

# GOULASH CANNONS AND SOYER COOKERS

## THE COOKS AND THE KITCHEN

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On a Saturday morning at the end of April, a year after my visit to Brasserie-Restaurant-Party Venue De Volksbond, it seems as though war has broken out in the village of Zonnebeke. The entrance to the local chateau grounds has been blocked off by barbed wire. To the right of that are a few tents and a group of men dressed in Dutch First World War uniforms. Passing a provisional barrier, I see a group of British soldiers led by a sergeant marching – *left, right, left, right* – towards the chateau. To my right, German men are digging a trench. A little further along are two encampments with French, Russian and Australian troops wandering around. Two mounted officers make their way slowly along the shingle path meandering through the chateau grounds.

More than a hundred men and women are spending the weekend re-enacting the First World War. ‘Re-enacting’ sounds a little unfortunate, considering the seriousness with which it is being carried out. To some visitors it may seem like a First World War version of *Dad’s Army*. But these men and women are more than hobbyists; they are experts who know from memory entire detailed histories about the regiments whose members they are imitating.

Amongst them is Kristof Blicck, Education Officer of the Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917 and organiser of the museum’s weekend with its ‘big historic evocation’, as it is called in the promotion leaflet. He is wearing the uniform of a Belgian soldier from the war era. Blicck is a large figure clad in khaki, with a brown belt tied around his corpulent stomach and a copper helmet on his head. He has arranged for me to assist the three cooks in their

preparation of the food for the re-enactors. ‘The forgotten heroes,’ Blicck suggests, referring to the cooks in the war. He points at three men in greasy aprons standing in the field kitchen they have set up in the museum grounds. The cooks have started making breakfast: baked beans, white bread, vegetarian sausages for the devotees and Lorne sausage, a kind of mince that has been pressed into slices and is fried in large frying pans.

The field kitchen consists of two rusty Soyer cookers and a blackened oven, attached to which is a baking tin measuring a metre in length. On these, four cauldrons are bubbling. Delicate wisps of smoke spiral out of the cookers’ chimneys. Behind the cooking units stands a white marquee stocked with further cauldrons, tins of baked beans, and bags of potatoes and frozen meat. Kitchen equipment is spread out on to a table, and there are crates with pots of salt, pepper, parsley, packets of tea, matches, metal plates, mugs, soup spoons, whisks and other small items.

The inventory resembles the list of kitchen utensils described in the *Handboek van den kok te Velde (Handbook for the Field Cook)*, written by ‘a commander of a unit’ within the Belgian Army. It is a catalogue of the bare minimum a soldiers’ kitchen should have in wartime in order to prepare a nutritious meal. It includes a decent butcher’s knife (with a 26cm blade), a steel, a tin opener, a butcher’s saw, a skimmer for fried dishes, a nutmeg grater, two meat boards, a coffee filter and a wooden masher.

A special mention on the list – because it was the most important tool for a cook according to the guide – was a mincer. This could be used for all kinds of tasks: grinding coffee, mincing meat ‘for the meatballs and pies’, chopping vegetables and grating cheese for macaroni.

According to the British regulations, the mincers were especially useful for grinding bones into small pieces. These pieces of bone had to be kept in nets marked 1, 2 and 3, so that the cooks could differentiate between the bones from the first, second and third day. All nets had to be stored in a stock pot, and each day the contents of this pot had to simmer for six to eight hours. The dirt that rose to the surface had to be skimmed off as often as possible. The stock pots were indispensable for supplies of stock, soups, stews, meat pies and gravy.