply.

Now my letter dated the 25<sup>th</sup> May as you will see is an application to return to Smyrna. Whilst the second letter dated the 20<sup>th</sup> June is an appeal to rectify the treatment which I have been subject to in the hands of the British Refugee Committee here, said letter having been accompanied by other letters which I had received from the said committee. I would beg to inform you that my birth right as an Ulster man has been the cause of all bitterness against me by the said committee, for on several occasions they have shown their feelings by using such language as Irish dogs, got no right to be in the Refugee camp here, got an Irish Government now whom I must appeal; to etc. Now I fail to understand why the Committee have made any exception whatever, in respect of equality where each and every Refugee is concerned, this in their various distributions, when I have been completely ignored, treated beneath other outsiders, not as a fellow sufferer and Refugee. In bringing this matter before your knowledge I would beg of you to thoroughly consider my present trying circumstances, as I have got very good reason to believe that any request or appeal which I may make to the authorities here, will be left as before unacknowledged. Allow me at least to have the

honour and satisfaction of knowing that I have a Government to assist me in overcoming this catastrophe which has befallen me. And that through no fault of my own. Therefore, I now submit to your kind consideration my case, trusting that it will meet with your due regard for which I thank you in anticipation.

William Smith Rea

#### **REPORT BY THE LATE COMMANDANT OF COTTONERA REFUGEE CAMP**

When the general funds were distributed by the Camp Committee, among refugees, in accordance with the telegraphic instructions from London, the Rea family (husband, wife and 3 children) received £4 per head. This sum of money, I was informed, went mostly for drink.

The Committee later received from London about £40 for of refugee children. This amount was expanded on general schooling, no children being treated individually. Mr Rea, rather than have the children taught free at the Camp school at the Nuns at Cospicua, and expected the Committee to defray expenses. The refusal of the Committee to meet the fees reused Mr Rea's anger and caused him to bombard both officials and Committee with a bulky correspondence which has formed the subject of this file.

The complaints made by Mr Rea have been investigated several times and found groundless.

I consider that both Mr and Mrs Rea are under a mania of persecution; certainly their state of mind is not in proper order so much so that I had them several times before the Medical Officer, who since inception of the Refugee Camp at Cottonera, has been attending both husband and wife for a nervous breakdown.

W.R. Gatt, Major R.M.A.  
C/C Cottonera  
12<sup>th</sup> September 1923

#### **REPORT BY THE PRESENT COMMANDANT OF COTTONERA REFUGEE CAMP**

I have been into this case and had new sufficient time to make myself acquainted with Mr and Mrs Rea and am prepared to endorse what Major Gatt said in his report of the 12<sup>th</sup> instant.. Mrs Rea is neurasthenic and very bad tempered and full of imaginary complaints. Mr Rea is of better health and temperament, but such too ready to take up Mrs Rea's groundless grievances.

Capt. J. Salomone, C/C Cottonera  
26<sup>th</sup> September 1923

Cottonera Hospital, 5<sup>th</sup> November 1923

H.E. Lord Plumer,

I respectfully beg to bring to your knowledge that an extract from your circular addressed to your Lordship by His Grace the Duke of Devonshire concerning a complaint advanced by me against the Smyrna Refugee Committee, was read to me by the office in charge Refugee Camp.

Now without wishing to inconvenience your Lordship, I hereby confirm my previous, segment without retracting a single word of it, I respectfully submit my case to be taken in due consideration and an impartial inquest be held to redress the wrongs instituted to me. This will not only repair the offence to my *amour propre* but will also its nude truth the incorrect behaviour of the Committee.

Having full confidence in the sense of justice which prompts your Lordship I have not the least doubt but my wrongs will be redeemed.

William Smith Rea