Chapter 10
Italian Prisoners of War in South Africa During the Second World War: Circumstances and Contributions

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Contents

Abstract On the featureless plains of the South African Highveld, a sign, in Italian, reads *Cimitero Militare Italiano*. The signpost seems strangely out of place in the predominantly Afrikaans cultural landscape. The cemetery honours the 312 Italian prisoners of war (POWs) who remained behind in South Africa when their compatriots left at the end of World War II. Theirs was not a choice; they died waiting for the end of their plight. After the war, some POWs chose to stay in South Africa and adopt the country as their new homeland. Many more returned to South Africa over the next few years. These new South Africans contributed much to their adopted country, but even those that departed and never returned, left an indelible signature on the landscape of South Africa.

Today, more than 73 years after the last Italian POWs were repatriated, their imprint is fading. However, even a cursory investigation reveals their contributions and their importance in shaping modern South Africa. A review of available literature sources and archival material, fieldwork and personal interviews were used as basis for the investigation of this underexplored piece of South African and Italian history. This chapter reports on the circumstances surrounding the incarceration of the Italian POWs, as well as the geographical extent and significance of their contributions to South Africa.

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10.1 Prisoner-of-War Experiences

Life as a prisoner of war (POW) is rarely a pleasant experience. To be robbed of your freedom of movement, put in captivity and, to a varying degree, be deprived of rights you had always taken for granted constitute a serious challenge to most POWs (Pautch 2003). Hickman (2008) alleges that both legitimate and illegitimate purposes for continuing the custody of POWs are adopted by captor states because the captives are not seen as part of the moral community. The moral community, Hickman explains, comprises those people to whom moral obligations are owed because of shared moral values. During war, members of the captor state oftentimes exclude POWs from the moral community. Prisoner-of-war experiences are sometimes described by words such as 'mental and physical hardship', 'great suffering' and 'extreme hardship' (Horn 2011, p. 101) or even 'physical and psychological abuse' and 'horrendous brutality and persistent atrocities' (Sutker et al. 1993, p. 240). It seems as if this was not the case for the Italian POWs in South Africa. Although by no means an enjoyable experience, it seems that the Italian POWs, after a bad start, were generally treated fairly, and many of them used the opportunities available to contribute meaningfully to a number of projects in the country of their captivity. In doing so, they left a geographical footprint over vast areas of South Africa. Although the footprint is fading, both in a physical and psychological sense, it is still obvious for anyone interested in the influences their labour had on contemporary South Africa.

10.2 Italian Prisoners of War in South Africa

On 4 and 5 April 1941, the first Italian POWs arrived from North Africa. According to Moore (1997, p. 123), the early campaigns in 1941 against the Italians were unexpected military successes that generated a 'superabundance' of prisoners. The Italian POWs who were captured early in 1941 were dispatched to the Union of South Africa. They disembarked in Durban, and most of them ended up in Zonderwater,[1] a camp hastily established near Cullinan, east of Pretoria (Delport 2013).

Geography was the driving force behind the location of the camp (Fig. 10.1). Ample space was available at the chosen location. Furthermore, it was close to the capital, Pretoria, but some 6000 km separated Zonderwater from the battlefields of

[1] The meaning of the name 'Zonderwater' is rather ominous. Literarily translated it means 'without water.'

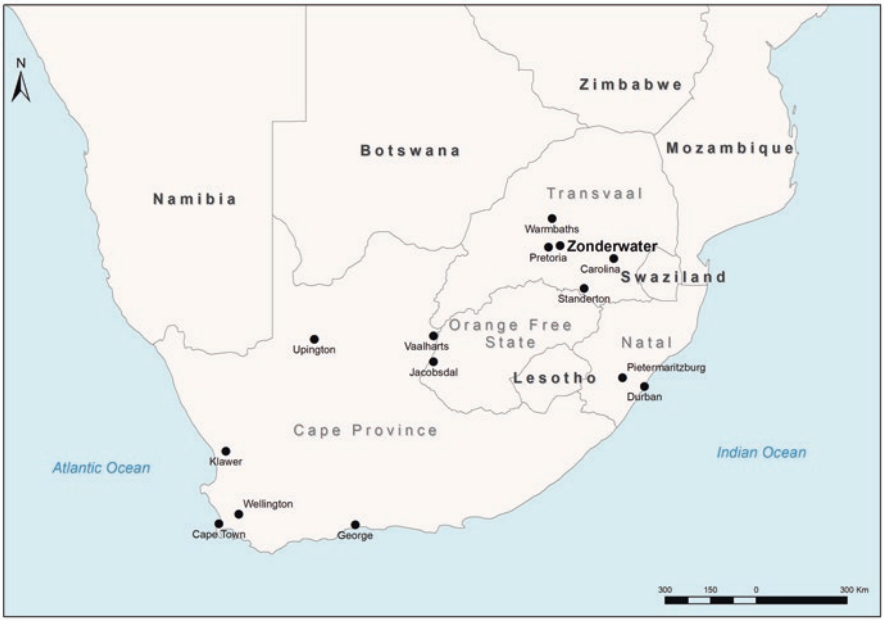

Fig. 10.1 Provinces, major cities and towns relevant to the prisoners of war in South Africa during the Second World War. For clarity, neighbouring countries are indicated by their current names

North Africa. This made successful escape extremely unlikely. A good railway and road network from Durban to Zonderwater made the transport of large numbers of prisoners easy and aided in the provision of supplies. The location also made escape to a sympathetic country unlikely. The nearest friendly country, Mozambique, was nearly 400 km away (Fig. 10.1; Sani, 1992).

Five base camps housed the Italian POWs. Of these, the Zonderwater camp was by far the largest and thus receives the most attention in this paper. The ones at Pietermaritzburg, Standerton, George and Worcester were much smaller. Four transit camps were used to move prisoners from the main disembarkation point at Durban to the various camps or areas of work. A detention centre near George housed cases of misconduct, whereas a convalescence camp near Carolina was used to house POWs recuperating from serious illness, from wounds sustained during battle or from accidents at their place of employment.

A brief note on the peculiar situation of Italian POWs during the Second World War is needed here. At the start of the war and up to 1943, the Italian POWs were treated in accordance with the stipulations of the Geneva Convention (Fedorowich and Moore 1996). Between January and September 1943, with Italy on the verge of surrender, the Allies used prisoners for labour in labour-starved Britain and the Dominions (including South Africa). When Italy surrendered in September 1943 and switched sides, Italian POWs became known as ‘co-belligerents’ and not Allies. This semantic manoeuvre allowed the Allies to bend the international rules

governing the treatment of POWs, allowing them to become 'co-operators', rather than prisoners, engaged in a wide variety of work in exchange for more freedom and payment for their labour (Moore 1997). The reason the Allies did not release the Italian POW immediately, was because they became too valuable in the war effort by providing cheap labour in a labour-scarce environment to simply release them.

10.3 Conditions in South Africa

10.3.1 Initial Conditions and Political Dilemma

South Africa was not ready for the influx of such a large number of POWs.[2] The political situation at the time was also not conducive to the incarceration of POWs. On 4 September 1939, a motion of neutrality brought before Parliament by the Prime Minister, General JBM Hertzog, was defeated by a narrow margin of 13 votes, and General Jan Smuts, the deputy Prime Minister, was asked to form a government. He declared war against Germany on 6 September (Van der Waag 2015). During the early stages of the war, the division in the population between the pro-war group and the anti-war group remained a political dilemma for Smuts. Katz (2012, p. 281) alleged that 'Smuts had to maintain a delicate, political, high-wire act for the remainder of the war, keeping in balance relations with the United Kingdom and harmony back home ….' To exacerbate this situation, the Anglo Boer war concentration camps[3] remained a source of resentment towards Britain for a large part of the South African population. To now house huge numbers of Italians in POW camps was politically fraught with danger – something Smuts realised only too well. To illustrate this point, Fiasconaro (1982, pp. 20–21) related how he marched to Clairwood on his arrival to Durban:

A most extraordinary thing happened to us on the short march. Many people sidled up to us and, glancing furtively round, hurriedly shook hands or patted our shoulders and congratulated us before melting away. Only much later did we understand that these were Afrikaners and other South Africans, who had been totally opposed to the Union's entering the war on the side of the Allies.

Zonderwater was originally a tented camp, named *Tendopoli* or Tent City by the POWs (Somma 2010). The camp commandant was Colonel De Wet (Sani 1992). Conditions were bad, and many POWs were killed by lightning. Considering the flat terrain, almost totally devoid of trees, as well as the long metal centre tent poles, the danger of lightning strikes was obvious.

[2] At the end of the war, more than 100,000 Italians had spent time in South Africa as prisoners of war.

[3] During the Anglo Boer War (1899–1902) large groups of women and children were rounded up and held in so-called 'concentration camps'. Due to the high mortality rate and dismal condition in the camps, it sparked resentment against Britain that lingered long after the end of the war itself.

Fig. 10.2 Colonel Hendrik Federik Prinsloo, Camp Commandant of Zonderwater from 1943 to 1947 (© Italian Prisoner of War Museum, Zonderwater. Used with the kind permission of Emilio Coccia)

Smuts realised that something had to be done, and in December 1942 he appointed Colonel Hendrik Frederik Prinsloo (Fig. 10.2) as new camp commandant. Prinsloo took office in January 1943. As a young boy of 12, Prinsloo experienced life as a POW when he was caught fighting against the British with his father during the Anglo Boer War. The young Prinsloo was thrown into a concentration camp at Barberton, together with his mother (MHJ 1967).

Prinsloo was strict and a good administrator, and his own experiences of being a POW left him with much empathy for the Italians in his care. During his administration, conditions improved dramatically, something he was given credit for by former POWs. In this regard, Somma (2010, p. 71) states:

Opinion on the character, ethos and humanity of the Zonderwater camp is surprisingly uniform. Most of the Ex-prisoners of war interviewed by the author, as well as those cited in secondary sources, agree that once the camp established itself under the command of Colonel Hendrik Frederick Prinsloo the material needs and, as far as possible, emotional states of the Prisoners were met and taken into account.

10.3.2 Life in Zonderwater

Zonderwater was divided into 14 blocks. Each block was designed to accommodate up to 8000 men. Blocks were further divided into four camps per block, each able to house 2000 men. Hardline Fascists were separated from the prisoners with more moderate political views to avoid conflict. Zonderwater accommodated a maximum of 60,000 to 80,000 POWs at any one time. According to Sani (1992, p. 298), 'The tent town grew into a sort of a city whose population grew to match that of an average Italian town'.

Il Comitato Superiore (the Senior Committee) ran the camp. The Senior Committee consisted of the Camp Commandant (Prinsloo), two assistant Camp Commandants, a Welfare officer, the Italian director of the POW hospital, a member of the Senior Italian Office, the Chief Chaplain (Italian) and two members of the prisoner-of-war senior committee (Senior Italian Committee 1944).

A hospital with a capacity of 3200 beds – at that time one of the largest hospitals in South Africa – catered to all medical needs. As boredom was a constant threat to the inhabitants, 25 football fields and ten athletics tracks catered to the sporting needs of the POWs. Other sports, such as boxing and fencing, were also popular. At one stage, the camp boasted 28 football teams (Kruger 1996)!

Several schools were built, and between 9000 and 11,000 POWs were taught basic literacy by 150 Italian teachers – all fellow POWs (Ball 1967). Two types of schools were built. The Duca d'Aosta schools provided basic literacy education, roughly the equivalent of Grades 1 to 5. The HF Prinsloo schools, on the other hand, offered vocational training for a diversity of occupations, from carpentry to electrical and mechanical engineering (Fig. 10.3). Some of the schools also offered courses in woodwork, art, etc. (Emilio Coccia, pers. comm. 2019a, b; DNMMH, File 1).

In addition, 16 theatres were built. Twenty-two orchestras regularly performed in them, and a number of musicals and operas were staged. According to Somma (2010, p. 83), music was 'a link to home, a way of re-creating community, a way of poking fun at their captors, of processing their experiences and even a way of integration into South Africa for those who stayed'. It also created solidarity between the different blocks in Zonderwater and kept the memories of civilian life alive.

Art and crafts produced by the POWs were sold in the surrounding area, with exhibitions held on certain days. This enabled the POWs to earn cash to buy items not supplied by the camp authorities.

One item made by a POW at Zonderwater has an extraordinary history. A violin crafted by Luigi Galiussi was sold during one of the craft days. The violin ended up in an antique shop in South Africa and was bought by EA Steyn many years later. Steyn noticed inscriptions on the violin and decided to return it to the South African military. After negotiations between the Italian and South African militaries, Mr. Galiussi was traced and the violin returned to him almost 40 years after he made it in Zonderwater. In the final act of the story, Luigi Galiussi travelled to South Africa in 1984 to personally return the violin. He believes that because the violin was made in South Africa, it belongs in South Africa. The violin can now be seen at the Italian Prisoner of War Museum at Zonderwater (Younghusband 1984; DNMMH File 2).

A large, multi-purpose exhibition hall, built by POWs, housed theatres and music and sports administration, as well as art and craft exhibition space (Fig. 10.4). In addition, a newspaper, *Tra I Reticolati* (Behind Barbed Wire), was regularly produced in the camp. It continued to be produced by the Zonderwater Block Association after 1963 (Buranello 2009; Somma 2010).

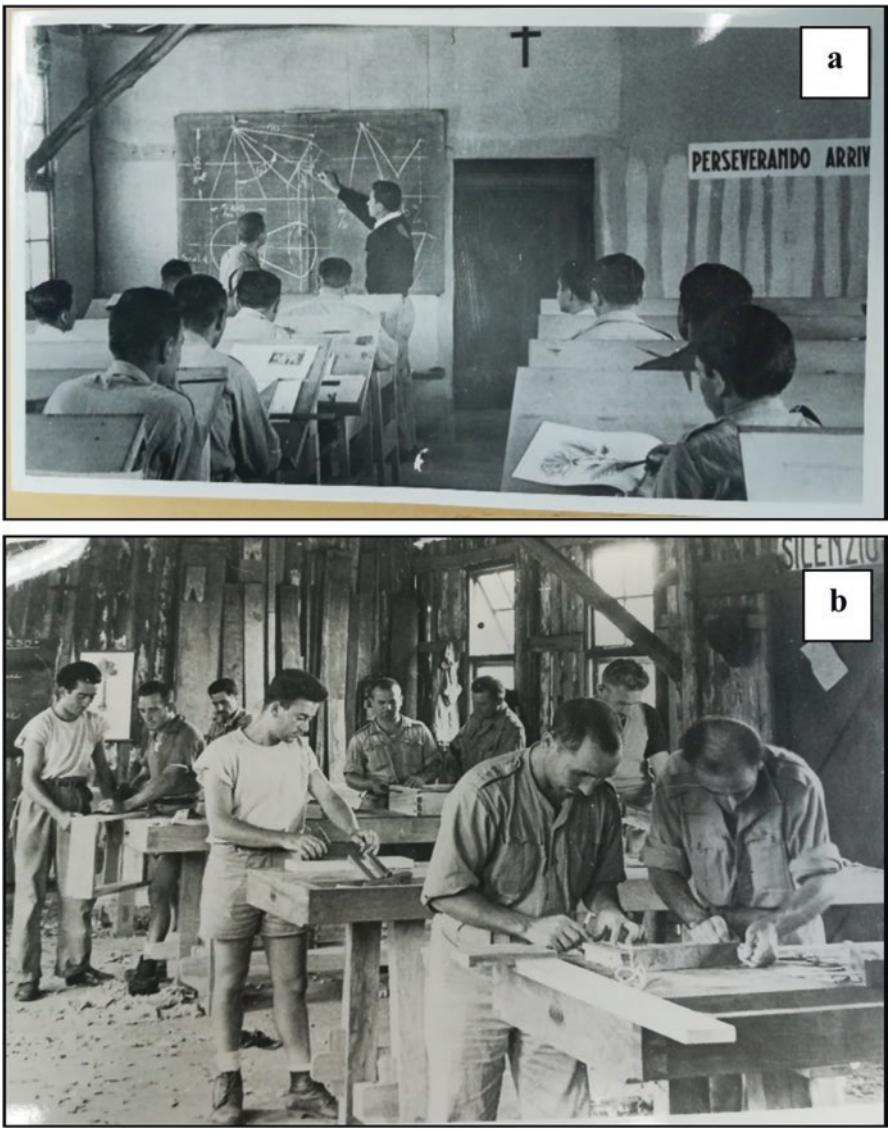

Fig. 10.3 (**a**) Education in subjects such as mathematics, technical drawing, science, physics, etc. and (**b**) training in carpentry, metalwork, etc., provided in Zonderwater (© Italian Prisoner of War Museum, Zonderwater. Used with the kind permission of Emilio Coccia)

10.4 Contributions to the South African Society

From June 1942 onwards, about 25,000 Italian POWs were employed all over South Africa in various roles. Figure 10.5 indicates the geographical spread of the contributions of the Italians. It is clear that virtually no place in South Africa escaped the presence and influence of the POWs.

Fig. 10.4 The Exhibition Hall designed and built by the Italian POWs. Public exhibitions of the works have been held annually (© Italian Prisoner of War Museum, Zonderwater. Used with the kind permission of Emilio Coccia)

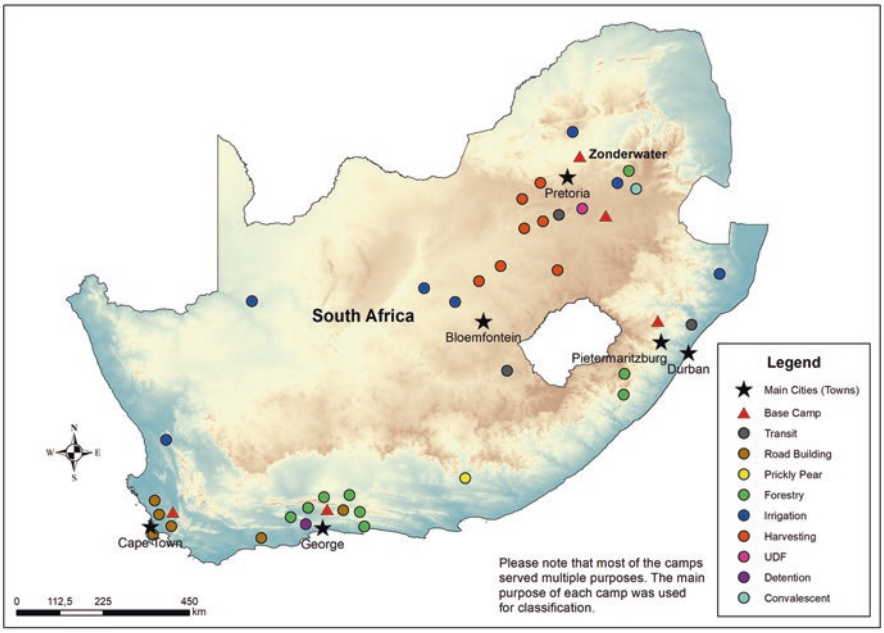

Fig. 10.5 The geographic spread of the impact of the Italian POWs on South Africa (the map was compiled using information supplied by Emilio Coccia, current President of the Zonderwater Block Ex-Prisoner of War Association; pers. comm. 2019a, b)

As noted above, although the Geneva Convention prohibited the use of POWs in military activities, this stipulation was circumvented by the status of co-belligerents the Italians enjoyed after the Italian surrender and Italy joined the Allies. After the surrender, the Italians were technically not POWs anymore, and could thus be utilised in military activities. POWs were employed at the Union Defence Force

Quartermaster General in Lyttelton and at various other Air Force and Union Defence Force bases (Emilio Coccia, pers. comm. 2019a, b).

A large number of POWs worked on farms. They performed all kinds of farm labour all over South Africa, from harvesting grapes and building wine cellars on wine farms in the southwestern part of South Africa to maize harvesting in the northeast. To aid communication, a special Afrikaans, Italian and English practical dictionary for use 'by farmers and others who make use of Italian POWs' was compiled and printed (DNMMH File 3).

POWs also worked in the forestry industry. Here, they helped to begin many forestry projects and assisted in planting, pruning and harvesting trees in the plantations. The Italians supported the forestry industry, especially in the George area of the Southern Cape and also in present-day KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga in the east of South Africa (Emilio Coccia, pers. comm. 2019a, b).

Prickly pear (*Opuntia ficus-indica*) is an invasive member of the cactus family introduced from Central America in the mid-1700s. It became widespread throughout the Eastern Cape region of South Africa (Van Sittert 2002). Prickly pear spread over 800,000 hectares of the Eastern Cape as large impenetrable thickets that rendered the invested areas unusable for farming or other land uses (Zimmerman 1980; Shackleton et al. 2007). Initially, it was removed manually and burnt. The Italian POWs helped with the tedious and labour-intensive eradication programmes, supporting the reclamation of large areas for use in agriculture. Today, the reclaimed land houses some of the most productive agricultural areas of South Africa.

Many large-scale irrigation schemes commenced in the period 1941–1947. The POWs played a pivotal role in laying the foundations of these schemes, most notably the Olifants river irrigation scheme at Klawer, north of Cape Town, and one on the Orange River near Upington. Other irrigation schemes where they contributed their expertise and labour are those at Jacobsdal, Vaalharts and Warmbaths (see Fig. 10.1). All of these schemes are still in use today and form vital components of the regional economies (Emilio Coccia, pers. comm. 2019a, b).

Probably the most well-known contributions of the POWs were in construction and road building. Many fine buildings were built by Italians. The most notable surviving example is the *Madonna delle Grazie* church in Pietermaritzburg. The Camp Chaplain of the POW camp near Pietermaritzburg, Padre Giacomo Conte, asked for the church to be built as a place of worship and to combat boredom among the POWs. The construction of the church started in 1943, and it took 13 months to complete. Built with shale from a quarry some 2-km distance from the camp, this impressive building was used by the POWs until their repatriation. The church was declared a national monument in 1977 (Fig. 10.6; Rhys Jones 2016).

Roads through mountain passes such as the Du Toitskloof, Bainskloof and Chapmans Peak passes near Cape Town and the Tradouw and Outeniqua passes in the Southern Cape, benefitted from Italian know-how and labour (Delport 2013). In many of these passes, the excellent stonework in retaining walls and tunnels can still be seen. The Italians played a pivotal role, especially in the building of the Du Toitskloof Pass, by supplying labour and expertise. The pass was skilfully constructed through the extremely difficult terrain (Fig. 10.7). A small monument along

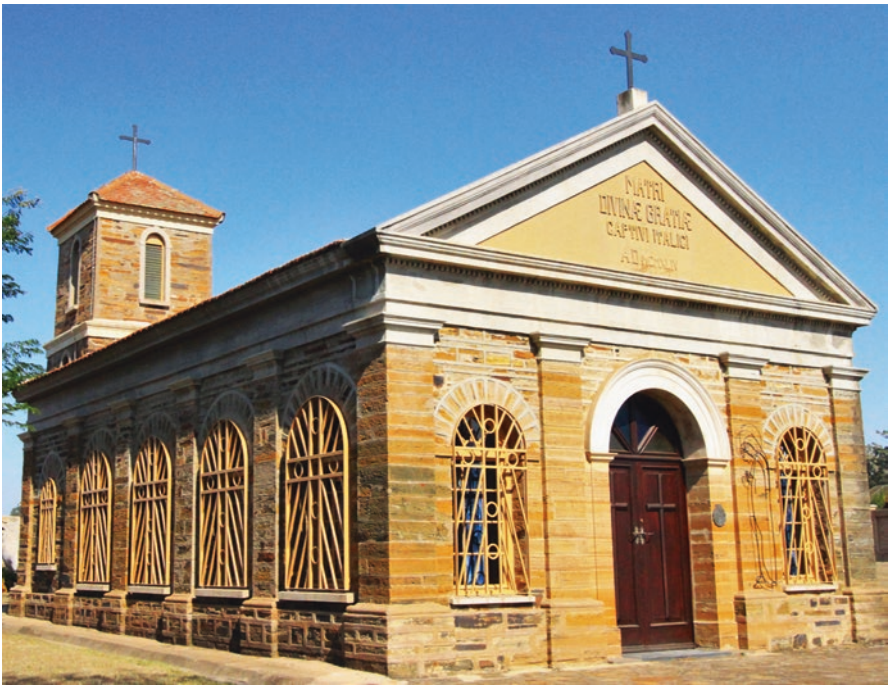

Fig. 10.6 The *Madonna delle Grazie* church in Pietermaritzburg. (Used with the kind permission of Hugh Bland)

Fig. 10.7 (**a**) Tunnel and (**b**) retaining wall built by Italian POWs in Du Toitskloof Pass, South Africa. Note the difficult terrain in (**a**) through which the road was built

the road and a steel cross on top of one of the highest mountain peaks overlooking the pass acknowledge the contribution made by these foreigners to the road infrastructure of modern South Africa (Sani 1992).

It is clear that the Italian POWs, who spent up to six years in South Africa, contributed significantly to the cultural and physical landscape of the country. This important legacy should not be forgotten.

10.5 Selected Contributions

To further demonstrate the impact of the Italian POWs on contemporary South Africa, the contributions of two prisoners of war who chose to stay behind in South Africa, Eduardo Villa and Gregorio Fiasconaro, are briefly set out below. Many more prominent Italians contributed to the development of various sectors of South African society, but only these two examples are highlighted.

10.5.1 Eduardo Daniele Villa (1915–2011)

Born in the village of Redona, on the outskirts of Bergamo, Italy, Eduardo Daniele Villa (1915–2011) became the foremost abstract sculptor in South Africa. Villa was captured in Egypt and sent to South Africa. He spent four years in Zonderwater, where he developed his artistic talents further (Van Bart 2015). To this day, his public sculptures mark the metropolitan landscape of Johannesburg – his sculptures are better represented in that city than the work of any other artist (Fig. 10.8). His numerous works – he produced more than 1000 sculptures – have also transformed the urban landscape of many other South African cities (Kruger, 1996).

In 1995, on his 80th birthday, the Eduardo Villa Museum at the University of Pretoria was opened in honour of his contribution to South African art. Villa also received the Chancellor's Medal of the University of Pretoria in recognition of his work. In addition, a second Villa Museum was established in Treviglio, Italy, by Giovanni Cervi, a Villa admirer and prolific collector of his sculptures (Read 2010).

10.5.2 Gregorio Fiasconaro (1915–1994)

The story of Gregorio Fiasconaro reads as something dreamed up for a war novel. As a young pilot, he was shot down and captured in Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and sent to South Africa as a prisoner of war. Incarcerated in the POW camp near Pietermaritzburg, Gregorio managed to meet his future wife while on an errand under guard, persuaded a prison guard to help him see her again and eventually convinced her to marry him. He accomplished this while he was barely able to speak

Fig. 10.8 'Conversation I' by Eduardo Daniele Villa (© UP Space Institutional Repository, Department of Library Services. Used with kind permission from University of Pretoria Archive)

any English, and May (short for Mabel) Brabant, his future wife, could not understand any Italian at all! Gregorio managed to escape from the camp a number of times to spend time with her and returned in time for roll call each morning, breaking back into the camp.

The fact that he was a gifted opera singer and that the Camp Commandant was an ardent opera fan saved him from severe punishment and enabled him to start a career in singing while still a POW. This talent also made it possible for him to see May from time to time and to visit her after obtaining special permission. After the war, his request to remain in South Africa was denied, but he fell seriously ill and missed the last boat transporting POWs back to Italy. This allowed him to apply again, this time successfully (Fiasconaro 1982).

Gregorio married May in August 1947, moved to Cape Town and became the first director of the School of Opera at the University of Cape Town. During his distinguished career in the music industry in South Africa, he produced more than 50 operas and sang roles in 34 of them. Gregorio is hailed as the 'Father of Opera' in South Africa and played a major role as a mentor to many South African opera stars. Ironically, some of those mentored by him became well known in his country of birth, Italy (Sani 1992).

The contribution of the Fiasconaro family to South Africa does not stop with Gregorio. On 19 July 1949, the only child of Gregorio and May Fiasconaro, Marcello Luigi Fiasconaro, was born. He became an accomplished middle-distance runner at a time when South Africa produced a couple of extraordinary athletes. Because of the sports ban against South Africa due to the racial policy of Apartheid, South African athletes could not compete internationally. However, because Marcello's father was of Italian birth, he qualified to run for Italy, and thus the sports ban did not apply to him. He moved to Italy, and on 27 June 1973, he broke the Italian and world records in the 800 m in Milan (Fiasconaro 1982). His time of 1:43.7 is still (2020) the national Italian hand-timed record, with an electronic record at 1:43.74. With that achievement, Marcello inspired a new generation of middle-distance athletes. He returned to South Africa and currently lives in Johannesburg.

10.6 Keeping the Memories Alive

In South Africa, the memories of the POWs are fading. However, in 1954, an association that promoted the interests of former Italian POWs in Italy was established in Milan. After a decade of contact between the Italian association and ex-POWs in South Africa, the Zonderwater Block Ex-Prisoners of War Association was founded in Orange Grove, Johannesburg, on 23 October 1965. The then South African Minister of Justice and future Prime Minister BJ Vorster attended the occasion in Orange Grove as an honorary guest. The aim of the Zonderwater Block was to facilitate contact between ex-POWs, both in South Africa and in Italy, and to keep the memories of the Italians who spent a long time in South Africa, and their impact, alive. The first President of the Association was Vittorio Giacchetti; the executive committee consisted of Enrico Mottalini, Ernesto Colombo and Duilio de Franceschi (Kruger 1996).

The current President of the Zonderwater Block is Emilio Coccia (Fig. 10.9), and the membership is mostly the children and grandchildren of ex-POWs (Elisa Longarato, pers. comm. 2019). A notable entry on the membership list is that of Paolo Ricci, the last known surviving inmate of Zonderwater, who turned 100 in 2019 (Fig. 10.10).

At the site of the Zonderwater camp, a cemetery with the remains of the 312 Italian POWs who died during their incarceration, together with former prisoners who chose to be buried at Zonderwater, bears silent testimony to the Italian presence in South Africa during the Second World War (Fig. 10.11). A small museum (Fig. 10.12) was opened in the Zonderwater cemetery on 4 November 1990 and houses articles made by the POWs, artwork and documents relating to Zonderwater and its inhabitants (Kruger 1996).

Every year since 1956, former POWs and members of the Italian community in South Africa, as well as representatives of the Italian and South African governments, gather at Zonderwater to honour the POWs held captive there so many years

Fig. 10.9 Emilio Coccia (right), current President of the Zonderwater Block Association, with the author, holding a violin made by Mr. Luigi Galiussi, one of the POWs at Zonderwater. The logo of the Zonderwater Block Association is in the background

ago (Kruger 1996). This is a fitting tribute to the people who shared the South African space for a relatively brief period in time but made a lasting impact on the South African landscape.

10.7 Conclusion

After the initial problems were resolved, the Italian POWs in South Africa were generally treated fairly and housed in acceptable conditions. One fact supporting this is that the mortality rate amongst POWs in South Africa. Between February 1941 to 1947, it was 312/109,000 or 0.3%. Compared to the mortality rates of 24.8% for British and 41.6% for American POWs in Japan during the early part of the Second World War (MacKenzie 1994), the favourable conditions under which the Italian POWs were kept becomes obvious

Fig. 10.10 The only known surviving prisoner of war held in Zonderwater still living in South Africa, Paolo Ricci (left), who turned 100 in 2019. The person on the right is an unknown retired lieutenant-general of the Italian Alpine Troops. (Photo used with the kind permission of Emilio Coccia)

Fig. 10.11 The cemetery at Zonderwater

Fig. 10.12 The entrance to the museum at the Zonderwater Cemetery

After the war, Colonel Prinsloo received the *Ordine della stella della solidarietá italiana* (Order of the Star of Italian Solidarity) from the post-war Italian Government. This award was established in 1947 to 'reward those who have especially contributed to the reconstruction of Italy' (Carlesso 2009). In addition to this, His Holiness the Pope conferred upon him the *Attestato di benemerenza* (the Papal certificate of Good Merit[4]; Ball, 1967). Hamish Paterson, education co-ordinator at Ditsong National Museum of Military History, maintains, 'Prinsloo is one of the only Camp Commandants of prisoner of war camps I know of that were honoured in this way' (Hamish Paterson, pers. comm. 2019). Many former POWs also applied to remain behind in South African after the war, and more returned later

Gabrielle Sani (1992) coined the term 'the Spirit of Zonderwater' to explain the special bond between ex-POWs held captive at Zonderwater. The concept also encompasses the good relations that generally existed between the Italian POWs and the South African population, as well as the prisoner of war camp personnel.

[4]This certificate, dated 5 June 1946 and signed by Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini, then the substitute of the Secretary of State, was donated by the Prinsloo family to the Zonderwater Block Ex-POW Association and is exhibited in the Museum at the Cemetery, together with Prinsloo's uniform and commander's sword (Carlesso 2008).

Sani emphasises the sometimes-lasting friendships forged between POWs and farmers and other employers of the Italians. He even alleges that the former POWs who stayed behind in South Africa had more influence in the South African government than the officials sent to Pretoria from Rome after the war (Sani 1992)

The Italians made an immense and lasting contribution to South African society by assisting in laying the foundations of modern South Africa. The effects of their labour and skill can even now be seen in the many mountain passes, roads and buildings constructed by them. Many of the projects the Italians assisted in are still in use today and form vital components of the South African infrastructure. The irrigation schemes they helped develop supplied work to soldiers returning after the war and still form the backbone of the regional economies of the areas where they were established.

In conclusion, it is evident that the Italians who were held captive in South Africa during the Second World War and those who settled in South Africa, both before and after the war, played an immensely important role in South African society. They left a lasting impression on the South African landscape, sometimes to a greater extent than what their numbers suggest.

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