

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 565

ROINN



COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 565

Witness

Professor Liam O'Briain,  
University College,  
Dublin.

Identity.

Member of I.R.B. 1916;  
Professor of Romance Languages,  
University College, Galway.

Subject.

Projected importation of arms from Italy,  
1920.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. ....S.1659....

Form B.S.M. 2

ORIGINAL

Galway  
12-8-1951

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 565

With regard to my journey to Italy in September 1920, about which a letter from the BÚRO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21, of the 25<sup>th</sup> July (S.1659) asks me for information, I beg to state as follows:

In the summer of 1920, being then professor of Romance languages in University College, Galway, since 1917, I thought I might make a short trip to France for professional reasons. I applied for a passport without much hope of getting it, but after an interview with the Police Commissioner stationed in Galway, Cruise, it was granted to me. In Dublin, I ~~was~~ happened to mention to Michael Collins that I had a passport for France and he immediately asked me could I get one for Italy. I rang up a former fellow-student of mine in U.C.D. then a Castle official and he got me the extension to Italy without difficulty or delay. On informing Michael Collins of this, he told me to go to ~~the~~ Genoa, at my leisure, and get in touch with Denis Hales there. He gave me his address - a post-box address - and also a sheet of paper with a Gaelic M on it - M — which he said ~~was~~ was "my passport" to show to Hales. After a few days in France I went on to Genoa and there met Hales and showed him my "passport," which ~~was~~ quite satisfied him. Denis Hales was

a brother of Sean Hales and Tom Hales and had been living in Italy for years. He was married to an Italian, spoke the language like a native and was doing useful propaganda work for us in the Italian press. He showed me one or two of his articles. It is worth mentioning that he had an office in Genoa, which I visited, on the door of which, in the street, he had a big brass plate with inscribed on it in large letters, the words; "Agente Consolare della Repubblica Irlandese." In 1920!

I gave Hales my message. It was simply to say: "yes", to him; meaning "Go ahead with your project". Although Mick Collins had given me some hint - I cannot remember precisely <sup>how much</sup> ~~what~~ he told me - it was Hales who <sup>really</sup> told me what it was all about. Some Italian officers had approached him - or perhaps he had approached them,

I cannot be sure which. At any rate they were extraordinarily sympathetic to Ireland's cause, and their proposition was as follows; Italy was full at the time of surrendered Austrian war material.

Much of it was being sold for scrap. There would be no difficulty in handing over to us as many machine guns, rifles and <sup>rounds of</sup> ~~ammunition~~ ammunition as we desired,

provided the money was forthcoming. In the account books of the Italian war department, the entry could be made that

this material had been sold as scrap to some Jew in Amsterdam or Oslo", as Hales put it, and, as the money would be there for it, no further questions would be asked. The material would be put on lighters in the Tiber and thence sent ~~to~~ out to sea. ~~outside~~ It was for the Irish to transfer the material to a ship and get ~~it~~ it to Ireland - and land it there. Such was the proposition Hales had put to Collins and for which he awaited approval or authorisation. This authorisation I had brought him. He would now go ahead with the project with all speed, he told me.

This really ends my personal ~~story~~ narrative of this episode. Nothing else I have to say is really at first hand. Except one little detail. I know that Joe Vize, Mick Collins' "admiral" as he used to be called, was ~~to~~ to be in it. On my return to Dublin, having reported to Collins that I had accomplished my mission, he asked me to mention my travelling expenses. I said not to bother, but he insisted, almost ordered in fact. I said reluctantly ten pounds. Meeting him again, about a month later, he said: "don't think I forgot your ten pounds, they were in Joe Vize's pocket for you when he was

(4)

arrested" That would be in October 1920.

I was arrested myself in November 1920 and in April 1921 found myself in the same hut in the Rath Camp on the Curragh with Joe Vige. He confirmed that he had had ten pounds in his pocket for me when he was arrested. This was one of the minor details of the big operation he was to undertake in connection with the transshipment of these arms.

My trip to Italy took place in September 1920 - during Jerry M'Sweeney's hungerstrike, with which all Europe was ringing. Sean-T. O'Kelly was in Italy while I was there. I met him on my return to Paris. He had just returned too. I know he was engaged on some project about arms and ~~was~~ met Mussolini just at that time, but whether it was the same project as Denis Hales' or another, I have never been quite able to ascertain.

This Italian project is mentioned at length in Eoin O'Malley's book "On Another Man's Wound" and in Tom Barry's book "Guerrilla Days in Ireland" chap. 21. They both describe a meeting of all the senior officers of the Southern Divisions to arrange for the landing of the material - in April 1921. But after that meeting nothing further happened. I wrote to Tom Barry asking him did he know anything more

and he replied to me, that he believed that Mick Collins after a while came to the conclusion that Denis Hales had been too optimistic; that he had been promising more than he was in a position to fulfil. A statement from ~~Barry~~ Barry to Supplement what he has in his book should be obtained, if I may venture to make the suggestion.

I did hear, I cannot recall where, that some ship officer from Cork was sent to Italy in connection with this matter.

Some years ago I wrote a long and detailed description of this trip to Italy in September 1920, in Irish, in the student's paper "Comhar." This may yet form part of the second volume of my memoirs "Cúimhne Cúinn"; if that second volume ever comes out.

Liam O'Brian  
12<sup>th</sup> August 1951

COPY.

GALWAY.

12.8.1951.

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( Signed).

Liam O Briain.

12th August 1951.

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