

Christian Schacht

Niedersächsisches Staatsarchiv, Wolfenbüttel: 299 AN 289. Letter, dated 25th August 1815, from Oboist (*Boiste*) Ernst Christian Schacht, Giffhorn Landwehr Battalion, to his parents in Ettenbüttel (translated from German):

I cannot desist from writing to you once again, but please read this letter carefully as it is impossible for me to describe everything, and I only recall the main events that occurred.

On Friday 16th June, at 4 o'clock in the morning the loud drum called us to move out. In front of Halle, a small town, the battalion assembled and so forth. At 11 o'clock we heard the thunder of the cannon. Rumour spread that the Bradanters [sic] were practising. The general order said that we should move to Waterloo, and we arrived there by 2 o'clock, when we saw three regiments marching hastily along the high road. The cannonade became more intense, and now we were told that the attack had begun and that it was the beginning of the battle. What a thought! One thought after another, one sigh after another was sent up to God. Everybody lost courage and nothing helped. All we could do was search for our courage once again. We remained at Waterloo until half past 5, and we saw 40,000 Dutchmen retire with many wounded; the word spread that there was no chance against the French who were too strong.

At half past 5 we marched into battle with the song 'We lead a free life'. The terrible cannon fire came closer and closer. At half past 9 in the evening we saw the corpse of the Duke of Brunswick. We camped for the night in a green meadow by the village of Niwel [sic]. The following morning, the 17th, at 2 o'clock, the cannon woke us again. At 5 we marched through Niwel and for half an hour towards Quatre Bras, a single tenant's farm where the enemy attack was in progress. We all believed that our lives would end very soon. At 11 o'clock we wheeled round and retired slowly for three hours as far as the village of Waterloo. Now with speed 180 cannon had to be in position first. At 7 o'clock in the evening the fiery muzzles were spitting across the field (in a circle of three miles), and then suddenly everything was over. A violent rain storm began and lasted throughout the night. I will never forget that night for the rest of my life.

The following morning, Sunday 18th, there was nothing to do except wait. Under a bright sun and open sky we tried to obtain food so that at least our stomachs would be satisfied. But it was all in vain. The food was prepared and ready to be served, but it had to be thrown onto the ground at 11 o'clock when the cannon started to fire, one after the other as if everything should be shattered. 500 terrible muzzles pounded and fought at the same time, and the muskets joined the fray, which added to the calls and laments of the pitiful wounded. I cannot express this adequately with my pen. The French left wing attacked our right, where the English stood. We occupied a small range of heights. Thus, we were able to see everything. A square, 8 men deep, was formed. We remained in this formation for three hours until 2 o'clock. During this time more than 80 balls flew narrowly over our heads. At last some came lower and struck us, killing and mutilating some and wounding others. We witnessed such cruelty in this way, it was butchery. I am trembling as I write. My pen is too weak to describe such pitiful





misery. And so from 2 until 7 o'clock it was wretched. Finally, at 9 o'clock at night we heard: 'Hurrah, hurrah, victory, victory!' The victory was ours. May the Lord Almighty God be praised! Yet the field was consecrated as a cemetery. There were dead men everywhere. Thousands upon thousands had lost their lives, merely for the sake of their country. Seeing all of this made me lose all sense. Yes, I could only pray: 'Lead me, Lord, and guide me.' Thus, I thought of you during these three days on a great many occasions. It was the most terrible time and I pictured my family before my eyes, in the hope of seeing you once again. God in his wisdom will grant this, which is why I am able to recount everything so clearly. This account causes my heart to flutter, the veins to beat, and as I continue I remember you with great joy. I would like to tell you this story again very soon, and my tongue will fly. But I cannot do this now for I am too far away.

We are encamped close to the capital Paris, and are 62 hours distant from Brussels. For a fortnight we marched from sunrise until sunset, with hardly a drink or food, and having to spend the night in the open. Yesterday we secured billets for the next eight days in a town called Saint Denis, an hour from Paris. I do not want to remember the miserable experiences of the past any more, and so I will tell you about my quarters. Here we drink French wine. Let me drink to your very good health. Three cheers to us all! I recommend myself to you with this friendly impression. With the help of our gracious Lord Almighty, I will close with the verse: 'Stay pious and do right. Stay upright before God, who gave life to all and who will save life in the future.' I will try to give you the very latest news of the war. More Prussians arrived each day, as well as more English. A cruel army is here now, and the troops march into France and Louis XVIII has been brought back. The whereabouts of Napoleon is known only to God Almighty! How much longer we are going to remain here I cannot say. On the 24th July we had a great review, where the King of France, along with our Duke of Wellington, the Tsar of Russia and the King of Prussia, in short very many princes and generals appeared: a total of 200 important persons. A parade took place before the royal castle in Paris. 180 thousand men participated and marched past these worldly majesties. I was much surprised at the size of this great army, which marched from 5 o'clock in the morning until 5 in the evening. There are arms of all kinds stationed everywhere, however, one or two men fall ill daily. I was ill for three weeks. But thanks be to God that I am well again. By the way drill takes place every day close to our camp. The following items are delivered to us daily: bread, meat, wood and some wine. But starters are always lacking. I would never have believed in my youth that people fare as I do now, especially as my father and mother are so far away. I am not the only guilty one. The wisest order is valid for the right of the country. May I ask you to keep this letter with my others until I return home. I hope that my wish will come true and that I will soon be able to greet you all, yes all, a thousand times. I am your humblest and devoted son, brother, brother-in-law, as ever. Christian Schacht.