

## The Making of an Officer-Diplomat: August Torma's Early Years

By Tina Tamman\*

August Torma (1895-1971) is not a household name in Estonia, but he is easily found in national reference books where he is described as a diplomat who served in Rome, Bern and Geneva in the 1930s and was then appointed to London where he stayed in post after the 1940 Soviet occupation of Estonia and where he died in 1971, having kept the idea of Estonian sovereignty alive for several decades. In his early days, however, he was a military man. The Estonian encyclopaedia sums up his army service laconically (and not entirely correctly): he was “mobilised during the First World War, wounded in 1917, a prisoner of war in Austria, evacuated to Denmark, returned to Estonia 1918. During the War of Independence Jaan Laidoner appointed T[orma] Estonian representative at the English Northern Corps in Archangel (formed an Estonian legion there).” (Eesti Entsüklopeedia, 2000:545) These truncated sentences fail to convey the complexities and excitement of those few years, which is why the piece below aims to put some flesh on the bare bones. Torma, incidentally, was born August Schmidt and changed his name only in 1940; therefore he is referred to as “Schmidt” throughout. In reference books, however, he is “Torma”.

In 1914 August Schmidt completed his studies at Pärnu gymnasium for boys and decided to study languages at St. Petersburg University. He was 19 at the time. His best friend Felix Tannebaum was slightly older but had studied in the same year at school. He also enrolled at St. Petersburg but chose to read science. It was probably Felix's influence that made August suspend his studies in 1916. The war had broken out and Felix had joined the Pavlov military school the year before. On graduation he was awarded the rank of 1<sup>st</sup> lieutenant (*poruchik*) and sent to the Caucasus. August, according to his military records, volunteered for army service in May 1916, opting initially also for the Pavlov school, but settling finally for the Vladimir military school where he completed a six-month course with the rank of 1<sup>st</sup> lieutenant.

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Despite the need for men on the front, Schmidt for some reason spent the next six months in a reserve regiment in Irkutsk. It was to this town in Siberia that his St. Petersburg friends sent postcards hoping to hear him play Beethoven's "Appassionata" soon again. Schmidt was very musical and, apart from playing the piano and the violin, he was also composing songs.

In early 1917 his regiment was transferred to Galicia on the western front where the situation was very difficult. Not only were the Germans advancing, but the Tsarist Russian troops were in complete disarray, with soldiers refusing to obey orders. In desperation the commanding officers formed shock battalions and death units to deal with the situation. These are said to have consisted of highly-motivated volunteers of which Schmidt was one: he joined a death battalion in June. He was an enthusiastic young man in those days, as the artist Jaan Vahtra recalls in his memoirs published in 1936. They had met in St. Petersburg when Schmidt was a student and, according to Vahtra, he was always good company. Vahtra had also seen him wear military uniform. Schmidt "had been involved in military operations but had not lost his cheerful disposition and optimism. I clearly recall him from those days. When I later met him in Estonia as a diplomat he seemed to me as a completely different Schmidt." (Vahtra, 1936:277-278)

In the summer of 1917 Schmidt was in the midst of fierce fighting in and around Tarnopol for six weeks. His own impressions are not known, but Russian Col Manakin has detailed a day that ended with 310 men dead and wounded and only 90 surviving intact. The town itself was in complete chaos, with no military or civilian authority. In those conditions Manakin described the efficacy of the death units that were required "to stem the wave of fleeing deserters." He has not provided much gory detail, but commented that widespread looting, for example, was curbed only by shooting the looters on the spot. (Manakin, 1955:218-219)

Near the village of Koniuchy in today's Poland Schmidt was badly wounded on July 21<sup>st</sup>, 1917 (Gregorian calendar) and left on the battlefield for dead. The Austrian Red Cross picked him up and treated his wounds (ERA 495/7/5497 [a]). Curiously no Red Cross records have come to light to describe the severity of his wounds and identify the hospital he was taken to, but another Estonian, Oskar Öpik (Oskar Mamers), was taken to Wieselburg camp in Austria when he was wounded in 1915 (Mamers,

1957:48, 98). It was apparently a well-run place where health care was taken seriously. Tsarist Russian Red Cross nurses used to visit the camps to monitor conditions and listen to complaints. Among them was Vera Maslennikova, who was to help Schmidt later in Denmark. Oskar Öpik also travelled to Denmark where he and Schmidt are known to have ended up in the same camp.

Against all odds, news travelled fast during the war, if not always accurately, and Schmidt's contemporaries in Estonia mourned his death and the loss of his "rare talent" (Semper, 1917a). The obituary was written by another school-friend from Pärnu, Johannes Semper, who had also studied in St. Petersburg where he was known as a literary figure. In years to come he would join the Communist Party and become a minister in the 1940 Soviet Estonian government. In 1917, however, he had to publish a correction when he learnt that Schmidt had been wounded but was very much alive (Eesti Sojamees, 1917b). For his bravery in Galicia Schmidt earned the Russian Anna medal, IV Class, as, incidentally, did Öpik. Schmidt was to gain a series of medals in years to come, but quite possibly he was never actually presented with the Anna because it is missing from the collection now kept at the Estonian Embassy in London.

In December 1917 a 50-strong group of prisoners of war was sent from Austria to neutral Denmark on a Red Cross exchange. The two men, Schmidt and Öpik, found themselves at the Horseroed camp for the Russian wounded. For eight months Schmidt was recuperating there and learning Danish, and he must have wondered about his next move. Estonia declared its independence on February 24<sup>th</sup>, but was promptly occupied by Germany. As the Baltic Sea was effectively closed to traffic there was no way back to Estonia. The Horseroed camp was due to close in June and there was the danger of repatriation to Russia. Öpik's affairs may have been more secure because he married a pretty Danish nurse in May. Schmidt, however, had reason to worry about his earlier membership of the death battalion, which "would mean that he would definitely be killed if he were to return to Russia," as an unknown sponsor put it when requesting that Schmidt be allowed to stay in Denmark (Estonian Foreign Ministry Archive, 1918). The sponsor was somebody well known to Vera Maslennikova whom Schmidt had probably met in an Austrian camp. She later took the veil, became Mother Martha and moved to London to look after the Tsar's sister, Grand Duchess Xenia (van der Kiste & Hall, 2002:210, 228, 234) but apparently kept in touch with Schmidt.

Horseroed being close to Copenhagen, Schmidt met other Estonians there during one of his visits. Independent Estonia badly needed international recognition and had set up a Foreign Delegation to achieve this aim. The delegation had initially intended to make Stockholm its base but found the city expensive and unfriendly and so chose Copenhagen instead. Schmidt met Jaan Tõnisson, Karl Menning, Mihkel Martna and Ferdinand Kull in Copenhagen. He has not recorded what was discussed during their meeting (EKM EKLA 193/41/22, 1923), but he would have heard the latest news. It is possible that the men told him that volunteers were sought to join the British forces in North Russia.

### 1. In North Russia with British expeditionary force

Schmidt has provided the following explanation for his subsequent actions: “It was the time of a full attack on the Western front, with Estonia, however, groaning under the force of occupation. For this reason I decided to refrain from being a bystander and joined the English service.” (*Ibid.*) His army records say that he accepted an invitation from an unnamed Russian military representative to travel to North Russia and volunteer for the British Expeditionary Force. He seems to have been physically strong enough for the journey and may have even been looking for adventure. Setting out from Denmark on September 4<sup>th</sup> and travelling via Sweden and Norway, he arrived in Archangel on September 24<sup>th</sup>, where he was promptly assigned to intelligence. Elsewhere just a single sentence in his own hand sums up the events of the month: “Volunteered in Denmark for English service and appointed to serve at the North Expeditionary Corps’ headquarters at Archangel (Sep 1918).” (*Ibid.*; ERA 495/7/5497 [a]; ERA 957/8/1999)

By the time of Schmidt’s arrival the intervention force in North Russia had already run into difficulties: there was resistance to Allied occupation and winter was approaching. Schmidt did not keep a diary and nothing is known of his experience. British Colonel Philip Woods, however, who had arrived three months earlier and recorded his impressions, found the situation delicate. “Nobody seemed to know whether we were at war with the [local] inhabitants or not,” he said and noted that the Russian soldiers viewed the British with “a sort of nervous armed neutrality which threatened at any moment to break out into open hostility.” (Baron, 2007:157) Around the time of Schmidt’s arrival, on September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1918,

French diplomat Louis de Robien recorded in his diary: “We are now feeling the full impact of the mistake which the Allies made in not hurrying. Where before a battalion would have sufficed, today a regiment would have difficulty in succeeding. The Bolsheviks have got used to the idea fighting against Allied soldiers and they resist, whereas in the beginning they were seized with panic and could only think of abandoning everything.” (de Robien, 1969:304)

On his arrival Schmidt became “engaged in the Military Censorship, Intelligence, NREF [North Russian Expeditionary Force]”, as his commanding officer put it (ERA, 495/7/5497 [b]). The main censorship was done in Peterhead in Scotland, where the staff were mostly Danish, but it was deemed advisable to check the traffic with knowledge of local conditions as well, which is why the station at Archangel was set up. There was also a landline from nearby Aleksandrovsk to Vardo in Norway and these communications similarly needed checking. Archangel in those days was full of Bolshevik agents and the censors were expected to watch out for any Bolshevik attempts at communication. It was impossible to tell who was pro-British and who opposed the British occupation. The censors had their work governed by *Cable Censor’s Handbook* plus various helpful lists, including *Enemy Diplomatic and Consular Representatives in Neutral Countries* and lists of approved banks.

Schmidt’s fellow censors were foreigners like himself: Russian, Polish, Serb and Belgian, all supervised by British officers in higher grades and with Chief Censor Lt-Col. H.V.F. Benet in overall charge. Benet was an experienced man who had formerly worked in St. Petersburg, cooperating with Tsarist censors there. In North Russia he found himself short of staff – “persons of the right class, who possessed a knowledge of French and English”. It took some seven weeks before he himself was assigned an interpreter and, as months went by, he lost a number of British men to serious illness; they had to be shipped back to England, some of them were invalided out (Browne, 1919:294-296). North Russian winters were harsh, much harsher than London had imagined although protective clothing had been designed to meet the local conditions. It was, however, very cumbersome, as were the facial mosquito nets the soldiers had to wear during the summer months. Also, the 1918-1919 Spanish flu epidemic took many lives.

Censorship personnel were normally selected from among the military. It was expected that military men, even when dealing with commercial telegrams, would “instinctively and subconsciously” recognise any possible military significance of a text. “The individuals selected for such posts should therefore be chosen from classes accustomed to constantly exercise their judgment and accept responsibility.” (*Ibid.*, p. 91)

Even if the station at Archangel was newly organized and short staffed, Schmidt appears to have enjoyed a position of trust. His superior, Col. Benet, was clearly satisfied with his performance. Schmidt “has worked very hard, diligently and punctually,” he said when recommending him for promotion in rank to officer (ERA 495/7/5497 [c]). Schmidt’s Tsarist rank of “poruchik” had been interpreted by the British as 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant. Some historians have seen this as tantamount to demotion, a common British practice for foreigners (Kröönström, 2005). On Benet’s recommendation, however, Schmidt was soon confirmed as a lieutenant.

A considerable number of Estonian soldiers had arrived in North Russia by the autumn of 1918 in an effort to join the Allied forces. They may have included the remains of the Estonian division that had briefly existed in 1917-18 under the command of General Johan Laidoner. Any order or structure in the Russian army had collapsed and the Estonian division had dispersed. At one point it was reported that there were 100000 men, nationality unspecified, making their way to North Russia (National Archives, PRO FO 371/3308/140838). Laidoner himself had gone into a self-imposed exile in Russia and spent several months in St. Petersburg. He had been an intelligence chief in the Tsarist Western Front Corps and this made him a marked man in German-occupied Estonia. It was better to disappear than to risk capture - this has been an Estonian explanation for his exile, ruling out the possibility that Laidoner simply fled. (Walter, 1990:5-17; 1999:29)

The idea of a dedicated Estonian military unit had been mooted at the time of Schmidt’s departure from Copenhagen. The Estonian Foreign Delegation told the local British Legation about an imminent German mobilisation in Estonia. The British reported to London that “Project is being considered very secretly by Esthonian representatives for evacuating men of military age before mobilization can take place and enabling them to escape eastwards to endeavour to join entente forces advancing from Murmansk.” (National Archives, PRO FO 371/3308/137968) Ants Piip,

the Estonian representative in London, visited the Foreign Office to promote the idea there. Encouraged by the nod he perceived, he dispatched Lt. Veros with his plan to Archangel.

Meanwhile the Estonian War Minister Andres Larka paid a visit to the British mission in Helsinki. He was “most anxious to mobilise an Estonian unit in Russia”. London subsequently authorised both Helsinki and Stockholm to issue visas for Estonian men provided they were “definitely prepared to serve in the Allied forces at Murmansk or Archangel.” (National Archives, PRO FO 371/3342/164259) This suggests that there were perhaps other volunteers like Schmidt travelling through Scandinavia to North Russia. Oskar Öpik for one travelled to Murmansk and fought there under Russian General Eugene Miller.

The British had been recruiting for the Slavo-British Allied Legion in North Russia ever since late June. It was going to be a unit of Russian men in British uniform hired on fixed-term contracts to serve under British command, with training provided. Leaflets had been dropped in and around Archangel – even in the Estonian language. Military Intelligence in London had been consulted and in November “a special Esthonian unit” was in place “as part of the Slavo-British Allied Legion serving under the supreme Allied Command”, although E.H. Carr of the Foreign Office had advised against the “Slav” element in the name, pointing out that the Estonians might find this offensive. (National Archives, PRO FO 371/3342/170305; PRO FO 371/3308/183979)

Estonian historian Hannes Walter has viewed those events in Northern Russia from the Estonian point of view and with considerable clarity. He no doubt had the benefit of hindsight. In his view Laidoner was the brains behind the idea. Laidoner had wanted to bring together all Estonian soldiers scattered across Russia, and officers in particular. “He determined that the rallying place should be North Russia where the Allies had landed simultaneously with the Germans landing in Finland in spring 1918. According to Laidoner’s plan, this was where the Estonian Legion should be formed. On the one hand, this would provide a symbolic signal of Estonia fighting together with the Allies. On the other hand, the unit would form the core for the time when the German occupation collapsed and the national military force was restored... Over the period of a couple of months Laidoner’s network transported about 200 Estonian soldiers to

the north. They made up the Estonian Legion attached to the French expeditionary corps.” (Walter, 1999:29)

If one compares this view with modern Estonian reference books, it seems that the name “Estonian Legion” has not been universally recognised. The Estonian encyclopaedia, an authoritative reference source for the nation, had an entry for the legion in an early, Soviet, edition without any reference to Schmidt, who during the Soviet era was seen as a traitor. A post-1991 tome introduced an entry for Schmidt and credited him with the legion’s formation, but a more recent volume has dropped the entry for the legion altogether. (Eesti Nõukogude Entsüklopeedia, 1987:219; Eesti Entsüklopeedia, 2003:66; 2000:545; Walter 1999:29; ERA 495/10/65 [a]) British sources do not seem to mention the Estonian legion as such – it may have been just the Estonians’ own shorthand.

## 2. Difficulties in setting up Estonian Legion

Archival sources provide plenty of detail. What to Walter seems to have been a straightforward matter, was in fact a messy and complicated arrangement for those involved with the formation of the Legion in 1918. There were huge difficulties - communication for a start. While the Legion was in its infancy in Archangel, Ants Piip was wondering about Laidoner’s and Seljamaa’s whereabouts and was keen to see the two in London where he had set up a mission (ERA 1583/1/47 [a]). Meanwhile, Julius Seljamaa as the Estonian government’s envoy had established a base in St. Petersburg, with Laidoner helping him as his assistant. In the absence of a government in occupied Estonia, the two men sent a small group of Estonians to Archangel. The group of six Estonians was to build a courier link between St. Petersburg, Archangel, London and Copenhagen. The men’s journey was hazardous: they walked most of the way and one of them died (Webermann, 1923:90). On arrival in Archangel in early October, they helped with the formation of the unit. One of the group, Harald Vellner, sought British help in transferring Estonians from the Russian army. He said that 62 Estonians had been registered and confirmed the aim of forming a legion. Gundemar Neggo, a fellow courier, noted the difficulties with the local Russian government that was “refusing permission for the Estonian community to hold a meeting that would promote membership of the legion.” (ERA 495/10/21 [a]; ERA 1583/1/47 [b]) By November 75 men had been registered, by December the figure had risen to 92 and there was the possibility of another 200

seamen. The British Consul Francis Lindley in Archangel confirmed the figure of 200 (ERA 1619/1/1 [a]; ERA 31/1/39 [a]; PRO FO 371/3308/181678).

There is no list of names to account for the 200, although various shorter lists exist. These show men were attached to either the White Russian, French or Slavo-British corps. With the general confusion in North Russia, one should not be surprised that the reports and telegrams regarding the legion are sometimes confused or even contradictory. One can conclude that the legion may have been altogether ill-defined and short-lived. Regardless, it matters for Estonia because of its unifying character. Also, as far as August Schmidt is concerned, it provided him with an opportunity to use his own initiative alongside his “day job” in censorship. The formation of the legion as such seems to have been a collective effort, but for more than six months in 1919 Schmidt was in sole charge of organising the soldiers’ return home.

There was also the diplomatic aspect as Schmidt was involved in the talks on the formation of the Legion. Several foreign missions had relocated to Archangel from St. Petersburg and Schmidt proved useful as a linguist who spoke excellent French, Russian and German. It is, however, a mystery as to where this young man had learnt English. At school and university he had studied a number of languages, including Latin, Gothic and Old French, but English does not appear on any of his reports. The language became fashionable in Estonia only in the 1920s. It is just possible that he had befriended the Dickses while still in Pärnu - they were perhaps the only English family in town. There were two brothers, Alfred and Charles, only slightly older than Schmidt, who had studied at the same gymnasium. They may have known each other because of a shared interest in music. Both brothers played the violin in the school orchestra, as did Schmidt. The Dickses lost their well-established timber and shipping business when the Soviets came in 1940 when they abandoned everything and fled to England.

It is also possible that Schmidt learnt English in 1917 before he was wounded. There were British officers training Russian soldiers in Galicia. In any case, by the time he arrived in Archangel Schmidt’s written English was good and he had a substantial vocabulary, judging by his telegrams to Tallinn and London.

It was clear that the Estonian Legion would not survive on its own. Schmidt told one of the couriers who had left for London: “We thought of setting up a fully independent Estonian military unit, but had we even got permission for this, funding [would be a problem] – you know yourself what it’s like here. And we lack the legal basis for contracting a loan on behalf of the Estonian government.” (ERA 1583/1/47 [c]) The solution was to attach the Estonians to an Allied unit, but even that arrangement failed to provide stability.

Gen. Ironside, the General Officer Commanding at Archangel, suddenly told the Estonians that the Slavo-British Legion would be disbanded and the Estonians would have to join the White Russian army. This created a crisis that forced Schmidt and Ernst Webermann to launch a new round of talks that tested their embryonic negotiation techniques. The couriers from St. Petersburg had left and Webermann and Schmidt were on their own to discuss the transfer of some of the men to the French Foreign Legion. They must have made an impression because the Ambassador Joseph Noulens has mentioned them in his memoirs. (Noulens, 1933:267-268)

Webermann was not a military man and may have greatly benefited from Schmidt’s army knowledge during those talks. Sent to Archangel by Moscow’s Agricultural Institute, Webermann was a fisheries expert who had an office at 20 Sobornaya Street in Archangel that he had placed at the Estonians’ disposal. Almost accidentally he had been elected a leader of the local Estonian community and an Estonian committee was set up. During their rounds of foreign embassies, Webermann found the British, French, Japanese and US diplomats kind and friendly. Emboldened by their initial success, the two Estonians seized the opportunity to promote Estonian independence wherever they went. Their diplomacy made some impact in so far as Ants Piip in London had heard rumours of an “Estonian mission” operating in Archangel (ERA 1583/1/47 [a]).

Webermann has recorded a particular sense of satisfaction over the agreement reached with the local North Russian government. There had been friction, but suddenly the Russians allowed the documentation of the Estonians in the area. Webermann and Schmidt acted quickly: they published an appeal to their fellow countrymen in a local newspaper, devised a simple document in Estonian, English and Russian and set up a basic vetting procedure. The agreement ensured that the Estonians were exempted from Russian mobilisation (Webermann, 1923:88-102). It had

been a serious concern that if the Estonians were needed at home they should be free to go and not find themselves caught up in some Russian fighting. Webermann was also pleading with Piip for some credentials to be sent to him; “otherwise there would be no official basis [for the local Russian government] to accept our representative.” (ERA 1583/1/47 [d])

The positive arrangements with the Russians, however, did not last. A call for the Estonians to return to homeland came at the end of November and a week later general mobilisation was announced in North Russia. A period of uncertainty followed. The Estonians appealed to Ironside. The general, who had been friendly towards the Estonians all along, saw no reason for creating obstacles and London agreed that the men were free to go home if they so wished. By comparison, the French were slow to release the Estonians, but praised them highly (ERA 495/10/9 [a]). The Russians, however, created difficulties because they badly needed every man available, even if he had been registered as an Estonian.

The Foreign Office in London had a few months previously considered the potential conflict between Estonian passports and Russian mobilisation when Piip had applied to issue passports there. For London it was also matter of *de jure* recognition “if, by recognising Esthonian passports, we show that we consider Esthonia as separate from Russia.” There were the Poles and Ukrainians similarly clamouring for recognition and so it was decided to “let M. Piip issue passports merely as certificates of identity, laying it down at the same time that holders of such passports are not thereby absolved from their obligations as former Russian subjects.” (PRO FO 371/3308/123134) And although Webermann had in vein asked Piip for passport blanks to be sent from London, it is quite likely that the identity documents issued in Archangel and London were similar, focusing on the bearer’s ethnic origin.

Piip was very much interested in the Estonians’ success in Archangel, as he saw Estonian freedom directly dependent on an Allied victory. “For this reason I *de facto* recognised as correct that Estonian citizens serve in the Allied force ... in line with the English-Russian convention,” he said. “The Russian Bolshevik government protested but I in essence supported this obligation so that large numbers of our citizens would serve as part of this country’s forces.” (ERA 1619/1/1 [b])

### 3. Schmidt in charge of Estonian repatriation

Webermann, who had been the official Estonian representative in Archangel since November, left for London in February 1919. At that point Laidoner put Schmidt in charge of the Estonians' return passage. Laidoner also cabled to Ironside: "Please if possible undertake necessary steps to release all Esthonians serving at Expeditionary Force for purpose of transferring to Esthonia. Kindly furnish them with equipment and provision for account of Esthonian temporary government's war department. Have authorized Lieutenant August Schmidt Intelligence to arrange despatch." (ERA 495/7/5497 [a]; ERA 495/10/65 [b]) Henceforth it was Schmidt alone who argued with the French, British and Russian authorities for the release of the men, often on an individual basis. Numerous letters were written and cables sent, and communication difficulties persisted. Schmidt had arguably better telegraph links with London than with Tallinn, possibly because Lindley had allowed the Estonians to use the British courier service (ERA 31/1/39 [b]; ERA 1583/1/47 [b]). But Schmidt was often in the dark about events at home and was looking forward to receiving Estonian newspapers (ERA 957/8/33 [a]).

Laidoner had meanwhile returned to Tallinn and become the commander-in-chief of the Estonian forces. The Bolsheviks had attacked from the northeast and this started the Estonian War of Independence. In his desire to speed up the arrival of the men from North Russia, Laidoner asked Col. Thornhill, chief of intelligence in Archangel, for Schmidt's release so that he could concentrate on the job of repatriation. Schmidt was concerned: "In order to give me more liberty and independency in my actions it is not necessary to release me from my present occupation at the British Headquarters because then I had to join the Russian army that I am not willing to do at all," he told Laidoner. "If the British War Office does not release me please arrange for me to stay on attached to the Headquarters as an Estonian officer wearing an Estonian uniform and being paid by the British War Office as I am in active British service." Laidoner's laconic acceptance of the young man's plea is impressive. He has just written across the top of the telegram: "Do as Schmidt says." (ERA 495/10/9 [b]; ERA 495/10/65 [c])

Schmidt was obviously working well for the British because Colonel Thornhill refused to release him but told Laidoner that "there is no reason

that he should not attend to the duties you require in addition to his other duties of censorship.” (ERA 495/10/65 [d]) The War Office in London described Schmidt as an officer who was “performing important work” and this required him to wear British uniform (ERA 957/1/1070 [a]). Confusingly Schmidt himself, however, told Tallinn in July that he had been released from the British service at his own request ever since March 27<sup>th</sup>. “I am at present an Estonian officer. I was asked, however, and succumbed, so now I’m working at the English headquarters as a volunteer. In every other respect I consider myself as falling under the Estonian headquarters.” (ERA 495/10/65 [e])

Schmidt seems to have been successful in his dispatch of the men. By the time he left Archangel in October 1919 he had secured the release of all but nine of the Estonians whom the Russians would not release because “the Russian troops’ commander-in-chief would no longer bend to the Allied commander-in-chief and thus forbade the release of Estonians from the Russian forces.” (ERA 495/10/21 [b])

The very first group of Estonian officers travelled on land, across Finland, and arrived safely in Tallinn in March 1919. Subsequent transports proved more difficult. During the winter the sea was frozen and the Swedes took a long time to process the transit visas required. Once the visas were issued it was no longer safe to use the land route. Money was constantly short although Laidoner in March sent GBP 300 with a promise of further GBP 1000 that does not seem to have materialised. The British and French demand that the men leaving for Estonia surrender their uniforms or pay for them created what seemed to be an insurmountable difficulty. Schmidt was at a loss until he ran into Count Sollohub, the Polish military representative, who was ready to help. The Count very kindly produced civilian clothes and waived the charges (ERA 495/10/21 [c]). Tallinn also helpfully decided that every soldier should receive 1000 marks but that was to be paid only on arrival in Estonia (ERA 495/10/9 [c]).

Navigation started late in Archangel but even when the ice melted there were no ships to carry the returnees. The British, who had from the start been helpful, offered to take the men as far as Britain but how would they then get home? The Estonian Legation that Ants Piip had set up in London was short of funds and manpower. It was temporarily run by Jaan Kopwillem while Piip was at the Paris Peace Conference. Everything in

those days was in short supply except for unlimited stocks of determination and enthusiasm.

However, as many as 300 men – “the legion and civilians” - were eventually transported from Archangel to Tallinn (ERA 957/1/1070 [b]; ERA 957/8/33 [b]). Despite numerous telegrams the details of homeward journeys are scant and it is near impossible to put together a clear picture. Despite initial talk of shipping, a large number travelled across land through Finland and Schmidt was concerned about the small amounts of cash he was able to give each man for the journey (ERA 495/10/21 [c]). Another 104 Estonians were evacuated in August. Tallinn had firmly decided to place its trust in Schmidt well before the top commanders had clapped eyes on him: instructions to allow into the country everybody documented by Schmidt were issued as early as March (ERA 957/8/92; ERA 957/8/39).

The North Russian venture came to an end in the autumn of 1919 and Schmidt left Archangel in October. The failure of the project was not unexpected: the intervention had been limping along ever since the armistice. The troop departure, however, affected not only soldiers who were leaving but the locals who stayed behind. Considerable disillusionment had been building up over the months. When the British troops withdrew the people of Archangel and Murmansk were literally abandoned and in due course the Bolsheviks carried out reprisals. One of the commanders sent to organise the evacuation, Maj-Gen. Sir C. Maynard, was dismayed that “the Bolsheviks were given ample warning of our contemplated evacuation, which was announced officially in our Press many months before it commenced.” (Maynard, 1928:240) He said that as an individual he was delighted to go home, but the troop withdrawal he found disheartening because of his concern for the local population.

What did August Schmidt feel? As there are no letters, one can only speculate. He may have felt more positive than Maynard because his Estonian efforts were largely constructive. It is curious, however, that Schmidt seems not to have referred to Archangel in any of his subsequent correspondence, even when writing to individuals who had also taken part in the intervention. No doubt he learnt a lot in North Russia: he improved his English, came to understand the basics of diplomacy and learnt a few lessons in compromise. When years later he found himself in a frustrating situation in London he behaved very much as Gen. Ironside had in

Archangel, just soldiering on despite adversity. Ironside, however, had his diary to trust his doubts and innermost thoughts to and his diary has survived. Schmidt, it seems, shared his thoughts only with his wife Alice. He was close to his brother-in-law Felix as well. Felix fought in the War of Independence on Estonian soil and later became vice-president of the Bank of Estonia only to be arrested by the Soviets in 1941. He died in a Soviet labour camp in 1947.

Disappointingly, Schmidt's British service records do not seem to have survived; they may have perished in the Second World War, or may be held elsewhere because of his intelligence links. The latter were to play an important role in his later life, not least because he had met Harry Carr (Henry Lambton Carr) in Archangel. Carr was a fluent Russian speaker interpreting for Gen. Ironside; Carr and Schmidt were two young men of similar age and disposition working in the same HQ building. Carr later became the controller of the Northern Area of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS).

Schmidt made friends easily in those days, it seems. Even during a stopover in Helsinki on his way back home he ran into Sir Park Goff MP who was to remember their meeting fondly many years later, in 1934. (ERA 957/14/7)

Schmidt's service in North Russia earned him two British medals but, curiously, he was only able to collect his Allied Victory and General Service Medals much later, in 1937, with the help of the Directorate of Military Intelligence. He had by then been posted to London where the Foreign Office observed him wearing his newly-acquired decorations "with the keenest pride." (PRO FO 371/23689 N5102/518/38)

In 1919, however, Schmidt spent only a few days in London on his way home. The Estonian Legation had just moved from rented premises to the newly-purchased town house at 167 Queen's Gate. The 7-storey building designed by Sir Mervyn Macartney and completed in 1890 (Moore & Pick, 1985:96-97) looks impressive today and may have impressed Schmidt then. At the time he could not have possibly foreseen that 15 years later he would return and spend the rest of his life at that address. He was yet to choose between a military and diplomatic career. Soon after his arrival in Tallinn on October 29<sup>th</sup> he was appointed military attaché to Lithuania where he stayed for the next three years.

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