

## PRISONERS OF JAN SMUTS: ITALIAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN SOUTH AFRICA IN WWII

by KAREN HORN

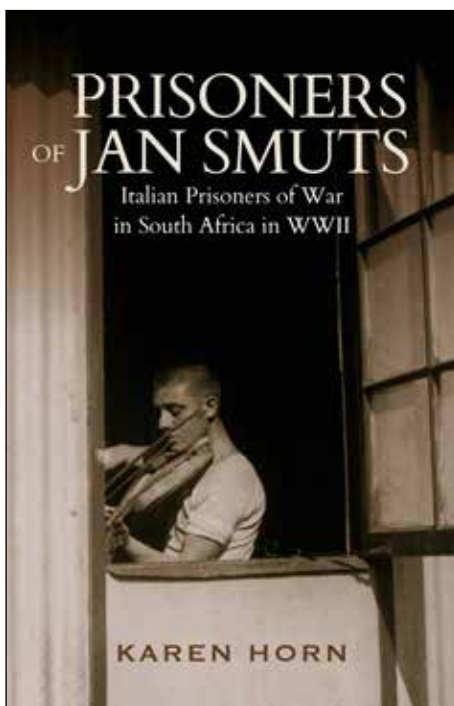
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RELUCTANT soldiers who readily surrendered, then enjoyed a largely contented and creative life in South African prisoner of war (PoW) camps with many staying on, or returning, after the war as emigrants: that is a nostalgic stereotype perpetuated as history. But Karen Horn regards it as myth encouraged by a lack of research and writing; and proves her point by looking in particular at five individuals. The general background story of 100 000 prisoners is not neglected.

Jan Smuts was keen to take on Italian prisoners to show South Africa's commitment to the Allied cause; but also because it was suffering from labour shortages in the construction and farming sectors. However, as Horn notes, most Italian soldiers had known nothing but the requirements of a fascist state and the cult of Benito Mussolini. Among them were hardline fascists and there were fears they might link up with the many Axis sympathisers in South Africa, especially among camp guards, Union Defence Force (UDF) soldiers who had declined to serve outside the country. For the same reasons, Smuts refused to take more than a handful of German PoWs.

Most PoWs entered the country via Durban and stayed at the Pietermaritzburg transit camp before being transferred to Zonderwater near Cullinan. Initially the situation was one of chaos. Resources were scarce, all the more so because Smuts seemed to have scant regard for the Geneva Convention. For instance, PoWs were accommodated in tents in violation of the convention. This chaotic camp was called tentopolis by its prisoners. Those in administrative control were concerned that the country's reputation would be impaired by these conditions and that South African PoWs might be vulnerable to retaliation.

Outside employment was offered to those prepared to sign a co-operation agreement. Some of the signatories were opportunists enacting pseudo-escapes by falsely claiming skills and hiding their backgrounds; but all became potential enemies of hardline fascists



who regarded them as collaborators. Labour camps were set up across South Africa attended by fears about security as prisoners now fell, in part, under civilian supervision. At a maximum there were 4 000 PoWs working on farms and this caused some public disquiet. Construction labour was also contested with resentment about allocations of scarce bricks and tools.

At Zonderwater a lack of amenities induced boredom and an epidemic of theft, although some of this was in the interests of entertainment and meaningful activity. All irredeemable fascists were concentrated in one block at Zonderwater. But in late 1942

they fomented unrest and engaged in violence against work volunteers. This was followed by a mutiny of Cape Corps guards over delayed pay and, ironically, PoWs helped to restore order. (This would not be the last time trusted prisoners were used to maintain discipline.) This unrest followed firing on prisoners deemed to be too close to the camp fence by trigger-happy guards. There had also been an epidemic of escapes, although exact numbers were never clear because of inefficient roll calls exacerbated by ignorance and confusion around Italian names. While some PoWs simply accepted their fate and awaited repatriation, the general stereotype of the docile prisoner was clearly flawed.

After the 1942 crisis, Colonel H.F. Prinsloo was placed by Smuts in charge of Zonderwater. He had been a childhood occupant of a concentration camp in the Anglo-Boer War at Barberton. Considered a genius at human relations, he was to demonstrate discipline mixed with kindness and empathy and Zonderwater became more liveable. Regarded as the PoW redeemer, he understood barbed-wire psychosis and the need to improve self-esteem among the living casualties of war through mental and physical activity.

A 26-hectare vegetable garden was established; brooms, baskets and beehives were manufactured. The creative arts flourished and Zonderwater and Pietermaritzburg had multiple orchestras. One budding

impresario became over-ambitious and proposed a touring PoW orchestra, which caused consternation among the censors reading his mail. At Zonderwater the hair of horses and mules was stolen to make strings and brushes with similar military outrage. Zonderwater was in fact a small city. Its educational facilities helped 4 000 PoWs to learn to read. Its sporting facilities catered for football, boxing, athletics; and, perhaps surprisingly, fencing.

The fall of Mussolini, the surrender of Italy and the German occupation created new fissures among the PoWs. Unrealistic expectations of repatriation and the creation of a pro-Allied PoW corps were soon dashed. Hardline fascists became more committed; although as Horn observes they were now safer at Zonderwater than they would be in Rome. News from an Italy wrecked by war was uniformly depressing and for some PoWs the attractions of South Africa increased. Italy was no longer an Axis belligerent, yet the status of prisoners remained unchanged; a PoW limbo.

Escapes continued, in particular from farms in the eastern Transvaal to Mozambique. There is a suggestion that the fascist Ossewabrandwag and railway police might have had a hand in this. Given changed war conditions, forbidden fraternisation was either ignored or misunderstood by prisoners and civilians. Given the chaos in Europe after May 1945, there was considerable sympathy for Italian prisoners, but the complex processes of repatriation could take up to two years. Returning South African troops were often angry to find former enemies at home, sometimes threatening job opportunities. And there was the problem of recalcitrant fascists unwanted back in Italy.

Zonderwater closed in March 1947 with 86 PoWs at large. The fascists, who had produced their own newspaper (*La Carretta*) advertising black market goods in a telling example of freedom of speech, were moved to Pietermaritzburg where they continued their disruption. Required to do some minor construction work as a technicality to secure their repatriation it was found to be daubed with slogans lauding *Il Duce*.

The number of prisoners who stayed in South Africa was officially recorded as 870; and thousands would

return as emigrants. They form the core of a community of South Africans now recognisable only by their surnames. Two of the most notable are Gatti (Aurelio of ice cream fame) and Fiasconaro (Gregorio, pioneer of South African opera).

In a city in which history is being obliterated (non-racial sportsgrounds) or being allowed to collapse (much Victorian-era architecture), the presence of Italian PoWs in Pietermaritzburg is surprisingly still evident. The old camp is no longer traceable because of road construction and housing development, but the well-maintained Church of Madonna delle Grazie built by PoWs in 1943 and 1944 is highly visible from the national road inbound from Durban. The transit camp features in Horn's book because one of her subjects, Raffaello Cei, was a permanent cook and a rough picture of its five-year history from 1942 to 1947 can be constructed from his experiences and memories.

It comprised six barracks and could accommodate up to 8 000 inmates. Most of these were PoWs, but there were also batches of civilian internees. It functioned as a labour camp for surrounding farms and PoWs would return on a monthly basis. Perhaps its most famous inmate was the pilot Gregorio Fiasconaro who ran a theatre company and, befriended by an army sergeant, was taken to Durban for radio auditions. Cei, who had to run errands to town, enabled a relationship between Fiasconaro and a local woman Mabel Marie by acting as courier. They married and Fiasconaro was eventually appointed professor of music at University of Cape Town. Their son, Marcello, was a world record holding middle distance runner in the 1970s.

The regime in Pietermaritzburg does seem to have been relatively relaxed, although it would not have been had a plan to move all hardline fascists there come to fruition. The camp's orchestra performed at the city hall; while its manufactures such as jewellery were sold in local shops. Cei was taken on fishing trips by UDF officers as cook. He also visited the museum and would occasionally sleep outside the camp. When he became eligible for repatriation, he turned down the offer of a hotel job and returned to Italy.

The myth may be flawed, but some of it has value.

CHRISTOPHER MERRETT