

The camp 103 for prisoners of war / POW camp 103

Since March 1943 Monigo also hosted the PG 103 camp for prisoners of war side by side to the concentration camp for Slavs. At the end of the month, there were 110 New Zealand prisoners and 510 white South African prisoners. Enlisted under the British insignia, they had been captured in Tobruk by Axis troops (Special Bulletin No. 754 of 21th June 1942 talks about 25,000 prisoners distributed in various Italian locations).

We know about their journey from Libya to Treviso thanks to the testimony of Arno Faber, a retired South African judge, who told us the story of his father, Zacharias Cornelius Faber, born on 17th June 1915 and identified with n. 198011, who was part of this ordeal. After being captured, the prisoners were taken to a transit camp in Benghazi (the captain was Felice Vismara) where they remained until mid-August.

The original text follows here below:

After some months, they were transported on merchant ships (Sestriere and Nino Bixio) in Italy. After having suffered an attack at sea, they landed in Greece, in Corinth and subsequently reached Bari, where they remained for a few weeks in camp 75 of Torre Tresca (Bari). Then they were sent on the road to Monigo" [The date of arrival is uncertain].

They were in a foreign country, far from home and do not know anyone there. They did not understand the language of the country and even inside the camp different languages were spoken. The camp itself was a very hostile institution. They had to wear the same clothes in which they arrived as none were available to give to them. The worst of the worst actually was starvation as there were no food, and what they received was simply just not enough. The infrastructure of the Italian forces was simply not adequately in place keeping so many of them. The similar scenario applied whilst in Benghazi and in Bari. When food were brought into the camp by open lorries, they watched if something does not fell from it and when it does, they run and ate it from the ground. (Arno Faber).¹

The "English" prisoners in camp 103 were used for labour outside the camp. For example, they worked in harvesting in Badoere, "at a former mill located along the Sile river"², as the local parish priest writes: 53 of them arrived near the end of July 1943. In this case, it is possible that they did not have to return to the barracks in the evening. In fact Don Antonio Volpato, chaplain of Morgano spoke of the "concentration camp of Badoere-Morgano".³

It concerns that the chief military chaplain of the Territorial Defense Command of Treviso deemed "dangerous" the contacts between prisoners and the local population as it was written on a message sent to the Curia on 24th May. The bishop would send a clear message to the parish priests in whose jurisdiction were the prisoners of war (in the footnotes Monigo, S.Bona, Castagnole are named in italics). When on pulpit, these priests should warn the parishioners taken "by false sentimentality",

¹ Email of 12 aprile2018.

² *Cronistorie di guerra*, a c. di E. Lorenzon, Treviso 2017, testimonianza di don Tom(m)aso Scattolin, I, p. 663.

³ Ivi, p. 696.

"to refrain from approaching the prisoners, communicating with them, exchanging goods, receiving or sending correspondence", "interacting with them in any way", in compliance with the instructions of the Army General Staff. It should be publicly remembered that the treatment of these prisoners was "more than fair", while "serious punishments" awaited offenders⁴. In reality we do not know if such threats reached the target and, above all, whether the imposed rules were complied with or not.

Camp PG n. 103 also included two detachments of New Zealand prisoners, who were employed as miners, carpenters and other similar tasks in the province of Udine. They were involved in the building of a dam at Sauris, on the Lumiei stream, a tributary of the Tagliamento river. The works, commissioned by SADE - Società Adriatica di Elettricità, had started in 1941, in the middle of the war (they would end in 1948). On 23rd May the first contingent of 100 men arrived and they were placed in Plan dal Sac (municipality of Ampezzo). On 27th May another 180 men arrived and were located in La Maina. After the Armistice, these prisoners would be sent to Germany through Tarvisio⁵.

As regards Zacharias Cornelius Faber, he worked in Mestre with about forty companions, in the lands of a baron.

After the Armistice of 8th September the situation became critical for the prisoners of war in Veneto and northern Italy (about 9000 people) because it was difficult to reach the Allied troops.

In Treviso, at first, the fugitives were helped and welcomed by the peasant families, who lived in the countryside surrounding Monigo camp. We know, from oral sources, that some of them were hosted in the large house in Via Pastori, where Maria Lucchetta lived. In Badoere, according to the parish priest, "they hid among the peasants, who, under the direction of the parish priest, were willing to help them", especially the families of Attilio Gobbo and Giuseppe Boa⁶.

This competition for solidarity, which the English ambassador stationed in Italy, Sir Noel Charles, would define as a Strange Alliance⁷, held out even in the presence of a military order that threatened very heavy penalties for those who helped the prisoners. Later, when in October the German Command promised a reward of 1800 lire (or the release of a relative interned in Germany) to those who denounced a fugitive⁸, this solidarity practice became much more risky, both for the assisted and for the helpers. At that point the most risky part began: the escape towards the sea (where English submarines emerged near the beaches to embark the soldiers) or towards Switzerland and Yugoslavia, where they were accompanied by special organizations, or towards the mountains, for those who decided to join the partisans⁹.

In the Treviso area it was above all the *Italia Libera* brigade (later *Italia Libera Archeson*) that enlisted the prisoners (about 30), while in the *Italia Libera Campocroce* brigade there were 20

⁴ Archivi Storici della Chiesa di Treviso, B. 3, Militari Cappellani (1915-1959), cartella "Cappellani Militari Diocesani".

⁵ Libero Martinis, *Neozelandesi nella Val Lumiei*, Udine 1999.

⁶ *Cronistorie* cit. I, p. 663. Relazione di don Tom(m)aso Scattolon.

⁷ R. Absalon, *A strange Alliance, Aspects of escape and survival in Italy 1943-1945*, Olschki editore, Firenze 1991.

⁸ Risidori cit. p. 431.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

South Africans and 2 Indians.¹⁰ Nineteen of them, initially unidentified, would then be victims of the Grappa raid.

Edoardo Pierotti, commander of the Italia Libera brigade, wrote:

6 South African soldiers were helped and protected by the Brigade for almost a year. There were also 12 Allied prisoners in the Brigade, who formed the "English Group" and fought on the Grappa together with the Patriots. It is not possible to provide precise data about them since by now they have returned to their countries and, for the most part, they were known on the basis of false identity cards that were issued in Pederobba by Dr. Vergani of this Brigade, in Cavaso and in Possagno by Miss Colla Caterina. (Edoardo Pierotti)¹¹

As for Zacharias Cornelius Faber, he was in Mestre and, at an unspecified time (we don't know whether before or after the Armistice), he managed to escape to the countryside together with other prisoners of war. He hid in different places and eventually in the farm of a man called Carlo Fonio, with his wife and daughter. As far as we know, this place of shelter was in Galliate, in the province of Novara. Finally, Zacharias joined first the partisans, until the surrender of the German troops in Italy, and then the Allied forces, on 28th April 1945. From there, he reached Egypt and then South Africa.

¹⁰ Ivi, 434.

¹¹ Aistresco [archivio dell'Istresco], Fondo 3, Resistenza, b. 1, Diario storico Brigata Libera Archeson, *passim*.