

Introduction¹

Like other camps (for example in Italy: Gonars, Chiesanuova, Visco, Renicci), Treviso concentration camp was created by Fascism, in order to imprison civilians, Slovenians and Croats. These people were captured by the troops of the Second Army stationed in Slovenia, according to Circular 3 C of General Mario Roatta, who resorted to indiscriminate round-ups in order to suppress the Resistance that developed after the Italian occupation.

It was located near Monigo, a suburb of Treviso, inside the "Cadorin" barracks. The prisoners occupied five masonry dwellings (one sixth was reserved to guard soldiers). The camp was opened on 1st July 1942. Until September it was populated by Slovenians, mainly students and intellectuals. In autumn, families from Croatia also began to arrive: women, some of them pregnant, children, old octogenarians, in many cases from Rab (It. Arbe), an alleged extermination camp. The barracks became overcrowded. Due to the cold, diseases spread and mortality increased, especially in the early months of 1943.

Starting from March 1943, a group of South African (about 500) and New Zealand (about 100) prisoners of war were also placed in the camp, and were partly used in agricultural work in the surrounding countryside. The camp remained in operation until the announcement of the Armistice between the Kingdom of Italy and the Allies (8th September 1943). Following this, the North and the Center of Italy were quickly occupied by the Wehrmacht, while Mussolini established in Salò, near Lake Garda, a puppet state, the Italian Social Republic. According to Italian documents, the following day the German army assumed command of the camp, where 38 Slavs remained, perhaps "protettivi"², or perhaps ill.

In May 1945 the war was over and the Germans had returned home. The barracks became a camp for Displaced Persons, run by the Allied Military Government. About 20,000 people were hosted there from May to August 1945. More than 1.000 of them were Slovenian and they were organized independently, with schools and sporting and cultural activities, as well as with the support of the bishop of Treviso. However, this is a topic that deserves a separate development since this is a different story.

When it was a Fascist camp this is how it worked: the newly arrived prisoners were subjected to "bonifica". They were forced to shower and their clothes were disinfected and returned to them as a uniform was not provided, a marked difference from German concentration camps. For sleeping, there were bunk beds made of wooden planks and straw. It was not a forced labour camp, even if some drawings made by a Slovenian interned artist, Vladimir Lamut, show construction or maintenance activities. The prisoners were subjected to a strict discipline, which included frequent inspections to prevent escapes, although they sometimes still occurred. It does not appear that

¹ This dossier is the summary of some parts of the book *Di là del muro. Il campo di concentramento di Treviso, 1942-1943*, Istresco, Treviso 2019 (new edition). I would like to thank Francesca Sodano and Martina Casarin for the English translation. My fault for possible errors.

² The Circular C divided the prisoners into *repressivi* (to repress because partisans) and *protettivi* (to be protected from aggression by the partisans). However, the indiscriminate arrests prevented a clear distinction, and in the life of the camps in practice it was not easy to apply it.

violence against prisoners was systematically practiced, but the commander Alfredo Anceschi was known for being strict and quick to punish.

The living conditions were very bad: the dorms were cold and the diet included only 911 calories per day. It was a very unbalanced diet, poor in fats, proteins, vitamins; to make it worse, at the end of 1942/beginning of 1943, rampant inflation was eating into the budget made available for the camp. In addition guards stealing food and supplies to sell them into the black market, further exacerbated things. Those who could count on some support network survived, while those with no help, or who came to Treviso at the end of the rope like the women and children from Rab, were at a high risk of death.

The casualties of the camp were about 200 (the average of three different lists, which respectively report 187, 192 and 225 deaths). In Treviso, 53 children under ten died; the infant mortality rate (calculated on the 45 born in the field) was almost 300 per thousand, including two children born in the Monigo camp and dead in Gonars. Doctor Menemio Bortolozzi, pathologist at the hospital, showed in his autopsy reports that malnutrition was one of the first causes of death, together with tuberculosis and other diseases caused by cold and overcrowding. "They were not normal corpses," he declared to the press later, "they looked like mummies or exhumed bodies".

It should also be noted that despite understandable sadness, depression and sense of displacement, the Slovenian prisoners showed great resilience, as they organized a choir, chess tournaments and even the publication of a newspaper (apparently only one edition): *Novice iz za žice*.