

Album of Gustave Martin, POW in Ceylon

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Abstract

Gustave Martin, from Normandy, aged 20 years at the outbreak of the war, was one of some 20 French POW's detained at Diyatalawa and the Ragama camps in Ceylon. He left a diary in the form of an "album" which has been found only a few years ago. This is a vivid account of miseries, small joys and long waits with many interesting photographs, most of them unknown or little known of yet so far. Thorough research made it possible to trace and reconstruct Gustave's life before and after, as a POW. Translation from French is provided by large extracts.

Paper / notes

Among some 300 French volunteers who fought on the Boer side, a few were shipped as prisoners to St Helena and a few others to Ceylon (Sri Lanka). A scrapbook by a French prisoner of war in Ceylon recently came to light. It is worth relating how historians became acquainted with this novel piece of Boer war history. However, we only know the last part of the story: the album had been bought a few years ago as a collector's item from an auctioneer outside South Africa. And the collector who bought it was Arnold Van Dyk. What is the album like? It appears simply as a book bound in red leather, in excellent condition. It is not a diary nor is it an autobiography. It is more of a scrapbook, a collection of documents relating to events which occurred at a specific time and at a specific place.

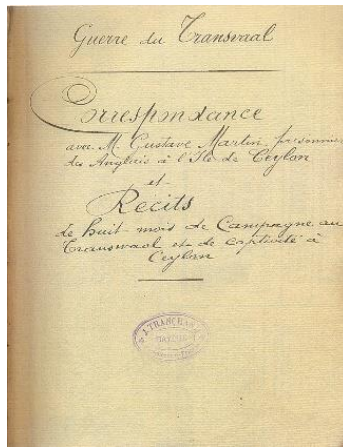
The prisoner and his correspondent

On the leather spine appear the words: "Correspondence of a Boer prisoner in Ceylon". And below "J. Tranchand. Appraiser." Correspondence received was put together and bound as a book, which was the private possession of a proud M. Tranchand, living at 26 Rue St Martin in Bayeux, Normandy.

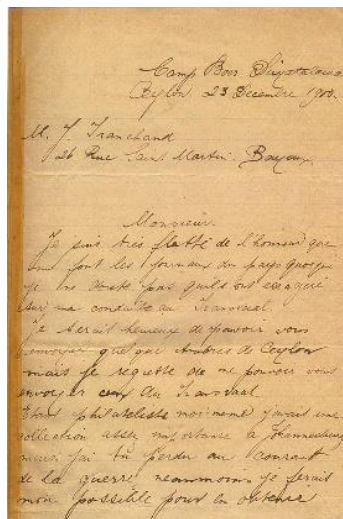
The first introductory page is as follows:

"Transvaal war: Correspondence with M. Gustave Martin, a prisoner of the English on the island of Ceylon. And a narrative of a 8 month campaign in the Transvaal and of captivity in Ceylon"

(This is not wholly true as there is no narrative of the campaign, but only of captivity in Ceylon) (**view 1**)



... 100 pages of correspondence then follow (**view 2**) and philatelic covers



... plus thirty odd photographs, (**view 3**), various ephemera, all related to the prisoners of war in Ceylon. Particularly notable is a press cutting dating to after Martin's stay in Ceylon which gives an overview of his actions in the Transvaal (**note 1**)



The first letter is dated 23 December 1900 and the last 13 June 1902.

The way the scrapbook started is explained from the first page (**view 2**): the writer is a philatelist as is his correspondent in France and both exchange stamps, covers and postcards (**view 3**). He is French POW Gustave Martin, detained in Ceylon, and there is no doubt that the correspondent, M. J. Tranchand, an appraiser in Bayeux, started the exchange by asking his young compatriot to send him exotic and valuable items.

On Martin's side, the terms of the exchange were multiple: apart from "used covers", which he did collect, it was also about keeping the dullness of life at bay by entertaining ties. "It is very kind to be thinking of a poor exile", he says, about receiving local French newspapers in the Bayeux area, about exchanging views, asking questions about politics in France (a subject that he is mostly ignorant of but on which he holds opinions).

Two thirds of the contents of the writing are about philately, the remaining third is left to polite and friendly exchanges and also to descriptions which are important to us.

Fortunately for us, M. Tranchand insisted on answers about daily life in the camp though young Martin repeats that life is uninteresting there.

Unfortunately for us, some items sent by Martin are not part of the book: a good example is "Documents taken by myself from the display board where dispatches are displayed. In a dispatch dated 31 May, Kitchener says that documents for surrender had been signed by the Boer delegates, Milner and himself. 2 June 1902. Signed: A.C. Allnutt, officer in charge of the prisoners of war at the Ragama's camp". He adds: "This piece of paper is unique."

First and last letters

The first letter reads:

"Boer camp. Diyatalawa

Ceylon. 23/12/1900

To M. J. Tranchand

26 Rue St Martin, Bayeux

Sir,

I am very moved by the honor made to me by the French press though I have no doubt that they have expressed exaggeration concerning my conduct in the Transvaal.

I would be happy to be able to send you few stamps from Ceylon but I do regret that I cannot send those of the Transvaal.

Being a philatelist myself, I had a rather important collection in Johannesburg but I lost it during the war. I shall try everything possible to get other stamps from other Boer prisoners. I will hand them to you on my arrival at Bayeux, which is safer than sending them by post.

I thank you for your invitation which I accept with great pleasure.

Would you be so kind as to send me two issues of the periodical from Bayeux? I have left the country so long ago that I cannot remember its title...”.

Eighteen months after Martin sent the first letter, he wrote, knowingly, his last letter, which reads:

“How long time seems since the peace had been signed (..) I will bring you some of the works made by the Boers such as newspaper cuttings (..) I will send a wire from to my uncle with whom I shall pay you my first visit. Looking forward to that moment “my dear friend.” (in English.

Whereabouts of Martin

Who was that young Martin?



Looking at the photograph of the French in captivity in Ceylon (**view 4**), taken by a French journalist no later than 1901 (**note 2**) we number a group of 13 all identified by Martin. Martin is no. 10, a gentle looking, rather thin young man. Two of the men in the middle row are looking sideways: they are de Loth (left) (**note 3**) and Courcenay

(middle) (**note 4**), both aristocrats feeling that the joke had lasted long enough... Please note that the ones in the front are gently handling little monkeys, which certainly gives them amusement and relief during a very long wait for release. Charles Macler is even smiling at us.

Martin was not an ordinary Frenchman, as he was very anglicized, otherwise carrying around with him a good sense of humour and a huge curiosity and enthusiasm for life, which undoubtedly helped him through the ordeals of his life.

Martin (Pierre Paul Gustave) was born at Saint Paul-du-Vernay, near Lisieux, Calvados, on 02 May 1879 and died at Sèvres, near Paris, on 31 December 1957.

He was born in the heart of Normandy and proud of his origins.

He did not spend long in his birthplace though, as his father was a wine merchant in Paris, in the popular rue du Faubourg in Montmartre.

We happen to know that his mother was staying in London in 1899. Was she only visiting or making a living in the British capital? We suspect that all the Martin family had left France for England rather early, as Gustave insists in his letters that he is not familiar with contemporary France. We suppose that the family left Paris for London when Gustave was still a teenager or even a child.

Whatever the date of departure, we certainly know that he had worked in London as a very young man and that he spoke English better than French.

What proves it, is that upon his capture in July 1900, the British military did not take seriously in the first place his alleged French citizenship, which is the reason why he had to make a plea before the French consul, asking for protection.

A proven fact is that he came to Johannesburg before the war, where he was “employé de commerce”, working in trade.

“Employé de commerce”? Not only that, as, if we give credence to a French source reproducing his own declarations (**note 1**), he also served as interpreter to the Secretary of State.

Because he had left France with undue haste and without preparation, he neglected to warn the military authorities of his departure and had hence been declared “absent”

in 1899, the year he turned 20, as like all young Frenchmen he was liable for a period of national service in the military.

During the war, he chose the side of the Boers: on his own admission, he had been a member of the Trichardt commando, also of the Irish brigade under Colonel Blake. He was present at the siege of Ladysmith, helping to manoeuvre the Creusot gun and at the battle of Colenso too where, with a few other volunteers, he captured and killed Colonel Bull, of the Devonshire Regiment; all those glorious actions being recorded in the "Journal de Rouen." (**note 1**).

He was taken prisoner at the Johannesburg fort on 24 July 1900 with six other French volunteers, and this is supported by French archival sources.

With his companions, and others, he had been shipped to Ceylon, first to the Diyatalawa camp then to Ragama, to camp no. 3 (hut no. 14).

Back in France, he is immediately after his return, towards September 1902, incorporated into the 39th Infantry regiment until September 1903.

We lose track of him until 1917 when, towards the end of the Great War, he is arrested at the French harbour of Le Havre and declared unruly ("insoumis").

After regularisation of his military situation, he settles in Sèvres, a picturesque village outside Paris, halfway to Versailles, where he works in a factory as a supervisor (this, attested to in 1928), where he marries, has a son at age 48, loses his wife the next year, remarries at age 66 to a nurse ten years his junior, who survives him.

His days of adventure were long gone.

He died aged 78 years, after 38 years of a stable and quiet domestic & professional life.

Gustave was born to Désiré Gustave (born 1854, deceased before 1900) and of Césarine Derruau (born in 1857).

He marries first Antonietta Ferrarin, an Italian (born 3 October 1887, deceased in Sèvres 30 November 1928) and then on 7 June 1945 Antonia Louise Fauconier (born in Lille 25 January 1890, deceased after 1969).

He left at least one son, Pierre Maurice, born in 1927, who was in apprenticeship in 1946.

At Sèvres, he resided at 13 rue des Bruyères then 50 pavé des Gardes (in 1919 onwards till 1927. From 1946 until his death, in rue du Docteur Roux (**note 5**).

On censorship and flowers

“I had noticed that your censorship had been even stricter than the English practice. Believe me, it is not necessary to edit the diary, if by any chance some sentences would not please those gentlemen, I assure you that, without doubt, they will make them disappear.”

The tone of the exchanges is factual and lively, as in that of another letter dated 4th April 1901.

“I have just received your letter together with the dried flowers and I am very grateful to you.

I sent you a letter yesterday asking you if you had received the envelope with the stamps. In your letter received today, I note that they have arrived safely.

Unhappily, negotiations have not been successful so far and I can see ourselves still living here in a year's time....”

Specifically, on stamps

Martin was indeed a collector.

“I do regret that I am not able to send you stamps as I collect only censored covers, as I just got 4 or 5 I make haste to send them to you together with 3 envelopes.

“In this envelope you will find several other stamps; if it is impossible to get a safe conduct on parole to visit Colombo then I shall not be able to get the stamps that you so wish. Nevertheless, I shall write and do what is possible to get them. I shall write to Singapore for the Straights stamp and also to various places in India. In my next letter I will render an account of those attempts and if I have stamps, I shall send them to you.

(..) Should you send me non-used French stamps of little value i.e. 2 or 4 cents, I could exchange them, as the new French stamps are sought after, plus some of those new “soldier” stamps that I would exchange only for the rarest”.

Life in the camp

Despite his dismissals – “You ask some details about our life here. This is of no great interest” - all Martin's observations are of value for the knowledge of daily life at the camp.

“Most of the foreigners, called “uitlanders”, arrived here last September, we have been dispatched to Diyatalawa which is situated nearly at the center of the island.

“In January (1901) we were about 3.000, Boers included. The governor had considered it wise to separate foreigners from Boers, in fear that we would incite the Boers to revolt. So they have sent us to Ragama which is a distance of 9 miles from Colombo. But do not imagine that escaping would be easy just because we are near the coast. It was much easier from Diyatalawa. Here we are, so to speak, in an island within an island; furthermore, to guard those 300 prisoners, they are more than 400 soldiers, with a Maxim on hand”.

“The camp is surrounded with 6 rows of barbed wire then a big rope crossed by electric wires which at first contact with a body, if heavy, sends an alert to Headquarters. In addition, every ten minutes you see a sentinel passing, armed with a bayonet. So you see that we are well guarded. Our dear neighbours have no intention to release us easily”. See the “fence of barbed wire around the prisoner’s camp. An English sentinel, (view 5) ...”



First call and after: chores, hygiene, leisure

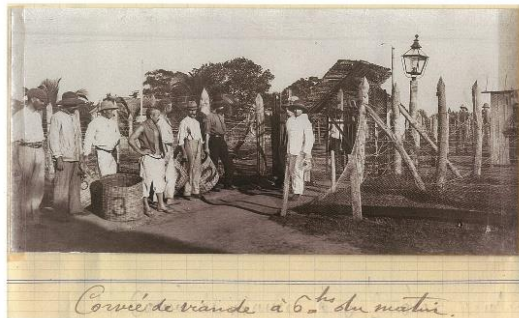
“The first call is made at 6. Breakfast at 7. At 6.30 three men go and fetch the daily rations, which consist of: one pound of bread; a few potatoes, one quarter pound of meat, as tough as leather; sugar; tea; milk; rice.”



Cette photo représente l'intérieur d'une Bute ;
 Au moment où la photo fut prise nous avions
 encore un plancher de bois, plus tard on a
 cimenté sur le sol : ce n'est pas si humide.
 Il y a 25 lits pliants de chaque côté.
 Les caisses qui sont suspendues aux traverses
 en fer qui supportent la couverture, qui sont
 des collections de papillons faites
 lors de notre séjour au Camp de
 Dijatalawa.

Look at **view 6** : "This is the inside of a hut. When the photograph was taken, the floor was of wood. Since then it has been covered with concrete as it is wet, there are 25 folding beds" Each prisoner takes a day, in turn, to clean the dining hall.

Some do some chores, as "meat", at 6 in the morning (**view 7**)

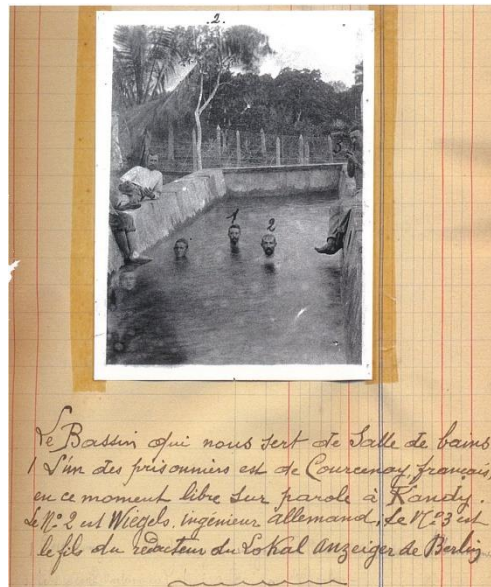


Corvée de viande à 6^h du matin.



Savalo et feuillots (N. 100)

As far as hygiene is concerned: toilets are outside and men made use of a dry toilet (**view 8**) while “the water tank we use as bathroom. You may notice Courcenay, one of the French prisoners, actually on parole at Kandy. The 2 others are Germans, one is engineer Wiegels” (**view 9**).



Just after breakfast, all go to their activities, such as French tuition, English tuition, German, Spanish, Greek, Latin even Arab. Some others paint, I assure you that Ragama talents are not to be looked down on. We have here a great mathematician who gives lessons in arithmetic. A choral society has been created by Germans. But most spend time lying down on their beds and smoking their pipes, thinking of the past and of all the creatures dear to their hearts and who are far away.

Myself I am busy now learning Spanish and improving my German, learnt during 2 years when in London. Should I have found a Frenchman who had some time to waste, I would have asked him to teach me French but as they all have some occupation, I am obliged to be backwards with my maternal language, as I speak English much better than French.

At Diyatalawa: “Next to our hut is the garden of Weiss (**note 6**), an Alsatian who has been repatriated. It was a true chef d’oeuvre and I have no doubt that many a gardener would have been consumed with envy at the sight of that lovely little garden bed created by our compatriot,”

Note that in Diyatalawa, some had collected butterflies, carefully put in boxes and kept in Ragama.

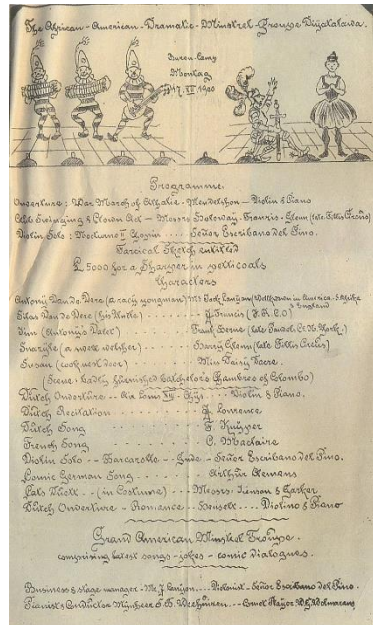
Distractions and the outside world

Prisoners were certainly not entirely isolated. Newspapers were a sought of distraction:

“I took time to write as I was still hoping to get news from you together with the newspapers that you sent, but seeing nothing coming, I could no longer delay my

thanks for the newspapers. I am most grateful for your sending them and they have given a kind of merriness to many a sad hour and charmed also my compatriot prisoners here with me, to whom I passed them on, after reading them.“

They also attended plays and tragedies, boxing “carnivals”, showing great fancy and talent (view 10)



A sad occasional activity was assistance to funerals (death toll is 167 for Ceylon, source Rodney Constantine, 2019)

And there were the visits:

- the French consular agent in Colombo: “we are lucky as the consular agent at Colombo is a very kind person and he regularly sends us *Le Petit Marseillais* and *Le Journal*. From time to time we receive tobacco, either from the Dutch Indies or from the *L’Union des Dames de France* (“French ladies Union”), of Nîmes. We have heard that the French consul has received 4 boxes of *Quinquina Dubonnet* (a beverage) for us, you can imagine how we will welcome it, as we have been drinking tea for over a year (7 March 1902).
- “No change in our sad position, on Sunday we had the visit of the French consul, a very good man, I assure you, he thinks we will stay here for another year (Ragama, 10 April 1901).
- A missionary whose visit is awaited “impatiently” (10 April 1901)
- Maritime passengers and staff : “I await impatiently the return of the *maître d’hôtel* on board the “*Dupleix*” plus, with him, the stamps that I have asked from him” (10 April 1901)

- *Having received a visit from a French person who works on board Messageries Maritimes (MM company) on the service between Calcutta and Colombo, "he has promised to bring me Indian stamps next time." (21 June 1901)*

Whatever had been the motivations of those French men to join the Boers in their fight against the English, be it a spirit of adventure, desire for revenge after a humiliating defeat at Fachoda (Eng.: Fashoda, September 1898), or a way to escape personal difficulties, the punishment had been hard on some.

Not so much for an alert and active Gustave Martin and a few others.

As from what he transmitted with some panache to posterity it is understood that monotony and weariness were the main punishments that had been imposed on foreign prisoners of war.

Notes

Note 1. Francis Marcel Lamy "Un volontaire normand au Transvaal" published in *Le journal de Rouen*, circa October 1902

Note 2. Gribayedov, "The prisoner camps in Ceylon" in *Armée et Marine*, 1901

Note 3. De Loth: Jean de Loth, member of the Galopaud commando.

Note 4. Courcenay: Edmond de Courcenay, present at Thaba Nchu, 30 April 1900.

Note 5. References for G. Martin:

Births St Paul du Vernay 1879/no. 11.

Marriages Sèvres 1945 no. 39.

Deaths Sèvres 1928/no. 183 (his first wife) and 1957/no.190.

Census Sèvres 1911, 1921, 1936, 1946.

Military file: AD Calvados. R 7028, folio 471.

Note 6. Weiss: Albert Weiss, of the Villebois Mareuil commando.