

## **A village and a world at war: sister Joachim (1867-1956) and World War I in Ooigem**

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### **Introduction**

It is not your everyday story: a British sister in a French convent in Ooigem,<sup>1</sup> West-Flanders. My attention was immediately drawn when I stumbled upon letters (1914-1918) in the archives of Chichester, written by Sister Joachim (to the world: Margaret Ann Shippam) and addressed to her family in her hometown. The contents of these letters and their context make a very interesting object for close study. Who was this sister? What family did she descend from? How was a French convent established in Ooigem? How did sister Joachim watch the village and a world at war from the priory<sup>2</sup> in Bavikhove Street? In this contribution I try to answer those questions.

In the collective memory of Ooigem the French convent is still a reasonably familiar spot, although not many details are known about it. Some older residents still remember that two English-speaking sisters lived in the French convent<sup>3</sup>. Locally, we can find some traces of Sister Joachim.

21 adults and 2 children died in Ooigem in the Christian year 1955-1956. One of the adults was the former subprioress, the Very Reverend Mother

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<sup>1</sup> For a historian it is an especially delicate matter to venture into the local history of a village or region that is not his own. I was only confident in undertaking the task because I knew that I would be preserved from pitfalls thanks to many people who supplied me with information: Chris Blondeel from Ooigem, Patrick Demeyer from Lendelede, Guy Seyns from Wielsbeke, Emilienne Vandenbulcke from Ooigem, Christine Vanhoutte from Wielsbeke and Freddy Van Overschelde from Wielsbeke. I am most grateful to them. The responsibility for any errors and shortcomings remains mine. Any additions shall be gratefully received.

I also thank Brian Morgan from Chichester for the genealogical information. I thank especially the County Archivist, West Sussex Record Office, Chichester for giving me permission to quote from the letters of Sister Joachim in this article. I thank my London colleague Keith Grieves for sharing his expertise with me concerning the letters to and from Ernest Shippam.

<sup>2</sup> Although the commonly used reference is to the 'French convent' at Ooigem, the correct term for a community of Benedictines is 'priory'. We will therefore use this term, unless we want to stress the French origin or when we refer to the cloister in a generic sense.

<sup>3</sup> Like sister Joachim, sister Stanislas (1872-1918) was not of French descent. After she passed away, sister Joachim was the only non-French sister in the priory. She found it hard to be the only 'foreigner' and therefore non-French conventual. In 1931 the Irish Nancy Franklin joined her. WSRO, Add. Mss. 14, 478, letter of 10.08.1918; Municipal archives Ooigem, Municipal register.

Joachim<sup>4</sup>. She died on 22 July, 1956 aged 89, 3 months and 14 days. The priest noted this death in his liber Memorialis, adding that sister Joachim had been born in Chichester on 3 March, 1867, had been in the 64th year of her profession at the time of her death and was the last professed sister<sup>5</sup> before the Benedictines of the Blessed Sacrament from Boulogne-sur-Mer sought refuge in Belgium<sup>6</sup>. Sister Joachim therefore probably took her vows in Boulogne-sur-Mer in 1892 at age 25.

Father Romuald (to the world: Louis Van Wesel), and head of the French convent of the Benedictine abbey of Maredsous, and fellow sister Mary Vanden Hende (religious name?) reported the death to the council the following day<sup>7</sup>. In accordance with the traditions of this Benedictine Priory, sister Joachim was buried in the collective grave at the cemetery of Ooigem. To this day her grave is marked by a metal crucifix with the inscription: 'Resting-place of the Venerable Benedictine Sisters'. Photo 1

If we want to know more about sister Joachim, we have to turn to Chichester in Sussex, where she was born and where her family lived and worked.

### **The Shippam family**

The name Shippam is well known in Chichester and beyond. Still today the name is synonymous with 'potted meat' and 'potted fish': meat and fish processed and preserved in various ways. These products are still commonly available in British supermarkets. Being products of a well-known brand and a respectable tradition, they are typically associated with Britain of the 'good old days'.

Little is known about Shipton Shippam (? -1778). We know that his son started a grocery business in Chichester and became very wealthy: he supplied food, mainly cheese, butter and meat to customers from miles around, and also, from the beginning of the Napoleonic period (early

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<sup>4</sup> Private collection Mrs. E. Vandenbulcke, Gedachtenis Ooigem, kerkelijke jaar 1955-1956.

<sup>5</sup> This note by father Deltour is not correct. Sister Saint-Jude (to the world: Jeanne Parsy), born in Dampierre (Somme department, France) on 9 September 1876, took her vows in Boulogne-sur-Mer in 1900, celebrated her golden jubilee in Ooigem in 1950 and died as a prioress (1919-1954) in Ooigem on 17 November 1954. Municipal archives Ooigem, Municipal register; Private collection Mrs. E. Vandenbulcke, Ooigem, Gedachtenissen gouden kloosterjubileum en overlijden van zuster Saint Jude. Sister Stanislas (1872-1918) entered the priory at Boulogne-sur-Mer a few days after sister Joachim. They made their profession together. West Sussex Record Office, Chichester, Add. Mss. 14,478, Letters M. A. Shippam, 1914-1918, letter of 10.03.1918.

<sup>6</sup> Parish archives Ooigem, Memorieboek van deze parochie vanaf 1.2.1950 (father Deltour).

<sup>7</sup> Municipal archives Ooigem, Deatch certificates, 1956, nr. 10. Father Romuald was head of the priory in Ooigem from 1945 to 1961, when he moved to Sint-Andries abbey at Zevenkerken in Sint-Andries near Bruges. He died there on 16 August 2008. In 1947 he published 'Les bénédictines d'Ooigem' in Les Cahiers de Saint-André, Chroniques trimestrielles de l'abbaye et de ses oeuvres, IV, 21 mars 1947, n° 12, pp. 37-44; Private collection Mrs. E. Vandenbulcke, Obituary notice father Romuald.

nineteenth century), to The British fleet, moored in Portsmouth. The grandson of Shipton Shippam set up a butcher's shop at the West Gate in Chichester in 1786. Photo 2

From George Shippam (1793-1863) onwards, Shipton Shippam's grandson, the history of this family of traders in the south of Britain is better documented. Four children were born from the marriage of George to Sarah Ann Cottrell in the church of St. Peter in Chichester in 1827. Besides Louisa (1830 -?, married to Russel Acton and mother of 8 children), Sarah (1832 -?) and Anne (1834-1925) especially Charles (1828-1897) is important to us.

The latter took over the family business in 1851 and to enable further expansion the company moved to East Street in Chichester, near the town ramparts. From his marriage to Caroline Cooper (1840-1915) in 1861 eleven children were born. Because they are occasionally mentioned in the correspondence of Sister Joachim, they are briefly discussed here.

The eldest son was named after his father: Charles Russell Shippam lived from 1862 to 1930 and had two daughters: Edith (1869-1918, married in 1889) and Bessie. Frank Shippam (1864-1953) married Mona Cosens in 1908 and their children were Charles (1909-1991), Margaret (1913 -?) and Frank Norman (1914-1944, deceased and buried in Calvados, France). The third child of the marriage of Charles Shippam and Caroline Cooper was Caroline Louisa (1865-1903), the fourth was Margaret Anne (born March 3, 1867, baptized at St. Pancras Church in Chichester on April 17, 1867, according to the "census" of 1881 living at 47-48 East Street, known as sister Joachim, deceased on July 22, 1956). Fifth in line was George Percival (1869-1958), who married Rose Mant (1871-1950) in 1898; they had one son: Charles Percival Basil (1899-1969). Walter John (1871-1955) married Rebecca Bankhead (1868 -?) in 1902. From this marriage were born: Frances Caroline (1903-1973), Alexandra Louise (1905 -) and Aileen Isabel (1906-1970). The seventh child was Alfred Ernest Cooper Shippam (1874-1947), named Ernest, who married Mary Prior (1876-1970) in 1899. They had two children. Everell Mary (1903-1997) became a well-known gynaecologist thanks to her actions in favour of better hygiene for mother and child, thus remarkably reducing infant death at her hospital. The second child of this marriage was Charles Ernest (1908-1991). The eighth child of Charles and Caroline Cooper was Frederick Arthur Shippam (1876-1961), who was married to Alice Payn (? -1960). He was followed by Cecil (1879-1964) and Winifred (1879-1973). The eleventh and last child was Wilfred (1880-1974), who in 1908 married Alice Phebe Brown. They had one daughter, Margaret Caroline Rayner (1917 -?)<sup>8</sup>.

Although the company was still owned by several members of the Shippam family (brothers first, then cousins), (Alfred) Ernest Cooper Shippam (1874-1947) played a prominent role in its management. After his education at Hurstpierpoint College in 1891, he took up work in the wool trade with

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<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank Brian Morgan from Chichester for these genealogical data.

Prior's of Chichester. He married Mary Prior, daughter of the owner, but gave up his plans to depart for Australia to represent the Prior company and instead was employed in the company of his father. In 1923 he became a general manager until his sudden death in 1947<sup>9</sup>.

### **The business of the Shippam family**

Charles Shippam (1828-1897)<sup>10</sup> managed to expand his business significantly. In 1882 he took his company's products to Chicago (USA), with a view to gaining a commercial foothold across the Atlantic Ocean.

In 1892 he started a factory for "potted meat": the prepared meat was stored in earthen jars, covered with a layer of fat. This clearly benefited storage time, which enabled the Shippam company to send supplies to British troops overseas: the official history of the company claims with some exaggeration that the British troops in the Crimean War (1856) and the South African Boer War (1899-1902) survived on Shippam food. This is not entirely untrue of the British expedition to Antarctica in 1911, however. Also for other British expeditions to countries such as Greenland, Iceland and northern Norway, did Shippam's act as a food supplier. And in the British colonies in Africa and in most British embassies Shippam products were in high demand as well.

In 1896 the company took centre stage in Great Britain by participating in a national exhibition of British products in the Royal Agricultural Hall in London. The company increasingly diversified its produce: wild boar, pheasant and shrimp joined the range. The sauces were so popular that the products of Shippam were for sale all over the country. Charles also showed his entrepreneurial spirit by having a private phone line installed (even before there was a public telephone service) between his company, the slaughterhouse and the station of Chichester.

In 1905 Charles's sons took over the company and introduced a new preservation technique. The meat was now kept in glass jars, sealed with an iron lid. The products could therefore be kept for a longer time in more hygienic circumstances: the company was praised for this in 1906.

Just before the First World War the third Shippam generation headed the firm, which at that time was transformed into a limited company. There were then no less than 26 kinds of 'potted meat' and 'potted fish' on the market. The company was also granted a Royal Warrant.

'Shippam's' developed into a true family business, from the management down to the shop floor. Children of employees were given priority when new

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<sup>9</sup> Anne Pimlott Baker, *Shippam, Alfred Ernest Cooper (1874–1947)*, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition, first published May 2005, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/101048184>.

<sup>10</sup> *C. Shippam Ltd. Chichester in Sussex. Founded 1750*. Chichester, Shippam, s.d., 21 p.; *C. Shippam Ltd., founded 1750 at Chichester in Sussex*. Chichester, Shippam, 1956, 24 p.

staff was recruited and employees would always stay for a long time, usually for their entire career.

The workers who had enlisted in the British Army and fought in the French trenches during the First World War maintained a correspondence with members of the Shippam family. This was definitely not unique to the company. But what is remarkable is that (Alfred) Ernest did not only preserve the letters, annotated them and sent a reply. He also made a note of which gift and/or possibly sum of money was sent to the front and he regularly intervened with the military officers on behalf of voluntary or drafted soldier-employees.

The paternalistic position of (Alfred) Ernest Shippam towards 'his' employees was not that beneficial for their morale at the front, especially because in his reply he guaranteed them that after the war they could return to their job at Shippam's. This sentence from one of the letters of such a worker speaks volumes to the effect: "There are times when we would all prefer the factory life"; it has long been used as a model in the company. On the other hand (Alfred) Ernest Shippam considered it the normal course of events that 'his' men were sent to the front to serve 'his' country: with 'his' soldiers he shared the pride to be able to serve their native country, but also the hope that life in the trenches would soon be brought to an end<sup>11</sup>.

Immediately after the First World War the Shippams introduced a number of social measures. In 1921 an employee bonus system was introduced; in 1927 a clubhouse for the entertainment of staff and retired employees was created; in 1928 profit sharing for employees was introduced as a standard part of company policy and in 1939 a private pension fund and health insurance was established (picture 3). Medical consultations and X-raying were made available on a regular basis and if they needed to discuss any personal problems, employees could always turn to any member of the board of directors. Shippam had become such a household name that, when a scandal erupted over the hygiene of preserved food - in 1924, not involving Shippam's, however - Queen Mary visited the company in Chichester in order to demonstrate that the Shippams did observe strict hygienic circumstances, and to prevent the company from being dragged down by the consequences of negative publicity. In 1934 the company started systematic publicity campaigns: various, at times moving, publicity films have been preserved<sup>12</sup>. (picture 4)

During World War II the company switched to female employees to replace the male workers who were mobilized. In 1955 the company completed its long-awaited substantial expansion, which was celebrated with a

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<sup>11</sup> Keith Grieves, *'There are times when we would all prefer the factory live': letters from the trenches to the Shippam Works in Chichester during the First World War*, Family and Community History, VI, 2003, 1, pp. 59-70.

<sup>12</sup> They can be accessed through the website of the Archive South East of the University of Brighton: [www.sasesearch.brighton.ac.uk](http://www.sasesearch.brighton.ac.uk).

housewarming party for all staff and their families. In 1960 'Cooking for Pleasure' appeared: a cookery book sponsored by Shippam's 'for housewives everywhere'. Eventually the company followed the global trend of expansion on an ever larger scale: in 1974 it came into the hands of the U.S. company William Underwood (Boston, USA) and in 1997 it joined the Princess Foods Manufacturing Group, which it is still part of today. The company also moved over the years: it remained in Chichester, but left East Street where it was located for well over two hundred years. Only the façade was kept of the old, original building: the building itself was converted to modern lofts. During the excavation works and reconstruction, Roman gold coins were exhumed: Chichester and Shippam's thus drew international attention.

### **A French convent in Ooigem**

In the early twentieth century a sharp conflict between Church and State raged in France. This conflict was finally won by the secular government. The Waldeck-Rousseau government made the continued existence of monasteries and convents subject to approval by the government. In 1902 the government began a campaign in which many monasteries were abolished. After the adoption of a law in July 1904, under the Combes government, the conventual orders were no longer able to continue their involvement in education. The successive, increasingly stringent measures made many conventuals decide to err on the side of caution and choose to move to safer places<sup>13</sup>.

Quite some conventuals from the north of France saw a suitable refuge in the nearby diocese of Bruges, which had a very Catholic reputation. The Catholic clergy and prominent citizens and noblemen helped the refugees in their search for a suitable place, often provided by rich benefactors. The Bruges Bishop Waffelaert initially welcomed this aid. Still, it was not easy for him to grasp the scale of the exodus: some orders requested permission to settle in the diocese of Bruges before they began their exodus, others took this administrative step only after having settled in some West Flemish municipality. Pretty soon the bishop realized that there were also negative sides to his hospitality. He decided therefore that the French orders could bring their French students to West Flanders, but they would not be allowed to have Belgian pupils in their classes too. They also had to demonstrate that they were financially independent: as a result, French conventuals could not enter the convent of their Belgian congregation, they could not make collections nor organize public chapels. The bishop's reserved attitude also resulted from his fear of anti-clerical reactions (especially in the south of his diocese socialist ideas had penetrated) and of the response of the French government. The latter worried the Belgian government in particular: they

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<sup>13</sup> Recent studies that treat this issue thoroughly and profoundly are: Patrick Cabanel, Le grand exil des congrégations religieuses françaises 1901-1904, Paris, Cerf, 2005; Patrick Cabanel; Lettres d'exil, 1901-1906. Les congrégations françaises dans le monde après les lois laïques de 1901 et 1904, Anthologie de textes missionnaires, Brepols, 2008, 500 p.

asked the episcopate in 1903 not to allow any more new orders to leave France. Over the preceding months at least 150 religious orders of French origin had established themselves in the diocese of Bruges. Hence the bishop, who referred to "l'invasion noire" when talking about French religious orders in his diocese, urged them to exercise restraint and asked them not to get actively involved in local life.

From 1905 on, the worst of the anti-clerical measures was over in France, but most orders who returned to their place of origin, did so only after the First World War. Other orders remained in Belgium: they had somehow settled in, felt good at the place where they had been taken care of, had acquired a certain livelihood and moreover they had also admitted Belgian conventuals<sup>14</sup>.

The Benedictines of the Blessed Sacrament received permission to establish themselves in Ooigem on 25 February 1904, in a house made available by a benefactor. Originally they came from Boulogne-sur-Mer<sup>15</sup>. They had been there only since 1885 and had been active as educators earlier in Arras, St Omer and Longuenesse. Bearing in mind the wish of the Bishop of Bruges, the Benedictines may first have asked permission before settling in Ooigem. They are actually only registered in the municipal register of Ooigem in 1904. They also took to heart the bishop's request to keep their distance from local life. Although the Benedictines were present in Ooigem for more than half a century, they remained a somewhat isolated island in the local community. From May 1905 the sisters could start their perpetual adoration in Ooigem. Step by step they built the Priory: in the beginning they were located in one house, but soon they could also use the adjacent house and add buildings on the corresponding plot (including a chapel in 1912-1913).

Although their building in Boulogne-sur-Mer was seized by the government to be used initially as an ammunition depot for the navy before being turned into a museum later, not all sisters left Boulogne-sur-Mer to move to Ooigem. Quite a number of sisters remained in Boulogne-sur-Mer in 1920 (22 in 1910 and 24 in 1920). In addition, a number of them left for Oñate in Spain in 1904<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Koen Rotsaert, *Franse kloosterlingen op de vlucht in West-Vlaanderen*, Biekorf, C, 2000, pp. 19-26; Koen Rotsaert, *De zwarte invasie*, Biekorf, CI, 2001, pp. 17-24; Lucien Van Acker, *Franse kloosterzusters in Koolskamp en Ardoeie*, Biekorf, CI, 2001, pp. 24-27; Koen Rotsaert, *Twee Franse kloosters in de Brugse rand*, Biekorf, CIII, 2003, pp. 66-77; Koen Rotsaert, *Vluchthuis van de 'Soeurs de la Providence de Rouen' te Brugge (1911-1932)*, Biekorf, CIII, 2003, pp. 156-163.

<sup>15</sup> José Tack, *De benedictinessen van het Heilig Sacrament te Ooigem*, Leiesprokkels, Jaarboek 2005-2006, pp. 319-323.

<sup>16</sup> Sister Ann Kessler, Benedictine Men and Women of Courage: Roots and History. Yankton, Sacred Heart Convent, 1996, pp. 382, 391 en 396.

The number of sisters living in Ooigem evolved slightly in the course of the twentieth century. The exact number of sisters who came to Ooigem from Boulogne-sur-Mer in 1904 is not known<sup>17</sup>. Currently we can only confirm the presence of twelve sisters. Also for the years after 1904, our information is still not absolutely final. For 1920, for example, we can be certain of ten names only, for 1940 of three (though it is quite possible that Emilienne Vandenbulcke is correct in saying that there were thirty-eight sisters in 1939) and for 1961, the year when the order left Ooigem, we do not know the exact number of sisters either. The appendix lists all names in alphabetical order, with the data available so far. By putting together various sources, we arrive at a provisional total of 46 sisters who lived in the priory of Ooigem for shorter or longer periods in the course of over half a century.

During the First World War, the sisters had difficulty keeping up their number of pupils and thus maintaining their revenues. For a living, they tried to raise the number of pupils, however: their number varied between 20 and 50. Pupils from France found it increasingly difficult to obtain a passport that enabled them to travel to Ooigem and some who stayed in the priory for a longer period, could not afford the costs associated with boarding<sup>18</sup>.

After the First World War, when the stay in Belgium seemed 'final', the boarding school for girls was further expanded at the priory of Ooigem<sup>19</sup>. The other, more traditional monastic occupations were also maintained and contributed to the revenue of the sisters.

At the beginning of the Second World War, the sisters had to leave their priory: the events known as the Battle of the Lys made the situation too dangerous. Indeed Ooigem was bombed and strafed. The sisters went first to Tielt and traveled from there to Loppem, where they found a temporary shelter with various other orders. Back in Ooigem the order tried to keep up the number of sisters by 'promoting' the priory with family and friends: located in a very Catholic region, near the French border, using French as the language of communication ... The mayor of Ooigem pointed this out to the Ministry of Justice in Brussels in 1942 to explain why young French girls sometimes asked to be entered in the Foreign Register at Ooigem<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Sister Ann Kessler, *idem*, p. 396.

<sup>18</sup> Lucien Delange, *Ooigem tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog. Een merkwaardig tijdsdocument, Leiesprokkels*, III, 1985, 4, pp. 169-170 (report on Ooigem during the First World War by curate Van Ryckeghem).

<sup>19</sup> Emilienne Vandenbulcke, *Op het internaat in het Frans klooster, Leiesprokkels*, Jaarboek 2005-2006, pp. 324-327.

<sup>20</sup> Municipal archives Ooigem, *Foreign Register*.



From 1943, the aforementioned and recently deceased Dom Romuald became head of the priory. He was the successor of Dom Henri Mariage, who – also as a conventual of the Abbey of Maredsous - was chaplain in Ooigem from 1937 to 1943<sup>21</sup>.

In the months immediately after the Second World War, the sisters received children from Central Europe at regular intervals, offering them lodgings for periods of five to six months. They had suffered from the war to the extent of showing signs of malnutrition and were able to recover while staying with the sisters. Perhaps these actions were not alien to Western efforts to convince as many people as possible of the benefits of the West and keep them out of the hands of communism in doing so<sup>22</sup>.

From the fifties of the twentieth century onwards, conventual life started to become 'anaemic' to some degree, even among the Benedictines. At a meeting in Rome (29 March-4 April, 1954) it was decided that all convents of nuns should unite in federations<sup>23</sup>. The Benedictines of the Blessed Sacrament of Belgium and the Netherlands merged into one federation that same year. Because this merger involved only one priory in Belgium and five in the Netherlands, it was clear that the Dutch sisters actually took over the running of the order. The successor of Mother Saint Jude (to the world: Jeanne Marie Parsy), the prioress who died in 1954, was the Dutch sister Marie-Madeleine. Together with Sister Benedicta she had come to Ooigem a bit earlier and had been appointed subprioress. Sister Benedicta became mistress of novices. It seems obvious that both Dutch sisters were part of the group of six Dutch sisters who settled in those years in Ooigem: Henrica Adelmeyer (1958), Petronella Gomes (1954), Hermina Hevink (1958), Catharina Hulselmans (1955), Joanna Kusters (1956), Petronella Schrauwen (1955). The aim of this sudden growth in the number of Dutch sisters was very clear: to the municipal authorities they declared that they were directed by the higher clergy of their order in Breda to reform the monastic community in Ooigem, to provide training for the members, to rejuvenate the order and to create a new spirit. They saw their mission as temporary, "but of indefinite duration"<sup>24</sup>.

The priory was also increasingly facing difficulties, both in terms of its infrastructure and financially. The original building was dilapidated and in 1946 had to be replaced by a new convent, the community faced debt, resulting from the School Pact (1958), as the Belgian government no longer recognized French diplomas. The boarding school was therefore obliged to close its doors. The sisters lived from that time onwards on the manufacture

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<sup>21</sup> Emilienne Vandenbulcke, *idem*, pp. 324-327.

<sup>22</sup> Municipal archives, Ooigem, *Foreign Register*.

<sup>23</sup> Benedictine Sisters, *De zusters uit het Frans klooster doen hun verhaal*, *Leiesprokkels*, 2006, pp. XXXXX

<sup>24</sup> Municipal archives, Ooigem, *Foreign Register*; José Tack, *idem*, p. 322.

and sale of candles, shoe polish and wax. They must have decided fairly quickly then that a move to a new location, in this case Rumbeke, would make it easier to implement the reforms agreed in 1954. In 1957 Joseph Camerlynck donated some land in Rumbeke that he himself had been able to buy from the Count of Limburg-Stirum. Other benefactors made it possible to start with the construction of a new convent in Rumbeke in 1960. In October 1961 the sisters went to Rumbeke (though formally they were only deregistered from the town of Ooigem in December 1961). The Sisters of the Immaculate Conception took their place and remained in Ooigem until 1993. The convent building was subsequently replaced by a modern block of flats.

The remaining Benedictines of the Blessed Sacrament stayed in Rumbeke until 2004. Then they moved into a renovated house in Ledegem.

So Sister Joachim was a conventual in Boulogne-sur-Mer for twelve years (1892-1904) before she and her fellow sisters moved to Ooigem (1904-1956). She spent 52 years in the West-Flemish town. Her work at the French convent in Ooigem was typical of the traditional occupations of a conventual. She essentially carried out embroidery work for nonresidents. She also taught English classes to boarders in the priory for about an hour and a half each day. These interns were mostly children of northern French nobility. Gradually - before the First World War – they were joined by children of Belgian aristocracy. During the First World War the role of Sister Joachim extended to two hours of English teaching a week to nonboarders, the so-called 'day-children'. For a few hours each day she also took up the post of priory portress. And, as mentioned previously, she became a subprioress for a number of years.

### **Analysis of the letters**

Sister Joachim maintained a lively correspondence with her family in Chichester<sup>25</sup>. She was clearly in need of this contact, because she came from a large, wealthy family with numerous children, a family that through the production of and trade in canned fish and meat products had contacts all over the world. At the age of 25 Margaret Anne Shippam said goodbye to all this and chose to live as a conventual. A few years later she was forced to move to Ooigem: the additional language barrier undoubtedly increased her sense of isolation.

References in the letters suggest that during her stay in Boulogne-sur-Mer (1892-1904) she once crossed the Channel to visit her family. In September 1915 she considered destroying the letters she had written up to then for reasons of safety. Her mother, to whom she addressed her letters, had

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<sup>25</sup> Municipal archives, Ooigem, Foreign Register; José Tack, *idem*, p. 322.

passed away in the meantime. Eventually she decided to keep the letters and continued writing, because other relatives might also be interested in her experiences.

All contacts with her family were interrupted between September 1914 and December 1918. At that time, she wrote and kept 141 letters: 6 in 1914, 50 in 1915, 6 in 1916, 30 in 1917 and 43 in 1918. That's an average of three per month; clearly, the year 1916 was a year of desperation and despair over the failure of the end of the war, not only for the Western Allies, but also for sister Joachim.

The letters offer a chance a glimpse of a few years into the doings, but also into the musings of a nun in a turbulent period. Because exchanging letters between occupied Belgium (which Ooigem was a part of) and Great Britain was no easy matter in the period 1914-1918, sister Joachim kept the letters she was writing to her home front, and had them delivered to her family in one package after the First World War<sup>26</sup>. This bundle of 141 letters has been kept by the family and - like many other documents of the Shippams - ultimately found its way to the archives of Chichester in West Sussex. We may assume that Sister Joachim also wrote letters to her relatives before and after the First World War, but they can no longer be traced.

Although sister Joachim had left home for several years already and she did not regularly visit or receive visits, the words 'home' and 'family' were of great importance to her. She mentions the birthdays of young and old family members on a very regular basis, occasionally recalling some amusing past anecdote. Special events in the family also received a lot of attention: the anniversary of her father's death in 1897 did not go by unrecorded. She also frequently expressed her concerns about the health of her mother, who was 74 at the outbreak of war in 1914 and died at Easter 1915. Sister Joachim learned about her death only several months later (in February 1916 to be exact<sup>27</sup>): afterwards she continued to address her letters to her brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces. She regularly expressed her concern about the fate of family members who served as soldiers in the British Army: her brother (Alfred) Ernest frequently appeared in her correspondence – he may have been her favourite brother. In the beginning of the war there were two attempts to forward correspondence to Chichester from the priory in Ooigem via the Netherlands: these attempts were abandoned because of the high risks attached<sup>28</sup>.

On 16 April, 1915, sister Joachim wrote: *I must write immediately and tell you about the visit I just had. I was in class, giving my English lesson. It was a little after three; I was called out and told that two American ladies were*

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<sup>26</sup> WSRO, Add Ms. 14,478.

<sup>27</sup> WSRO, Add. Mss. 14,478, letter of 05.03.1916.

<sup>28</sup> WSRO, Add. Mss. 14,478, letter of 25.12.1914.

asking for me. N.M. [= Notre Mère, the prioress] accompanied me to the parlour. On seeing me Mrs. Dixon asked me if I was St. Joachim and on the affirmative she told me that she had come from my brother Ernest and she gave me your letter dear old boy, you are dear brother to have sent her and thank you so much. Think of how glad I was at last have news from you and to hear that you are all alive. I was rather emotioned and when I had read your letter I could scarcely speak. Mrs. Dixon immediately told N.M. she had come to fetch me. The latter said as we are in no present danger I can't let her go. I do hope you haven't filled the Mother with hopes of my return and that she won't be cut up about it; it is a hard sacrifice you know, especially too as you say 'come for Mothers' sake'. I was afraid Mother dear you have been ill, ...<sup>29</sup>. At the time sister Joachim read this and was too emotional to write down a few words in reply (and therefore had Mrs. Dixon do this), her mother was already deceased (Easter, April 4, 1915) ...

In other letters to the home front sister Joachim asked herself whether her family would still recognize her: her English had gotten worse, she was emaciated and her cheeks were hollow, her hair had turned grey and she had had to have her teeth pulled. At the time she wrote this she was 51 years old ... <sup>30</sup>

At the outbreak of the First World War both sides were convinced that the fight would not last long and that victory was within reach. Sister Joachim also shared this view. In the first months of the war, she let her family know that rumour had it that the war would be over by Easter 1915. In February 1915 she had learned that Easter was still feasible, weather permitting. In March 1915 the date for the final victory was moved forward to May and in August 1915 she observed that the end was anticipated for September<sup>31</sup>. For the first time we detect doubt in sister Joachim's words: the war might well last for months still, and was holding out the prospect of the end not a form of propaganda in itself? Doubts hit even further: in autumn 1915 people began to fear that the war would last for years (and she immediately expressed her fear that she would not see her family nor hear from them for years to come). As mentioned earlier, 1916 was the year of Allied despair: sister Joachim expressed this in the few letters she wrote in 1916 observing that she did not see any end in sight: *I feel very sad, everyone was so hopeful that we would be delivered at the latest by the new year and now our deliverance seems as far off as ever; the Allies seem to be bent on remaining where they are and exterminating the enemy* (14.11.1915) and *Oh! How long it is. How long it is. When shall we have 'peace'. To think we must go through winter. There is but one thing to do. Take patience and hope on. God is there*

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<sup>29</sup> WSRO, Add. Mss. 14,478, letter of 16.04.1915.

<sup>30</sup> WSRO, Add. Mss. 14,478, letters of 10.01.1915, 03.10.1915 en 21.07.1918.

<sup>31</sup> WSRO, Add. Mss. 14,478, letters of 25.12.1914, 01.02.1915, 24.02.1915, 28.03.1915, 06.06.1915 and 24.08.1915.

*with His Grace for each day.* (17.09.1916)<sup>32</sup>. It is therefore not surprising that in the spring of 1917 she was particularly critical of the 'hope' that emerged through the participation of the USA in the war: she sincerely doubted whether this would bring the end of the war closer. Early in 1918 she was convinced - and she was not the only one - that the Allies would be victorious. Yet recent years had taught her that she could not count on an early end<sup>33</sup>. As time progresses the letters of Sister Joachim frequently raise questions about the possible dangers that the sisters might face in the battle that would mark the end of the war. Some time later, particularly from autumn 1917 onwards, she wondered from time to time whether she would be able to stay on in the priory until the end of the war.

Once the German troops had passed through Ooigem - the sisters' first confrontation with the Germans was the clatter of hoofs outside, one dinner evening on 10 November, 1914 - the community at Ooigem quickly formed an image of the average German. Sister Joachim managed for four years not to mention the word "German" in her letters: "G" was bad enough for her as a reference to the enemy. For her, the German soldiers were nothing less than stupid and afraid<sup>34</sup>. The fact that after the capture of Kortrijk they just left the town, to her was a sign of their fear: for fear of the reaction of the population, the troops dared not remain. It never occurred to her that strategic considerations might have motivated the transport of troops. Another example of German stupidity was that captured "Tommies", the pet name for the British soldiers, were able to escape under the eyes of the Germans. If this were possible, then the short-term outcome of the war was clear to sister Joachim. German soldiers were also said to be convinced that they had already arrived in Paris when entering Kortrijk: that they might be taking their wishes for reality because of fatigue was not something sister Joachim would consider. After a short time she was convinced that the German troops were afraid of the military confrontation with the Allies: they were allegedly especially frightened of the Indian soldiers. This fear was expressed in the high number of suicides, in the large number of conscientious objectors and in the fact that German soldiers after a period of rest in or near Ooigem wept when they returned to the front. It is clear that the "facts" that Sister Joachim wrote down cannot always be substantiated and that they are coloured by word-of-mouth stories that she heard and by her belief that her countrymen were the biggest victims of the German attack.

Sister Joachim did not only think of the Germans as stupid and afraid, she also found them cruel, waging a real propaganda battle<sup>35</sup>. According to the rumours that penetrated the priory in Ooigem, the Germans would leave

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<sup>32</sup> WSRO, Add. Mss. 14,478, letters of 14.11.1915 and 17.09.1916

<sup>33</sup> WSRO, Add. Mss. 14,478, letters of 11.02.1917, 29.07.1917, 02.09.1917 and 20.01.1918.

<sup>34</sup> WSRO, Add. Mss. 14,478, letters of autumn 1914 and spring 1915.

<sup>35</sup> WSRO, Add. Mss. 14,478, letters of autumn 1914 and of 1915.

their own wounded soldiers behind on the battlefield to die. In some cases, so the story went, wounded soldiers were even buried alive. Even worse than the atrocities they committed against the population of certain cities (Leuven, Tamines, ...) was their behaviour to children: they also buried them alive. Moreover, on their way to villages and towns to find a resting place, they were reported to throw the most severely wounded from the trains alive. Revenge against the local population was an integral part of German politics. Sister Joachim noted these "findings" especially in the initial months of the war: rumour mill stories spread like wildfire among the Belgian population and of course such stories could not be sustained in those parts of the country that were occupied and were no longer the target of direct military events.

In terms of propaganda, sister Joachim also noted a number of remarkable events. She had heard that the placard "Dunkirk" had been fixed to the walls of the station of Kortrijk: in this way, the soldiers who were photographed there could fool their relatives in Germany into thinking that Dunkirk had already been taken and that the German Army had advanced as far as the North Sea. For the same reason, German soldiers were allegedly required to mention 'Paris' or 'Versailles' on the letters they sent home. Sister Joachim also noted regularly that bells had to be rung in Germany to announce the "capture" of Paris, of Ypres .... This had to convince the German population that their army was close to victory.

Sister Joachim disapproved of decisions by the German authorities to refer to the Germans in terms of "our soldiers" and "our brothers" in posters circulated by local Belgian authorities. She was convinced that the newspapers were full of lies, especially when the surrender and defeat of Russia was announced. Strikingly, such messages were more or less omitted from the summer of 1915 onwards. This again shows how the feeling of resignation grew, faced with the endlessness of war and the despair that accompanied it.

Yet sister Joachim was convinced that not all Germans were equally stupid, scared, cruel and deceitful. Unknown, unloved ... as the saying goes. During the war the sisters at Ooigem got to know a number of German soldiers better, especially those who were regularly billeted at the convent. In order to organize the quartering a German officer paid them a visit to have a look at the possibilities of the priory. He turned out to be Alsatian. This struck the right note immediately: Alsatians were not "real" Germans and so much more likeable<sup>36</sup>. The first soldiers who were billeted, were not that bad either: they came from Poland and Bavaria and, on top of that, they were Catholic and full of nostalgia for their village, their families and their girlfriends. The sisters in Ooigem for the first time in months were a listening ear. They could confide in them and talk about the problems they had because of the

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<sup>36</sup> WSRO, Add. Mss. 14,478, letter of 20.12.1914.

war and their long absence from home. In general, sister Joachim was convinced that the most humane German officers were those who themselves had sons in the army or - if the war were to last - would be called for military service<sup>37</sup>.

Of course sister Joachim did not just record information on German soldiers and the German view on war, although those were the things she was best informed about. Her opinion on the Allied troops was very positive. The Belgian army and Belgian soldiers were not mentioned. She initially referred to the Allies in general and to the Tommies in particular. She expressed her appreciation for the courageous way in which the Allied armies held up against the supremacy of the Germans in the autumn of 1914. In the spring of 1915 she was still positive, but she was glad that the Allies could maintain their positions. Some time later she was hit by doubt: the Allies were allegedly close to a breakthrough, but in the summer of 1915 she did not believe that any longer. Even worse, in the autumn of 1915 she realized fully that the Allies could not immediately break through and that the war would certainly last for months. Also in the following months and years doubts prevailed: she frequently wondered why the Allied troops, who were so close, could not immediately liberate the occupied regions: *You won't miss having news from me to-day because I never write on Easter but I do miss your letters. This is time I would be reading them so that is why I am having a little chat with you now. At Christmas, we said for Easter we certainly shall have news and Easter has come and we are just as far off from getting news than three months ago. Patience is the only remedy, but there are days one does feel down.*<sup>38</sup>

Her opinion about the British soldiers was indiscriminately positive. The injured who were entrusted to British nurses had no cause for complaint: they were dedicated and caring and did everything they could to make life more bearable for their patients. The wounded who were at the mercy of German nurses fared worse: the latter only cared for their own pleasure and dancing, they devoted more attention to their make-up than to the patients in their care<sup>39</sup>. Tommies were also born optimists. Even when they were dying, they managed to cheer up people around them and put heart into them. Sister Joachim gave examples of dying British soldiers who cut off the buttons of their uniforms and handed them to their carers to remember them by. Tommies were also grateful: when a group of captured British soldiers marched through Ooigem, they gratefully received the food they were given by the local population – much to the dismay of the German guards.

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<sup>37</sup> WSRO, Add. Mss. 14,478, letters of 01.12.1914 and 20.12.1914.

<sup>38</sup> WSRO, Add. Ms. 14,478, letter of 04.04.1915.

<sup>39</sup> WSRO, Add. Mss. 14,478, letters of 07.03.1915 and 13.06.1915.

The patriotism of sister Joachim ran in the family: earlier we observed the same attitude in her brother (Alfred) Ernest. It is therefore not surprising that the other Allies paled in comparison to the heroism of the Tommies. The French troops may have been on the side of the British - and were therefore "by definition" good - but they were so chaotic that wherever they came, they left trash behind and any sense of discipline was alien to them. The Americans she had to be thankful to because of the food distribution they organized during the war, but she could not appreciate at all that American soldiers expected "services" of the sisters in the last days of the war in return for their liberation.

Sister Joachim thus managed for the entire duration of the war to pick up rumours and reports from outside the priory and write them down. Whether they were true or not, justified or not, is one thing. Where she got her information is something else. The prioress, invariably called "Notre Mere" or "Madame", clearly played an important role. Up until now we have not been able to trace the secular nor the religious name of the prioress. She was obviously of French descent, but spoke German fluently. Maybe she belonged to the group of Alsatian sisters in the priory. Sister Joachim's notes describe her as someone who looked after people and felt responsible for anyone connected with the priory in a conscientious manner: the sisters themselves, but also the resident and non-resident children, and some others who worked for the priory. The size of this group was quite variable during the war, ranging from 38 to 65 people at any given time. From a distance, the attitude of the prioress can be called an example of accommodation politics. She sought to entertain good contacts with both the local government and the German troops; her language skills will have been a great help in doing so: *Throughout the year our Dear Lord has watched over us in a special loving way. N.M. has always had to do with good commanders. When the G's were here we had nothing to complain of them. The doctors were almost polite. At the time being the head clerk at the Commandature here at Oghem (sic) is a Pole and a Catholic and is most obliging always to N.M*<sup>40</sup>. The prioress carried out translation work for both the council and the German military government. Every week she went to Kortrijk on various errands: for the financial affairs of the priory she went to the bank, she got supplies for the next few days, and she learned the latest news. She also occasionally browsed through a newspaper. Usually the prioress went to Kortrijk by train. When that was no longer possible, she used a dog cart as a means of transport (being 67 to 71 years' old), but occasionally she enjoyed being taken in a German car, driven by a German soldier on behalf of the local commander.

The prioress managed to preserve the priory from the greatest evils thanks to her policy towards the German occupier during the war. Thanks to her relations and diplomacy she could avoid new soldiers being billeted in

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<sup>40</sup> WSRO, Add. Mss. 14,478, letter of 01.09.1918.



October 1917: Sister Joachim expressed her joy about this, though she hastened to add that this implied a greater burden on the villagers and the sisters of the 'other' convent (on the other side of the street). Yet the reason why the priory was spared most of the trouble to sister Joachim was quite simple: it was simply "miraculous".

On 27 October, 1917, the sisters had to allow the chapel being used as a field hospital for wounded German soldiers. Two class rooms were also occupied until February 1918. In a nearby room, the sisters tried to improvise ways to continue their perpetual adoration<sup>41</sup>.

The prioress also succeeded in saving part of the priory's copper: thanks to her intervention only the 'profane' copper (such as doorknobs) were confiscated, the 'sacred' copper (candlesticks, clocks, ...) remained in the priory. For the same reason the mattresses of the priory were not claimed until September 1918: sister Joachim complained about how difficult it was to sleep without a mattress: *The very day all the children returned we had to deliver up all our mattresses - made with wool - and they were all made with hit. Such good mattresses too. There were certainly 50 or more and the bolsters too to those horrid G's. If we had not delivered them all up the policeman would have come and ransacked the house*<sup>42</sup>

The supply of the priory was left untouched during much of the war. In the autumn of 1914 sister Joachim noted that plenty of food was available, even exceeding the bare necessities. Even in 1915 the priory had a "good stock" and the prioress succeeded in buying everything she wished to buy in Kortrijk. The weekly supply of fresh vegetables was not in any way threatened by the war until 1915 and meat was served three or four times a week – just like before the war. Her being on fairly good terms with the German occupier did not keep the prioress from successfully buying a salted pig of one the villagers: *I told you we were having a piggy salted. Well, his arrival was Accompanied with great solemnity and triumph, at ½ past 7 am Wednesday. Just as we were going to take down our frugal breakfast, piggy arrived in a big cask, carried by three men and a woman. Happily the G's did not get hold of our piggy.*<sup>43</sup>

From the end of 1916 sister Joachim noted that supplies were becoming problematic, especially for the children in their care. Around the same time she observed that the supply of coal was no problem, but that its price was increasing continuously. From 1917 onwards the sisters had to rely on food distribution by the municipality through the Provincial Relief and Food

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<sup>41</sup> WSRO, Mss. 14,478, letter of 28.10.1917; Lucien Delange, *idem*, part 1, p. 169.

<sup>42</sup> WSRO, Mss. 14,478, letter of 22.10.1918.

<sup>43</sup> WSRO, Add. Ms. 14,478, letter of 25.12.1914.

Committee, chaired by deputy Reynaert<sup>44</sup>: *We shan't die of hunger, at least not yet. We are getting in our provisions of potatoes (on the sly) if we hadn't taters, I don't know what we should do. Soup potatoes and other vegetables for dinner, potatoes again for supper with cocoa (not the real) the latter, we receive like poor from the 'commune'. Bread is portioned, wonder how you would like the bread. When one is hungry glad to have it. Happily I don't get as hungry as I used to*<sup>45</sup>. From autumn 1917 the sisters did no longer have any milk or butter; some time later potatoes were rationed and meat was no longer available.

At the start of the war, Sister Joachim was strongly affected by the fact that the German troops would claim provisions quite regularly, especially pigs (15.11.1914), cows (09.12.1914, 08.10.1918), horses (18.11.1914), pigeons (18.11.1914), eggs (24.10.1915), dried nettles (07.10.1917), weapons (06.12.1914). Later in the war this occurred less often: it would have been difficult for it to proceed without further disrupting the basis of economic life. The German occupiers then paid for the products they claimed, but in the eyes of sister Joachim and of the victims of the claims, the price paid was far too low.

Sister Joachim quite regularly wrote down her surprise and concern about soaring prices during the war. Whether she can be relied on for correct figures, is highly questionable: she did not leave the priory and she was not responsible for any shopping. Also here her information is but based on hearsay<sup>46</sup>. She noted, for example, that a train ticket to Ghent suddenly cost 9 francs, while before the war it was only 2.5 francs (18.11.1914). In the middle of the war she observed that the repair of boots then cost as much as new boots did before the war (25.12.1916). In 1917 she also recorded a number of prices: sugar at 20 francs per kilogram, cocoa rose to 60 francs per kilogram, coffee and tea to 70 francs. An egg was then sold in Kortrijk at 1 franc each and a rabbit fetched 12 to 15 francs. Potatoes were priced 3 to 4 francs before the war, their price increased to 50, 80 and even 100 francs per kilogram (22.07.1917, 25.12.1917, 04.08.1918 and 13.10.1918).

Strikingly, sister Joachim became only really aware of price rises in the second half of the war, when the supply of the priory became a problem. In other words, the world of sister Joachim was so confined and oblivious to the outside world that she did not wonder about the food on her plate, as long as there was enough to get by. In her letters she wrote down very little about the effects of food shortages for the other inhabitants of Ooigem. Perhaps the

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<sup>44</sup> Lucien Delange, *Ooigem tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog. Een merkwaardig tijdsdocument, Leiesprokkels*, III, 1985, 4, pp. 158, 166

<sup>45</sup> WSRO, Add. Ms. 14,478, letter of 23.09.1917.

<sup>46</sup> Complaints about the cost of necessities going up were legion. Dr. Gits from Izegem observed the same in his war diary. Jean-Marie Lermyte, *Izegem 14-18. Het oorlogsdagboek van dokter Jules Gits*, Veurne, De Klaproos, s.d., I, pp. 171, 207.

relatively forced isolation of the sisters played a role: Ooigem to them was a fairly distant outside world.

It was only from the autumn of 1916 that the food supply in the priory became problematic. In this respect it is interesting to see what was being served in the priory. Sister Joachim did not record the daily menu (except that in the beginning of the war they would still have meat three or four times a week). She did refer to exceptional cases or to the fact that dishes became less copious and more monotonous. At Easter 1915 there was Pressed Shippam Beef on the menu: *We have had dinner and we had some of "Shippams Pressed Beef 'directly the war broke out all the remaining tins were kept for a" rainy day" a tin was brought out to-day in honour of Easter and Ernest dear, we eat it cold. Ever since your visit we have done so.*<sup>47</sup> In the second half of 1916, she wrote that mainly vegetables were cooked and in December 1916 that meat had become so hard to get by that it was reserved for the weakest children. In May 1917 she noted that potatoes were now also eaten at breakfast and that bread - if in stock - was hard and crumbly. In the last months of the war (from May 1918) potatoes and bread had gone too and only one type of rice was served.

We are better informed about three Christmas menus in the priory during the war. On 25 December 1914 the sisters had soup in the afternoon, baked potatoes, black pudding and goose. Wine was served at this meal, which ended with cake and coffee. A year later, after midnight mass, the sisters ate white bread with jam and there was also a glass of wine. For breakfast a few hours later there was white bread again and coffee with milk and sugar. In the afternoon, alongside soup, there were French fries with meat. Dessert consisted of grapes. At Christmas 1917 the menu had become more frugal. After midnight mass, the sisters got some bread and water, with a glass of wine. For breakfast, there was some dry bread, a potato in the peel and coffee. Lunch was still a feast: there was soup, followed by rabbit with potatoes and inlaid apricots, and coffee for afters.

Sister Joachim also sometimes informed her family on other aspects of daily life in the priory. Because of the war, the pupils were their only source of income: where there were twenty in 1914, the sisters managed to drive that number up to fifty at the end of the war. Children from Ooigem were admitted for the first time then. With mixed feelings sister Joachim wrote to her family that the bishop had given them exemption from fasting for the duration of the war. It was not all doom and gloom in the priory: despite the wartime conditions and the rising cost of living, the sisters had sufficient financial resources to provide electricity for the entire priory in 1915. Each year the sisters organized a Christmas raffle and they saw to it that there was a present for each sister for as long as possible.

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<sup>47</sup> WSRO, Add. Ms. 14,478, letter of 04.04.1915.

Everyday life in Ooigem outside the priory rarely gets any mention in sister Joachim's reports<sup>48</sup>. There were two reasons for this. First, the convent was quite isolated from village life and therefore she was not well informed about all events. Her letters do not express much sympathy for the fate of the villagers either. Second, sister Joachim of course only recorded the "striking" issues in her letters and because Ooigem is not by a main thoroughfare, there were few bombings and troop movements, once the situation at the front had stabilized.

The sisters even showed a rather elitist attitude to the residents of Ooigem. If the situation in the village at the end of the war was problematic, only the *ladies of the chateau* were granted permission to live in the priory<sup>49</sup>. In the days of liberation, when the village was in the firing line, the doctor and the baker - being useful to the sisters - were allowed to hide in the priory. But also their general attitude towards the common man was rather elitist. If the prioress took the train to Kortrijk, she had to take a seat between Flemish workmen (both men and women): *N.M. went to C. last Monday - she is 71 - listen how she traveled. First of all she rose at 3 o'clock. A few minutes before 4 she left the house and took the train - what kind of a train? Trucks like a good train. They convey the Flemish men and lads to the place where they have to work for the G's. N. M. asked to travel by it thinking perhaps she would be less shaken than in the car but just imagine her in such a company. She had a chair to sit on but she says she won't go again. The same conveyance brought her back about 6*<sup>50</sup>.

When they met with a couple of "upper-crust" German soldiers who were no officers, sister Joachim lamented that they had to live among the ordinary soldiers; she hoped that in the British army this was not the case. She was also surprised that the new pupils that they had to accept for a living and who were not of noble birth, did have good manners. This was something she clearly had not expected. Still, she found their funny names quite entertaining.

Occasionally sister Joachim told her family of a notable event in the village. She noted that on Ascension Day 1915 a farmer had dropped dead at the entrance of the castle, when he was on his way to early Mass in the parish church. She also mentioned that in September 1915 a man from Ooigem was arrested because he had ignored the ban on the possession of pigeons. Facts such as these again showed her limited information about what

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<sup>48</sup> On 31 December 1914 sister Joachim used the term 'Poor little Belgium' for the first time. WSRO, Add. Mss. 14,478, letter of 31.12.1914. The expression was being used the world over from August 1914, when it was first launched in the magazine 'Punch'. It is not clear how the sisters came to know the reference.

<sup>49</sup> WSRO, Add. Mss. 14, 478, letters of 22.07.1917, 29.07.1917 and 11.11.1918.

<sup>50</sup> WSRO, Add. Mss. 14,478, letter of 07.06.1918.

happened in the village. She did not know, for example, or at least did not record, that this man, Camiel Ottevaere, was sentenced to death by the court martial in Ghent shortly afterwards and was executed by firing squad on 31 October 1916<sup>51</sup>.

She had heard that Russian prisoners of war were employed to work on the railway to Kortrijk and she saw that in 1917 a telegraph wire was stretched from the tower of the chapel to the tower of the church. In February 1918 she mentioned the death of a boy and the injuries of a woman from Ooigem, following a bombing. On the death of the priest in the spring of 1917 she noted that he was a "holy man" who had been held in high regard in the village<sup>52</sup>. She expressed her horror at the fact that girls and young women from Ooigem went out with German soldiers: *And what one can't understand a great number of young girls and women also get on with the G's - flirt - more than disgusting*<sup>53</sup>.

Events of a military nature were often reported on in detail by sister Joachim. In April 1915 she wrote about the emergency landing of two French pilots: one managed to escape, the other one hid in the river. He was betrayed to the Germans by innocent children<sup>54</sup>. In September 1915 she wrote down a couple of things about the relatively well-documented plane crash behind the garden of the priory<sup>55</sup>. In July 1917 she witnessed an air battle between German and British pilots in the garden. According to her report, four German planes and one British plane had crashed<sup>56</sup>. The British pilot was buried in Ooigem. In September 1917 she wrote about plans to

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<sup>51</sup> Lucien Delange, *Ooigem tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog (part 3)*, *Leiesprokkels*, V, 1986, 1, pp. 20-24. Jan Van der Fraenen, *Voor den kop geschoten. Executies van Belgische spionnen door de Duitse Bezetter (1914-1918)*. Roeselare, Roularta Books, 2009, pp. 75-76.

<sup>52</sup> This is a reference to father Legein who died on 18 April 1917 and was temporarily replaced by curate H. Van Rijckeghem. Lucien Delange, *idem* (deel 1), pp. 158, 166.

<sup>53</sup> WSR0, Add. Mss. 14,478, letter of 19.09.1917. Curate Van Rijckeghem mentions likewise: *En nopens 't gedrag, onder zedelijk oogpunt, van onze vrouwen en dochters in hunne betrekkingen met den vijand: de oorlog heeft hier ook zijn kwaad gedaan. En hoe kon het anders? De priester miste zijn volle vrijheid van spreken en van werken op dat punt, zeventien getrouwde soldaten waren weg van huis, daarbij ook vijf getrouwde civielarbeiders, binst het wintergetijde waren dezelfde troepen dikwijls voor langen tijd in dezelfde plaats gekwartierd, hetgeen een noodlottigen invloed moest hebben op de zedelijkheid. Eenige dochters hebben zich lichtzinnig gedragen, eenige soldatenvrouwen zijn met reden beklapt geweest, drie soldatenvrouwen betreuren helaas! haar jammerlijk gedrag*. Lucien Delange, *idem* (deel 1), p. 167.

<sup>54</sup> WSR0, Add. Mss. 14,478, letter of 25.04.1915.

<sup>55</sup> WSR0, Add. Mss. 14,478, letter of 13.09.1915. Also Stijn Streuvels mentions this accident in his war diary.

<sup>56</sup> This accident is also mentioned in father De Praetere van Wielsbeke's Liber Memorialis. Two British planes crashed on the Molenhoek, the third on the 'spot' near the Lys. The British dead were, however, buried in Wielsbeke according to him. He assumes there were also German casualties. P. Van de Maele, *Het oorlogsdagboek 1914-1918 van pastoor A. De Praetere*, *Leiesprokkels*, IV, 1985, 2, p. 69.

build an airfield behind the garden of the priory. Then again she did not mention anything on the aerial combat over Ooigem of 4 October 1918<sup>57</sup>. She noted with horror that German officers organized a farewell banquet just before the end of the war: the nine people invited had drunk forty bottles of wine and champagne among them according to her.

At the end of the war the situation in Ooigem turned positively dangerous. The front, which for four years had almost invariably been at 15 to 18 kilometres from the village, started to move. The liberation of Ooigem would be a risky undertaking. The most difficult days for the sisters were those from 15 to 19 October 1918. On October 15 it was clear to them that the final attack had been launched: large groups of wounded Germans marched past and the noise of the guns became increasingly clear. For reasons of security, the chapel was evacuated on 16 October 1918: the Blessed Sacrament was temporarily moved to a wine vault in the basement. The perpetual adoration, however, was continued. That same day the priory was hit by a bomb: there was quite a lot of damage and sister Joachim's room was badly damaged. In the immediate vicinity a woman died in the bombardment, the baker's wife (who had temporarily sought shelter in the Priory) was severely wounded. A second bomb that hit the priory, landed in the water tank and therefore did not explode correctly, causing only limited damage. The situation was such that the curate of Ooigem granted general absolution to all residents of the priory.

On 17 October 1918 many bombs fell on Ooigem; they also fell on and beside the priory. There was a great deal of damage and shrapnel penetrated the entire building. The sisters had sought shelter in the underground walkway between the two houses that formed the Priory: *We spent 7 long hours in the 'Tunnel', standing as there was no room to sit down, or even kneel, one upon another. But we had the Blessed Sacrament in our midst, whose presence supported us. Nuns and children prayed without ceasing whilst the bombs and shells were hissing over our heads, and falling upon the house. At each bomb, we wondered whether it would fall just where we were and all be crushed to death. ... Every ten minutes or so, we heard a plane come and take a survey and a few minutes afterwards, along would come a shell or a bomb. We heard glass breaking everywhere, but not knowing where, as we dared not stir*<sup>58</sup>. They had been right in believing that this was the safest place: none of them was injured.

On 18 October 1918, the curate said that the situation was even worse and had become so dangerous that it was better for the sisters to leave the priory. The sisters left - unprepared - and quickly met Belgian soldiers. This means that they had fled in the direction of the front, which in view of the

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<sup>57</sup> Guy Seyns, *Een witte grafsteen op de begraafplaats van Sint-Baafs-Vijve, Leiesprokkels 2005-2006*, pp. 137-146.

<sup>58</sup> WSRO, Add. Ms. 14,478, letter of 17.10.1918.

circumstances may not have been the best choice. Sister Joachim observed that they had made a mistake. Because of the use of gas bombs by the retreating German army, Belgian troops considered the area too dangerous for civilians and sent the sisters back home<sup>59</sup>. Back in the priory the prioress consulted with the sisters and they decided to leave again: after all Ooigem was not safe. This time the sisters were organized a little better. Sister Joachim had to look after two old ladies: she pushed one in a trolley, and carried a suitcase at the same time. She gave her arm to another older woman. The few miles from Ooigem to Hulste they covered in three stages, spread over two days. After walking for twenty minutes they came to a farmhouse, where the entire company was offered a meal, despite the imminent military threat. A little bit further they decided to spend the night at another farm. Sister Joachim slept on a pile of potatoes and thought wistfully of the good days in the priory.

On 19 October, at half past six in the morning, they continued their journey to Hulste. Through the mud, past ruins of smashed houses and between the fire lines of both the Allies and the Germans, they reached Hulste. They were de facto liberated there and then. Hulste was under the control of the British Army. The Tommies were not happy seeing the sisters arrive and decided to evacuate them from Hulste. Most members of this group, including sister Joachim, were deemed healthy enough to undertake the journey to Lendeledede on foot. The elderly, including the prioress, were taken in British Red Cross trucks to the sisters of St. Vincent at Lendeledede. In her notes on those days sister Joachim is surprised that none of them got injured, while others - also from Ooigem and fleeing along the same route - did get hurt and she also saw bodies along the side of the road.

Great was the dismay of the sisters when on October 21, 1918 - three days after their hasty departure - they were told that their priory had been looted by residents of Ooigem: *On the 21st of October a priest, who had remained faithfully at his post at Oyghem, sent us word that it was urgent for some one to return to the Convent as it was being ransacked, not by the soldiers only, but also by the 'civilians'. He did what he could to keep any eye upon our Convent, but notwithstanding, many things were stolen and valuable things also*<sup>60</sup>. Some sisters turned back immediately to prevent further disaster. Perhaps residents had noted that in recent years the priory had endured wartime hardship quite well and had maintained pretty good contacts with the German soldiers? Resentment and revenge would not have been surprising given the circumstances.

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<sup>59</sup> Lucien Delange, *Ooigem tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog (part 3)*, *Leiesprokkels*, V, 1986, 1, pp. 20-24. This author mentions 14 people dying of German gas bombs in Ooigem. They were all killed between 18 October and 20 October 1918. One of the victims died of his injuries on 27 October 1918. Curate Van Ryckeghem does not mention any names, but counted 26 dead. Lucien Delange, *idem*, (part 2), p. 40.

<sup>60</sup> WSRO, Add. Ms. 14,478, letter of 21.10.1918.

The month of November was a period of joy for sister Joachim. On November 10 Tommies arrived at the monastery in Lendeledede saying that the war was over and that the Germans would surrender unconditionally the next day. To celebrate, a British parade marched through the streets of Lendeledede on November 11. The prioress urged sister Joachim to show more modesty: it was not proper for a sister to show her joy by calling out to British soldiers and doing a little dance. While sister Joachim was still at Lendeledede, like most of her fellow sisters, suddenly her brother (Frederick) Arthur (1874-1961) walked into the kitchen of the monastery. As a soldier he had been stationed in the area and had quickly traced her - by saying that he was looking for an English-speaking sister.

Because the damage to the priory in Ooigem was greater than initially thought and because the recovery would take longer than expected, the prioress gave the sisters permission to look for temporary shelter elsewhere. Sister Joachim herself was taken to Kortrijk by car on 4 December 1918. There she took the train to Boulogne-sur-Mer. After waiting for a while she managed to secure a place on the ferry to Folkestone, where she took the train to Ashford. There her brother Wilfred (1880-1974) was waiting for her, who took her to Chichester by car. In April 1919 sister Joachim returned to Ooigem. The chapel was still damaged and temporarily served as a parish church (until June 1919)<sup>61</sup>.

The last event sister Joachim recorded was the death of the prioress at age 72. She had guided the convent through the Great War, but shortly afterwards, weakened and tired, fell victim to the Spanish Flu.

Sister Joachim did not immediately record the events of and after October 15, 1918. The dramatic events then followed each other so quickly that it was not the right time to write down impressions. When she handed her collection of letters to her family soon after the First World War, they were kept there for a long time. Thirty years later, in 1948, a family member from Chichester asked her to also write down the chronicle of the liberation and the restoration of the contact with Chichester. Sister Joachim agreed to do so. This suggests that in the years following the First World War – possibly until her death – she kept sending letters to her family. No traces have been found of this correspondence so far. Based on the information available we can therefore only assume that Sister Joachim continued to lead a 'normal' life as a sister in Ooigem from 1918 to 1956. Photo 5

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<sup>61</sup> Lucien Delange, *idem*, (part 2), p. 41.