

THE FIRST ZOMI EXPOSURE TO THE WORLD

-Rev. G. K. Nang

The Zomis were first exposed to the world as labor corps during WWI (1914-1918). The recruitment for labor corps was launched by the War Committee in London in 1916. The recruitment of Labor Corps was on voluntary basis to the British government but it was compulsory recruitment by the order of the Chin Hills Superintendent to the chiefs to supply certain number of labor corps from their respective jurisdictions. They reluctantly joined the recruitment offering themselves to die in a foreign land and with no hope of returning alive. Indian Labor Corps included the following tribes: Hindu Mohammedans from the United Province, Shyntengs and other tribes from the Khasi Hills, the Lushais, the Nagas, the Manipuris, the Santals from Bihar and Orissa, the Pathans from the North-West Frontier, the Burmans and Chins, the Bengalis and Kumaons.

Out of 3,000 from the Chin Hills, 1,000 came from the Zomis of northern Chin Hills leaving Tedim on May 27, 1917 to Gunkhawm and proceeded to Yangon by train led by Capt. E.O. Fowler (Vum Kho Hau 1990:152). Those Zomis from India went to Syhlet in Chittagong, to Akyab and then to Yangon meeting their friends from the Chin Hills in Yangon. Leaving in a Ship from Yangon to Kolkata, Mumbai, Eden, Suez Canal the group reached Marseilles in France on Aug 15, 1917. Their position was on the border of France and Belgium about 25 miles away from the war zone. Their duty was to pick up the wounded, loading and unloading of military supplies. They worked with whites, blacks, Indians and Nagas (Gin Za Tuang 1973:43). They were in 61 & 62 (Burma) India Company. Their place of duty was started in Marseilles to Meaulte Farm,

then to Fricourt–Salvage, moved from 3rd Army to Abancourt, then Rouen, and back to Marseilles until repatriation from Taranto.

Due to cold weather and illness 24 of 1,000 Zomis died. Suan Thang, Zuan Pum, Kai Gin, Maha Peng, Gin Dam, Ngul Gin, Pau Pum, Son Neng, Thang Eng, Tut Lang, Tuang Pum, Vial Dam, Vum Dai, Gin Nang, Kam Nang, Go Kam, Sian Lut, Lang Za Khen, Kam Ngul, Tual Kim, Lun Kap, Khup Za Dal, Khoi Cin, Cin Khai were buried in a foreign land in the war cemetery in France.

Upon the invitation of King George V the following persons Mang Pum, Thawng Za Kai, Song Theu, Kam Za Mang, Vung Za Kham, Thuam Pau, Vial Zen, Hau Za Nang, Hang Khaw Cin and Cin Kam met the King led by Capt. E.O. Fowler on March 27, 1918 in Buckingham Palace, London (Gin Za Tuang 1973:43).

They returned home after one and a half years in France due to the “native insurrection” at Haka in November of 1917. The Haka people who refused to send their men to France revolted against the British colonial rule. In 1917 they raised an army of 5,000 and sieged the Haka camp. They cut off the road between Falam and Haka. The relief column of the British party was attacked by the Haka party on their way to Haka in which there were thirty or forty casualties and 18 villages were burnt. This was called the “Anglo-Chin War” 1917-1919 which resulted in the withdrawal of the Labor Corps from France (Laura Hardin Carson 1925:226-231). On hearing the war at home the Zomi Labor Corps demanded for release. After a strong demand they were allowed to return to their homeland. It was known as “Piantit Pai” (A trip to France, Piantit–Burmese term for France). They expressed their excitement to return home in a song.

- (a) Pian tui a gam lei aw e, sial zatam tuang a tunna,
- (b) Sial zatam pian tui ngak hen aw, I sau lam zong ta ni e.

(Gin Za Tuang 1973:44)

- (a) Oh land of France, the land where unending worries amounted,
 - (b) Let all worries remain with France as we found our way home again.
- (Translation is mine)

They were impressed by the war, the planes, the ships and the guns. It was undoubtedly an immense exploration for the Zomi boys. They had endless tales of their experience and adventures. On their return they brought enough money to pay for the bride they want to marry. Their world view was completely changed and some even changed their belief to Christianity. It was the first exposure to the modern world for the Zomis after meeting with English King in London. The King praised the Zomi labor corps for their commendable service and told them that their good service would be remembered (Pau Za Gin 1972:4). There were positive and negative results of Labor Corps in France.

Positive results:

1. Economically the people who went to France were better off than those who did not. They were not only exposed to the world but they earned money which was unknown in the past (Vumson 1986:134).
2. It promotes Christian growth among the Zomis. In 1918 there were 500 Christians in the whole of Chin State and by 1926 the Christian population reached 4,046 and most of the Christians come from the Tedim area in the north (Lian Sakhong 2000:253).
3. The British government had recruited the returnees from France into regular army to form the “First Chin Battalion” soon after WWI. The officers of the First Chin Battalion like Major Son Kho Lian (1962) and Lt.Col.E.K. Kim Ngin (1988)

became prominent and influential leaders in the Zomi Baptist Convention (Lian Sakhong 2000:252-254).

4. Modern dress has been introduced among the Zomi people as the Labor Corps returnees adopted short pant for the first time. Following this experience Zomis adopted western dress as more and more young Zomis joined military service (Gin Khan Khual 1998:57).

Negative results:

1. E.O. Fowler did not fulfill his promise to grant each a house of teak and land of 25 acres on their return in Kalay valley saying that they did not fulfill their term of service. They came back on hearing the Chin revolt at home in 1918-1919 (Tonzang Jubilee Laibu 2004:103).

2. In Indian Territory, the Kuki people in Manipur refused to send their men to France. As a result the British forces of 100 rifles were sent to subdue them. The Kukis defended themselves from the attack. The combat took two years from later part of 1917 to 1919 in which 86 villages were burnt. It is known as "Anglo-Kuki War" 1917-1919 (Vumson 1986:135-137).

References.

Carson, Laura Hardin,

1927 *Pioneer Trails, Trials and Triumphs*. New York: Baptist Board of Education. Unpublished.

Gin, Pau Za

1972 "Tedim Gam Tangthu a Tomin" (Short History of Tedim Area). Universities, Rangoon Chin Literature and Culture Annual Magazine. Rangoon: Magazine Committee

Hau, Vum Kho,

1990 *History of the Zoumi Chin Race*. Rept. (First print 1947). Edited by Tualchin Neihzial. Lamka, Manipur: Zougam Research Publications.

Khual, Gin Khan,

1998 “*I Zo Ngeina Puante*” (*Zo Dress*) in ZOLUS Journal, NO.3. Yangon: The Zomi Literature Upliftment Society.

Sakhong, Lian,

2000 *Religion and Politics*. Uppsala: Uppsala University.

Tonzang Jubilee Laibu. 2004. Ed. Hang Khan Pau. Tonzang: Tonzang Jubilee Celebration Central Committee.

Tuang, Gin Za,

1973 *Zomi Innkuan Laibu*. (History of Zomi Family). Tedim, Chin State: Author.

Vumson, Suantak

1986 *Zo History*. Aizawl, Mizoram: Author.