

GERMAN SOLDIER CAPTURES DIFFERENT VIEW OF WWI

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By AMY DAVIS

Their young faces smile from black-and-white photographs, even during war time.

Some smoke cigarettes. Others pause for a haircut. Most seem to be making the most of the downtime between the battles they fought a century ago while wearing grey wool tunics and field caps featuring black, white and red buttons — the symbol of their homeland. Germany.



(Pictured: Cookeville museums manager Beth Thompson and Tennessee Tech University history professor Mike Birdwell look through World War I images the German perspective. An exhibit featuring the photos opens Saturday at the Cookeville History Museum).

Amy Davis | Herald-Citizen

One of their own, soldiers Fritz Einstein, captured it all on the camera he carried on the Eastern front of World War I between 1915 and 1918.

Those photos — which his son, Frank Einstein of Nashville, has been restoring — are now part of a new exhibit that opens Saturday at the Cookeville History Museum with a reception from 1-4 p.m. at 40 E. Broad St.

“It’s really cool to have the opportunity to show World War I from a different perspective,” Beth Thompson, Cookeville museums manager, said. “We’re used to seeing everything from the American point of view.”

The exhibit, “World War I: A View From the Eastern Front,” is also being sponsored by the Tennessee Tech University Archives, Tennessee Great War Commission and Library of America.

“The photos portray Fritz’s experiences,” Thompson said. “There are a lot of real-life moments that show a different side of war — the human side. I think people will find it interesting.”

Coinciding with the exhibit, a lecture titled “Not So Quiet on the Eastern Front” will be presented at 1 p.m. at Cookeville City Hall, which is across the street from the museum,

by Vejas Liulevicius, director of the Center for War and Society at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.

“For the most part, the only thing Americans, especially Tennesseans, know about World War I is Alvin C. York,” TTU history professor Michael Birdwell said of the Fentress County native, whose life was portrayed in the 1941 film “Sergeant York.”

York, one of the most decorated soldiers of the war, received the Medal of Honor for leading an attack on a German machine gun nest, killing at least 28 soldiers and capturing 132 others.

“Now we’re seeing the other front,” Birdwell continued. “The Western front was brutal, but the Eastern front was even more so in some ways because they had to contend with the Russian weather.

“It’s a part of the war that’s not nearly as well known in the United States.”

Around 60 photos will be displayed on the museum’s walls. Many others will be shown digitally.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Frank Einstein said of the exhibit featuring his father’s photos, most of which he believes were taken in Romania. “I’m happy they are being shown.”

Einstein — whose family is distantly related to renowned theoretical physicist Albert Einstein — offered the photos for the exhibit after having met Birdwell a couple of years earlier at the Ohio Valley History Conference at Austin Peay State University.

Birdwell, who also serves as state chair of the Tennessee Great War Commission, then took the idea to Thompson, who was eager to make space available at the history museum.

“This is helping to bring awareness to the 100th anniversary of World War I,” Birdwell said.

Even though Einstein has a visual history of his father’s service in the German artillery, he said he never heard much about the war from the man himself.

“He didn’t really talk about it,” he said. “But I do remember he said that after the war he threw his medals and pistol into the sewer. He was pretty disgusted with war.”

Einstein said the belief at the time in Germany was that the war would be short.

“Many people joined up in the beginning because they thought it would be over by Christmas of 1914 — which, of course, it wasn’t,” he said. “But that was the expectation.”

In an ironic twist, the young soldier later had to escape from the country he fought for.

“He had to flee from Hitler,” Einstein said, noting that his family was “Jewish enough” to qualify for persecution during World War II. “He was, I think, about to be arrested by the Gestapo.”

Fritz, who was from Hamburg, left Germany around 1936. His wife, who also escaped the country, was from Breslau. They met in the United States and lived in New York City.

Their son, Frank, now retired, came to Tennessee originally to teach at Fisk University in Nashville. He later became self-employed, working to prevent the death penalty.

He said he’s been to Germany a couple of times for his own view of his parents’ homeland — a view that was far different from that of his father’s photos.

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