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MYTHOLOGISING MUSIC: IDENTITY AND CULTURE IN THE ITALIAN PRISONER OF WAR CAMPS OF SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the idea of music-making as mode of cultural expression among Italian prisoners of war imprisoned in South Africa during the Second World War. In addition to readings of some of the music performed, there are accounts of the prominence of music as a theme in the mythology generated by the prisoners. Viewing music as a framing mechanism for the narration of experience is central to understanding the resulting group identity of these prisoners. This in turn leads into an examination of the continuing function of the myths as markers of identity; highlighting cultural production as a defining characteristic of Italian South African identity in the present. Through the investigation of various forms of archive, analyses of a variety of non-musical cultural products are included for their ability to articulate some specific Italian cultural values promoted in the mythology.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Music in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

Donato Andrew Somma

6 January 2007

Dedicated with love and gratitude
to the memory of my father
Michele Peter Somma

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Introduction

The origin myth for many South African Italians today has, as its foundation, the experience of the Italian prisoners of war in South Africa during the Second World War. Perhaps more important than the memory of the event itself are the markers of identity encoded in the narratives of the POWs. As the largest single influx of Italians into the country the legacy of their experience, through the agency of those who settled in South Africa, is a model of South African-Italian interaction; the beginning of an intercultural dialogue. Sani, in his history of the Italian presence in South Africa, claims:

> Notwithstanding the considerable amount of material work carried out by Italian P.O.W.'s [sic] during the war years, the greatest accomplishment of Zonderwater, was the forming of a new spirit of reciprocal understanding and friendship – which would presently seem paraxial – between large masses of Italians and South Africans which never before then had the opportunity to meet and get to know each other in such large numbers. (Sani 1992, 301)

That Sani positions the POW era so centrally in the only definitive history of Italians in South Africa is a testament to its importance in the community's perception of itself. Furthermore, as proof of the success of this interaction, he highlights the role of the POW experience in enticing Italian emigrants to South Africa:

> the presence, even if forced, of tens of thousands of Italians in South Africa opened the way to immigration in the 1950's and 60's, thanks to the direct testimony of ex prisoners which subsequently led to numerous fellow nationals applying for residence and work permits in the country. (ibid. 302)

The memorialising of these prisoners is central to the validation of identity for this community, and as such should not remain un-theorised. However, the lack of a complete, or at least established, archive has made this more difficult. The various collections, both public and private, that document the Italian POW presence in South Africa are being reconstituted and edited through various processes and agencies. This thesis, therefore, draws on an archive of primary sources that is constantly growing and spread across a wide spectrum of media. The subject of Italian POWs, as well as the material objects connected with them, has enjoyed a number of revivals in public interest interspersed with long periods of neglect over the last sixty years.[1] As the majority of ex-POWs have died during the last twenty years, the

[1] In 1978 the Zonderwater Block Association of ex prisoners of war and servicemen held a 'Goodwill Festival' in Johannesburg, with the intention of highlighting the good relations between South Africans and Italians.

motivation for remembering their experience is changing. Part of the reason for this, as well as the seemingly erratic periods of growth and decline in interest in the subject of Italian POWs, has to do with the changing politics of South Africa itself. As a minority within a white minority, the vicissitudes of the Italian South African community have been, and continue to be, highlighted when and where they best serve a given ideology or cause.

The focus of the present work is to provide examples of the ways in which cultural production, specifically music, served as an exaggerated marker of Italian identity in the context of the POW camp itself, and the effects of this after the war. Due to the unsettled nature of the primary sources it is necessary to refer to additional events and records, sometimes from other camps, and often constituted in the post-war years to hypothesise on the role of these markers in moulding identity during the internment period. Thus, in Chapter One, two narratives with musical subjects are analysed as an introduction to the Italian perspective on imprisonment, and some key forms of Italian imagination. Chapter Two extends the scope of the enquiry into Italian identity by drawing on examples of musical performances, sculpture, painting and embroidery to illustrate the important ways in which the absence of women was symbolically addressed. Underpinning these two chapters is an exploration of the process whereby events that occurred during the time of internment have been and still are recounted and circulated within the community of ex-POWs. This process I term 'mythologising' and it describes the ways in which the prisoners' stories are manipulated over time to serve the purposes of their community.

The effect of these stories on the Italian community in South Africa after the war forms a secondary focus area. These narratives change over time becoming grander, more stylised, or more fanciful, and are eventually indistinguishable from the 'official' history of the camp. Chapter Three bridges the temporal gap between the period of internment and the post-war cultural life of the Italian community in South Africa by tracing the legacy of POW music from its humble beginnings in the camps to the important role that it plays in remembering the POW experience. The last chapter draws the themes of culture, identity and memory into the present in the form of an ethnography of the memorial service that honours the prisoners. Close examination of the rituals and spaces of this event speak directly to the

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Later, South African newsprint carried a number of interest articles concerning specific ex-POWs. For example, *Paratus* 1983 printed an article on violins made in the camp. In the early nineties, the Military History Museum of Johannesburg unveiled an exhibition of Italian POW memorabilia and militaria.

changes in their mythology, and identifies the narrative features that will be carried into the future.

Music narratives and the prisoner of war experience

While the post-war role of the POW stories has largely been to prove the amicable relationships that developed between South Africans and Italians, their role during the war was as a form of resistance to domination. In *Hidden Transcripts*, James Scott argues that artful acts of resistance by the oppressed are often performed in the presence of the powerful, protected by the various codes of conventionalised behaviour within a power dynamic (Scott 1990). These hidden transcripts are observable across a spectrum of discursive sites, from the private lives and close family of the oppressed, to the public sphere (Scott 1990, 26):

> This is a politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors. Rumor, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemisms – a good part of the folk culture of subordinate groups – fit this description. (Scott 1990, 19)

The tales, rituals and songs preserved in the POW archives abound with hidden and double meanings. That the expression of resistance should be so elaborately veiled in so many seemingly powerless forms is, Scott argues, necessitated by the struggle for survival under the threat of violence:

> If subordinate groups have typically won a reputation for subtlety – a subtlety their superiors often regard as cunning and deception – this is surely because their vulnerability has rarely permitted them the luxury of direct confrontation. The self-control and indirection required of the powerless thus contrast sharply with the less inhibited directness of the powerful. (Scott 1990, 136)

The particular field of cultural production to be explored as the site of this resistance, is that of music, as it seems that the narratives that emerged around the practice of music best exemplify the process of mythologisation. Narratives that deal with the practice and growth of music under the particular circumstances of a POW camp lend themselves to mythologisation for a number of reasons that relate to the close link in the Western imagination between Italians and music, particularly, Italian song. Thus positioned, music (both its practice and the stories that emerged around it) was able to receive and communicate a number of key aspects of Italian identity, serving to preserve and modify the POWs' sense of self during their internment, and to form the basis of their post-war identity.[2]

[2] These narratives and their narrators are contextualised and located within the broader discourse of Italian POW history in each case, except where the interview material is garnered from a secondary source, the film *Captivi Italici in Sud Africa* for example. However, it is worth noting that where references are made to specific

In addition to texts that draw specifically on music, I refer also to examples from the visual realm, contextualising music as part of the broader project of cultural production in the camp. The inclusion of visual art not only enriches the discussion of a temporally bound art-form such as music, but in this specific work flags the important conceptual connection that existed in the camps between all the arts. The citing of some colourful and apocryphal anecdotes that are not directly linked to cultural production serves to flesh out the dimensions of the rich narrative tradition that was the vehicle through which the POWs communicated their experience.

1.1 Zonderwater

During the Second World War, many Italian soldiers were captured in North Africa by the Union Defence Forces of South Africa and, in accordance with the Geneva Convention, were sent to the country whose troops had captured them for the duration of their internment. It was hoped that in doing so the Allies could avoid a build-up of POWs close to Europe (Sani 1992, 297).

A number of camps were established in the former Cape, Natal, and Transvaal during the course of the war, some of them to accommodate civilians with Italian connections or origins (the latter were decommissioned early on). Also, some camps would eventually contain both Italian and German POWs as well as Afrikaner nationalists. The various camps developed distinct identities based on the interaction between nationalities and political affiliations of the prisoners, and the personal leadership styles of the various commandants (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 2, 00:04). Of the camps created exclusively for Italian POWs, Zonderwater, located east of Pretoria, was the largest and best managed (ibid.).

Zonderwater (Dutch: ‘without water’) was also the largest Allied prisoner of war camp in the southern hemisphere during World War Two and has come to symbolise the entire Italian POW experience in South Africa (Sani 1992, 298). It has been the location for memorial services and attempts to archive the experience of the interred Italian soldiers in South Africa, not only during, but also post-war. Most of the sources for this research stem

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interviews, these indicate a series of interviews I conducted in person with ex-POWs and their descendants from 6 May 2004 to 2 December 2006 (see sources below). Full transcriptions were made and while the interviews were conducted in English for the most part, I have made translations of those portions where the interviewee switched to Italian.

from Zonderwater; however, a number of references are made to other camps where contrasting or corroborative evidence existed.

When the first Italian prisoners of war arrived in South Africa, after crushing defeats by the South African forces in North Africa, Zonderwater and its surrounds was a wasteland. Mario Gazzini, an ex-POW, described it thus: 'In una zona deserta e ventosa' ('On a windswept, deserted plain of South Africa') (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 1, 00:01). Consciously constructing a sense of desolation, as if the landscape was mirroring the psyche of the defeated prisoner, Gazzini proceeds to vivid descriptions of the 'bringing to life' of this forbidding space. The first men arrived in 1941 and the last left in 1947. Sani estimates that the most prisoners at any given time did not exceed ninety thousand (Sani 1992, 299). During those seven years the lifeless Zonderwater, whose very name implies hardship, became a bustling town of up to one hundred thousand Italian men of varying ages, as well as African guards, English and Afrikaans officers and administrators.

Following the precepts of the Geneva Convention to the letter, the camp management focused on the humane treatment of their captives, allowing an order to emerge naturally (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 2, 00:05). With this ethos as a backdrop the camp began to produce a lively spectrum of recreational activities in the endless fight against boredom and depression. Theatre productions, art exhibitions, elementary and secondary schooling, artisan training, goods manufacturing, sports, food production and many other things filled the prisoners' days. Relying on donations, theft, cunning and charm, the Italian prisoners managed to beg, borrow and steal all they needed to create large brass bands, varied ensembles, orchestras, and even operettas. Music, though important, was not the only creative work: the Military History Museum in Johannesburg (MHM hereafter) has in its possession a collection of brochures advertising art and craft exhibitions (*Mostre d'arte*). At these exhibitions the commercial produce of the prisoners was on view for sale. These included: sculpture, paintings, decorative items and furniture. In addition to this the men manufactured objects for their own use, their creativity knowing no bounds. According to ex-POW Albertini these items ranged from cigarette lighters made out of spoons to slippers made from Stetson hats (Albertini interview 1).

The cultural activities of these Italian Prisoners Of War were allowed to develop in the South African camps with very little interference, and often with the active support of the camp management, concerned as it was with the need to maintain calm. An essential

component of this activity was musical, and it is this that was crucial to the 'historical lesson' that the POWs wished to leave as a legacy to subsequent generations; a lesson in which artistic activity as a marker of civilisation flourished even in the circumstance of internment.

1.2 The function of the myth-complex in creating a history of the camp

In examining the traces left by the Italian prisoners, in archives, libraries and personal memories, a multi-layered image of life emerges. In addition there is the annual ritual enacted at the camp cemetery in the form of a memorial service. It traditionally includes a Catholic mass, laying of wreaths for the fallen and also the performance of songs that have come to be associated with the camp (addressed in Chapter 4). The representation of life in the camp that emerges is worked into and through the myth-complex, the successive layers of which are carefully wrapped around the historical events.

In the field of myth analysis the term 'myth-complex' is widely used to label a set of narratives that relate to one another in some way. Discussing Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Raw and the Cooked*, David Bidney writes: 'In *Le Cru et le Cui* the author in representing his analysis … has viewed myth-complexes as types of musical composition' (1966, 613). The term also functions as a set of beliefs held by a specific group about themselves: 'This "complex" is socially reproduced, passes from parent to child through legends, fairytales, and historical narratives, and in this sense is ascriptive' (Walker 2006, 14). Aspects of both these readings inflect my own use of the term; however, the emphasis remains on the conceptual link between the various narratives that have accumulated around the Italian POW experience, and that are often centred on an object or event. The creators of the myth-complex are the ex-prisoners themselves, many of whom went to great lengths to mould an image in the broader public imagination, both during and after the war. The myth-complex and the perpetuated perception of Zonderwater are so well integrated that they are inseparable.

I use the term 'myth' here with reference to the Barthesian conception of myth as the process whereby nature replaces history (1993, 11). Through this process the determining factors of history are naturalised (portrayed as givens) through narrative. Most famously Barthes, in his *Mythologies* (1957), shows how, in the unpacking of 'current social phenomena' (ibid.), myth is redefined as language. It is important to flag the constructedness

of the myth-complex at this point: the Zonderwater experience, as mediated through its various myths, has been a defining factor in the articulation of the Italian community in South Africa since the Second World War.

Underpinning this theoretical treatment is a socio-anthropological base that frames myth in terms of its function within a community:

> myth possesses the normative power of fixing custom, of sanctioning modes of behaviour, of giving dignity and order to an institution…This is what we could call the normative influence of myth on custom. (Malinowski in Young 1979, 237)

In this excerpt from an early ethnography, Bronislaw Malinowski captures the sense of order that myth imposes on experience. This is a feature of myth that, I argue, was important to the prisoners. Furthermore, while it is not necessary in the present work to engage with the structuralist approach of Lévi-Strauss, a sense of mythic 'ahistorical' time permeates the narratives that constitute the myth-complex, extending its influence into the present (addressed in Chapter 4).[3]

The main agency for the construction of myths and mythologising has been the Zonderwater Block Association (ZBA), which for many years was the organisation that promoted, perpetuated and protected the memory of the prisoners at the Zonderwater camp, and to a lesser extent the other camps.[4] The members of this association, the 'Zonderwater boys' as they were affectionately known, had considerable influence in South African-Italian relations after the war, and frequently acted as the voice of South African Italianness (Sani 1992,302). Their disproportionate authority in defining a distinct brand of Italianness in South Africa is, I argue, a direct result of the promotion of the myth-complex as the dominant Italian South African narrative.

This myth-complex has operated through a two-stream process, at once producing literature or media articles from the stories, and reaffirming the myth and its integrity at the annual memorial service. The myth-complex is comprised of stories about life in the camp that have emerged over the years. These stories are bound together by the POWs' need to

[3] 'Ahistorical' time refers to Lévi-Strauss's expansion of Saussure's concept of 'langue'. This mythic time makes language (and its message) applicable in diverse times and places (Klages 1997, 2).

[4] 'Blocks' refer to the organisation of the camp; these were self-contained units with their own kitchens, field-hospitals, theatres, sports facilities etc. Although each block consisted of roughly 8000 prisoners at the height of the camp's expansion, the very literal separation from other prisoners and the world was made clear by kilometres of barbed wire fencing (Sani 1992, 298-299). The Block method of organisation was a constant reminder of alienation and isolation. Its prominence in the myth-complex of Zonderwater is reflected in the title of the POW newspaper: *Tra i Reticolati* (Behind Barbed Wire).

represent themselves in specific ways. This has led to an unspoken agreement between the various interest groups involved in the Zonderwater story as to what is to be included and what excluded from the complex. The resultant image is highly stylised, I argue, drawing on many thematic threads that run through the mythology and folk-cultures of Italy and Europe. The level to which the prisoners were aware of the historical line from which these threads were drawn is an issue I will interrogate.

The image of the POWs that is generated is at once humble and heroic. Both of these qualities can be linked to particular characterological tropes that were, and still are, to some extent, evident in Italian society. The culture of the *bella figura* is as much a part of Italian culture today as it was during the Second World War. Like the Arab concept of 'face' it places a high value on a given individual, family or community presenting a respectable façade to the world at all costs, regardless of what lies below the surface (Richards, 1995,19-20). The POWs, feeling the need to present themselves in the best light, turned their internment into an opportunity to construct a particular image. The reason for the complexity of this myth stems in part from the men's multi-faceted identities as soldiers, prisoners, family men, entrepreneurs and survivors with varying degrees of commitment to the ideals of fascism.

The paradoxes of this image are expressed in various Italian folktales, especially those dealing with the oppressed.[5] Thus the POWs could simply insert the details of their stories into pre-existing narrative forms, as is illustrated in *The Story of a Violin* below.

A specific aim of the myth-complex that has grown around the Zonderwater experience is to perpetuate a quality that was, and is, articulated by the ex-POWs and their families. It has become known as 'Zonderwater Spirit', and refers specifically to the cultivation of good relations between the captives and their captors.

> That which was called the spirit of Zonderwater was thus born in these unfortunate years: a reciprocal desire of, besides overcoming the effects of a war between two nations which were not – and never had been – in conflict, above all creating a new understanding and a new friendship between two peoples so alike in many respects. (Sani 1992, 301)

[5] The potential power of peasant resistance through narrative is at the heart of the theory of subaltern classes and their politics. 'Folklore was scarcely a dilettante amusement for Gramsci; he called it a vernacular *concezione del mondo e della vita*, a conception of the world and of life that challenged the hegemony of the educated classes. For genuine revolution, and for the necessary organic bond between theory and practice, Gramsci advised the intellectuals who define dominant beliefs that the beliefs of subaltern classes are different.' (Birnbaum 1993,19).

The myth-complex is not only significant as the illustration of the prisoners' lives, a collection of autobiographies and testimonies; it is also the origin myth of a significant portion of the present South African Italian community and, as Sani suggests above, has acquired a spiritual dimension. Its fundamental role is the founding myth of post-war Italianness in South Africa.

I have thus far discussed the myth-complex as an entity but it is of course constituted of materials that appear in a variety of media that are archived at various places. There are, firstly, annotated photograph albums and artefacts in the national Military History Museum in Johannesburg; secondly, a mass of paperwork, art, literature and memorabilia in the camp archive (the Zonderwater Museum, ZM hereafter) only now being restored and catalogued.[6] In addition to these archives there are books on the subject, a film documentary, and personal accounts in English and Italian. The various structures built by the prisoners such as roads, bridges, farm buildings, churches and the actual internment sites around the country have also accrued their own narrative clusters that in turn are part of the oral and official histories of the surrounding communities. It is this material that, when taken as a whole, forms the overarching narrative that is the subject of my research. This narrative signals a particular type of heroism, a heroism that has tremendous significance for the post-war identity of the POWs and their community. It is however most accessible, and most flamboyantly represented, on the micro-level of the individual myths. They seem to convey the flair that characterises the whole most clearly.

Many of the most enduring legends of the camp deal with aspects of culture. Stories about music are particularly prolific, far outnumbering those dealing with more 'dangerous' issues relating to politics and ideology. This is because the South African-Italian community was always on the political defensive: when perceived as fascists it was among South Africa's enemies in the Second World War; with the rise of Afrikaner nationalism thereafter, it was expected to unanimously share the nationalist aspirations of that movement. As Scott posits: 'With rare, but significant exceptions the public performance of the subordinate will,

[6] The archive at Zonderwater is in the custodianship of Emilio Coccia. As restorer, curator, and manager of the museum, his role is best understood when compared with the Derridean description of the *archons* of ancient Greece. These men (superior magistrates) were not only guardians of the archive, but also those imbued with the right to interpret them. Similarly, on all matters relating to Zonderwater, Coccia, through his close association with the archive, is empowered to 'recall the law and call on or impose the law' (Derrida quoted in Hamilton et al. 2002, 162)

out of prudence, fear, and the desire to curry favor, be shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful' (1990, 2). Ultimately, therefore, the cultural sphere became the safest forum for Italians in South Africa to voice their Italianness: it avoided politics and conformed neatly to the stereotypical view of their race.

In the analysis that follows I have attempted to illustrate how the work of the myth is best accomplished through a musical frame of reference; how it is that the 'musical imperative', imagined to be central to Italianness by Italians and South Africans alike, was evoked to excuse acts of subversion.

Of various methods available for exploring the mythic significance of individual narratives, I have chosen the comparative method. In particular I have chosen a metaphoric and anthropomorphic comparison, suggesting an analogy between the Italian soldier and the popular folkloric figure of the fox, archetypal trickster in fable and story.[7] This highlights specific qualities of the Italian POW which, I feel, have been emphasised in their mythologising of experience. The image of the cunning, roguish Italian prisoner, with all his charms of persuasion, gypsy-like savvy and adaptability, steps rakishly out of Italian POW legends time and time again. *The Story of a Violin* and *The Banjo Poem* below clearly demonstrate his valorisation.

1.3 The Story of a Violin

The following is a translation of the narrative by POW Pasetti (ZM) (see Appendix 1 and Figures 1-3):

G. Pasetti
Story of a violin.

Page 1
On a bench the springbok (1)
Sits reading a paper
Meanwhile behind him
A prisoner looks on.

[7] There is substantial precedence for investing animals with human characteristics and visa versa in the body of European folktales. Birnbaum discusses the anthropomorphic nature of many characters from Italian oral traditions (1993, 60-61), and a number of examples can be drawn from Italian literature (Levi 2006). Further instances can also be found Classical mythology (Irving 1990), as well as in the broader field of world mythology (Campbell 1982).

Page 2
Look what's going on! The prisoner (5)
Is a renowned luthier,
He likes that bench
Therefore he seizes the opportunity.

Page 3
He risks, alas, the dangerous cause (9)
And so quietly
The scoundrel makes the bench disappear.

Page 4
With hammer and knife (13)
He feverishly cuts and hammers
And after a few hours
Finishes his work.

Page 5
Plucking the instrument (17)
He comes to the decision
That the violin is a bit dull:
It sounds like a cat in love.

Page 6
And so, cunningly (21)
To make lots of money
He says: "This Stradivarius
Is an original model!!"

Page 7
The springbok says: "Good!! (25)
It has a marvellous voice
Yes!! I will pay three pounds sterling!
Very well!!"

Page 8
This story that I have told (29)
Is an original story
That happened to a certain person
and that person is me.

Professional luthiers amongst the POWs at Zonderwater made a number of violins for the violinists of the camp, some of whom were well known in Italy. One among many was the violin made by Luigi Galiussi that was returned to its maker, in Italy, in the 1980s. It was no

easy task making a violin in a camp, as observed in *Paratus* (1980).[8] It is this ingenuity and the subject associated with it that were mythologised in Zonderwater. The violin, in this context, becomes a signifier of cultural leverage, an object that was, and still is, seen by the POWs as a marker of cultural superiority.[9]

The violin narratives, as well as the violins themselves, serve as a visual sign of the Italianness of the camp. Like the 'insistent fringes' of Mankiewicz's Romans in *Julius Caeser*, the sign (made up of the violins and the frequent recounting of their stories) leaves no room for doubt.[10] They proudly declare that these prisoners were musical, civilised people, unstoppable in their quest to maintain culture. Thus this myth speaks directly to the particularly Italian desire to project a *bella figura* against all odds.

The story of the violin made by the luthier Pasetti at Zonderwater is based on his account of its creation, contained in an undated manuscript in the Zonderwater Museum. Beautifully illustrated, each page contains a quatrain in Italian describing the events depicted in vividly coloured pencil drawings. Not much is known about Pasetti, other than that he was a prisoner at the camp. However, his violin and the story that goes with it are a central myth of the Zonderwater canon, including all elements of a good Zonderwater tale.

In every interview and conversation connected with this research I have been asked whether I know the story of 'the violin'. Of the numerous instruments made in the camp (and their circumstances), it is Pasetti's that has become representative, containing most of the elements that make up other violin narratives. In fact it serves as the story for a number of violins that are kept at the Zonderwater museum, and a copy of the text is kept in the display case with two violins and a mandolin.

That this story is one of the first to surface in any discussion of Zonderwater is telling. An analysis reveals that it is emblematic of at least three features of Zonderwater lore. Firstly, it points to the Italian POW's ingenuity (the actual manufacturing of the violin out of a bench) and cunning (selling it back to the rightful owner of the bench at a profit). Secondly, it demonstrates the weaving of the story into the myth-complex, ensuring its dissemination into Italian-South African, as well as certain South African and Italian

[8] In 1980, this military journal published an article on the return of the Galiussi violin to its maker.
[9] 'Cultural leverage' is a term used in a number of fields including politics, economics and cultural studies. It implies the use by a given group of a cultural force (here culture can mean anything from a specific economic pattern to the expression of values) to influence or exert pressure on another (see Horowitz [2005], and Pym [1996]).
[10] See Barthes' 'The Romans in Films' (in *Mythologies* 1993, 26-28).

communities. Thirdly, it illustrates the 'working' of the myth, using the story and the object itself to illustrate particular aspects of the character and spirit of Zonderwater POWs (aspects that speak to a specific Italianness). In fact it provides a model for the way in which many of the individual Zonderwater stories work through the myth-complex to promote the overall image of Italian POW identity, discussed in previous pages.

In Pasetti's tale (see original Italian in Appendix 1) the hero is a shrewd young man who describes himself as *con furberia* (line 21) (*furbo* translates as: cunning; clever; shrewd). His ability to trick his captors, who occupy the position of power, and to come out on top is viewed in a most favourable light by ex-prisoners and the community who preserve their memory. As ex-POW Albertini exclaimed:

> No. The Italian! Look, let me tell you this. We can be full of it. We can be … but as far as brain concerned. (Albertini interview 1)

Another description from the verse ('malandrino' – scoundrel, line 11) indicates, I suggest, a character derived mythically from the classic trickster of western lore: the fox. Like its English equivalent *malandrino* is not an entirely negative term; it implies 'naughty' rather than 'bad', a disruptive but harmless character. While the fox leaves chaos in his wake and disturbs the peace of those around him, he remains if not loveable, then at least a figure worthy of admiration in the lexicon of western anthropomorphic creatures. His ability to make good in a difficult situation and take advantage of the flaws of his fellow creatures – the vanity of the crow, the competitiveness of the bear and the lion (Aesop) – makes him the hero of the underdog, a favourite in Italian folklore. It is perhaps this love of a good 'underdog' story that provided the model for this aspect of the mythologising of Zonderwater. There is a long established tradition in Italy of stories that vindicate the peasant, the poor, the hermit and the weak. Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, in her work on the black Madonnas of Italy, recounts the Sicilian story of *comar Giovanuzza*:

> The origin of injustice in the world is conveyed in a fable, "La Parita di Giovanuzza," about comar Giovanuzza, godmother fox. When the lord created animals he asked each of them to choose a virtue. Comar Giovanuzza presented herself to the lord and said she wanted strength, whereupon Silvestro, the wolf, said that strength belonged to him. So comar Giovanuzza asked the lord for impudence, whereupon a fly lit upon her head and said that was *her* virtue. The fox, having watched the strong and the impudent appropriate the virtues she wanted, asked for shrewdness. The fable concludes with a statement of peasant resistance to an unjust society: "You with the hats have taken over by force and impudence; we who wear berets will survive

> with shrewdness." (Adapted from Varvaro's *Lingua e storia in Sicilia.* n.d., in Birnbaum 1993, 60-61)

This story is representative of the trope in peasant Italian folklore that values cunning as the peasant's only weapon and ultimately his virtue. The traits attributed to the fox in many of the foundational texts of Western lore and popular imagination (such as Aesop's fables) are those of the wily trickster, and they are ingrained in the Italian national character, although most would probably deny their existence. This is because the notion of an Italian character (that is a character identifiable throughout the peninsula) has always been contested (Triandafyllidou 2002, 2).

The problem of modern Italian national identity is, in its present form, as old as the Italian state, that is, the political entity which emerged from the *Risorgimento* (Patriarca 2006, 1). It is still a contentious issue in Italy, and so it is necessary to discuss Italianness as a changing concept through the past century and a half in order to give some context to the small community of Italian POWs whose Italian (as well as personal) identity is the subject of this research. The following paragraphs serve as a very brief introduction to some of the traits that characterise this particular nation, emphasising twentieth-century manifestations that, I argue, have emerged from past 'Italys', 'Italys' that communicated through stories.

Although the exact wording is unsure, Massimo D'Azeglio's phrase 'With Italy made, we must now make the Italians' (quoted in Forgacs 1996, 19), allegedly uttered in 1861, has been resurrected for many discussions around Italy, Italians, and *Italianitá*, or 'Italianness'. Since unification the problem has been further complicated by the views of Italian emigrants and other marginal 'Italian' voices who have added their flavour to the concept of Italy. However, certain defining traits have emerged from the socio-economic history of ruralism, poverty, misrule and general hardship common to most regions of Italy. Not surprisingly, it is a book on Italian cooking that gets to the core of the matter, even if it purports to represent Neapolitans specifically.

> Neapolitans – for all Campanians are Neapolitans at heart – have over the centuries perfected *l'arte d'arrangiarsi* (the art of getting on with it, against all odds). It is this which gives them their spirit and sense of fun, yet allows them to prosper. (Harris 1993, 11)

Included in the list of admired features are mistrust, an often blatant disrespect for authority, and the notion that it is acceptable to break the rules if it means survival and/or betterment of

one's lot. The unflattering composite that results is, in part, the basis of the perception of Italy as decadent, a corrupting influence on those who surrender themselves to the culture of bribery and kickback bureaucracy that passes for order in Italy. Such accusations of graft come, not only from outside observers, but from Italians themselves; many intellectuals, journalists, clergy and politicians have taken strong moral stands against the broad-based corruption in Italian life. Particularly articulate and impassioned admissions and apologies for such corruption include Italo Calvino's *Apologo Sull'onesta nel Paese dei Corrotti* (An Apology for Honesty in the Country of Corrupt Men) (1982), and the graffiti that appeared on the entrance into his city (Milan) days after the breaking of a story of city-wide corruption that rocked Italy in the closing decades of the last century; it read: *Benvenuti a Tangentopoli* (Welcome to Bribesville) (Richards 1995, 30).

While bribery and corruption are contentious ethical issues in peace time, when civil liberties are intact, such practices seem to have been celebrated in the POW camps in South Africa where the Italian ingenuity and creativity in frustrating the efforts of anyone attempting to impose order were seemingly justified by the futility of their war in Africa and their imprisonment for fighting for their country.

Pasetti's account of his escapade draws many of these character traits together. On the first page we see the ready humour with which he undermines the power of his imprisoner: not 'captor', 'enemy', or even 'soldier', but a 'springbok', in reference to the heraldic animal associated with the Union Defence Force of the day. This springbok is to prove the butt of the joke, and so complete is the author's control of the situation that the nickname 'springbok' is itself Italianised by rendering it in Italian spelling: *sprimbocche*.

The characters in Pasetti's story are depicted in a stylised, cartoon-like way; both prisoner and *sprimbocche* are essentialised. The focus is very much on the narrative with no background information. On page two the action begins. Seeing the potential (yet another indication of Italian genius for taking the gap), the prisoner of the first page, a 'renowned luthier', seizes his opportunity. We are not told how, but the 'scoundrel makes the bench disappear'. According to ex-POW Albertini, Pasetti told the officer that there was someone on the phone for him; on the latter's return the bench had disappeared (Albertini interview 1). Despite the fact that every inch of the camp was searched for weeks in an attempt to find it, it never turned up. And no one was talking. This relocates the activity of Pasetti from a private act of theft to a camp-wide act of subversion.

A point worth noting here is that there was effective and lucrative legal trading in the camp. Anna Lupini says that Italians in Johannesburg sold items made in the camp and supplied prisoners with all manner of materials, ranging from wood to needle and thread and pasta (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 2, 00:14). Why, then, was a professional artisan stealing furniture to make violins? Worse still, Albertini claims that the hair for the bow of the violin was pilfered, one strand at a time, from the tail of a horse belonging to a certain Captain Tosi, a captain very well liked by the prisoners because he could speak Italian (Albertini interview 1). The answer lies in the fact that the Italian prisoner validated himself as a man, and as an Italian, by constantly disregarding the authorities, affirming his freedom of choice by using wood, literally stolen from under the proverbial nose of the warden, and hair from the tail of a horse – not just any horse – but a captain's horse! Such acts constituted a form of resistance, a cheeky, essentially harmless act of resistance intended to privately insult rather than publicly antagonise. Again, the emphasis is shifted from the political sphere to the cultural. Their political war already lost, the POWs waged a war of culture against their captors, determined to prove at every opportunity their capacity for civilised living.

Page four of the story illustrates the skill of our renowned luthier. According to his own account the violin was the product of a few hours' work, clearly a contraction of myth. Albertini remembers it rather as a matter of months. That aside, the violin's worth is described on page five: on plucking the strings our hero pronounces that 'It sounds like a cat in love'. And then the final act of gumption: he attempts to sell the instrument back to the *sprimbocche* as a Stradivarius for much more than its worth. The *sprimbocche* is firmly established as the butt of the joke when he not only pays for the instrument but raves about its marvellous sound. On the eighth and final page the author reveals his identity as the maker ("And that person is me"), drawing the narrative to a close without any hint of guilt or embarrassment. Rather, there is a strange satisfaction and even pride at his contribution to the body of 'evidence': the prisoners are reaffirmed in their wiliness and cultural superiority, while their captors are left in the dark. The subtle put-down is complete; an indictment made all the more sweet by its situation in the realm of music, a realm that Italians past and present like to consider exclusively theirs.

1.4 The banjo poem

The Banjo Poem
by Adriano Tosto.

When with the banjo, - that is my faithful friend, - I deceive my imprisonment time
and to the girls – now ancient remembrance –
I send my homesickfullness songs,
I even think to you, pretty young girl,
Although my song is vanishing.

While parts of the myth-complex (*The Story of a Violin* for example) develop over time, gathering layers of significance as they are reworked by many 'authors', other myths were created during imprisonment, and their significance is best understood from the perspective of the POWs. *The Banjo Poem*, and the gift of which it forms a part, fall into the latter category. As with *The Story of a Violin*, the language of music is evoked to communicate identity, express feelings and further agendas.

The original text from which *The Banjo Poem* is taken is an autograph album that belonged to Joan Utley of Cape Town. Her father, Captain W.L. Wellard, was stationed in Abyssinia and was in charge of an Italian POW camp there. When he was reassigned, the Italian prisoners, according to Utley's letter (no date), wanted to present him with a gift to express their gratitude for his kindness.[11] The Captain informed them that it was against military policy to accept gifts from prisoners; the POWs instead made the presentation to his wife and daughter. There was a carved wooden box for the captain's wife, and enclosed was an autograph album with messages from the POWs for his daughter. The messages are mostly in Italian with some in English, and many are illustrated. Each message in Italian has a small piece of paper attached with a translation. The translations for all the messages are in the same handwriting and so were presumably made by the same person. It is almost certain that he was Italian, as these are often direct translations. The particular entry under discussion is by one Adriano Tosto, POW number 5638. Unlike most of the other authors he gives no indication of his regiment or rank, and the absence of any mention of the Captain himself is

[11] Professor Mino R. Caira, President of the ZBA of ex-POWs for Cape Town and its Environs made the donation. It was submitted to the Museum of Military History in Johannesburg in 1996 and attached was the cover letter by Joan Utley. The circumstances surrounding its inclusion in the Zonderwater archives at the museum indicate the dominant role that the ZBA played after the war in the gathering and dissemination of almost all the material from Italian POW camps, even some from camps that were not in South Africa. Confirming this is the fact that the present ZBA president, Mr Coccia, has been able to put me in contact with ex-POWs who were imprisoned in other African countries.

representative of just under half the entries. The album includes bits of original and quoted verse, miniature paintings and drawings, messages of thanks and wishes for the best.

Many of the entries are highly original and cleverly make light of the plight of the prisoner. This in itself is a trope in Italian culture: Rigoletto's heartbreaking laughter hides his pain in the opera of the same name, and Roberto Benigni's character in *La Vita é Bella*, jokes his way through the holocaust.[12] The light-hearted tone of the album belies the seriousness of the circumstances under which it was produced. Scott, in a discussion of the modes of resistance employed by slaves in America, suggests that, in feigning contentment with their lot, subordinates open the way to better their situation:

> By their artful praise at celebrations and holidays, they may have won better food rations and clothing allowances. The performance is often collective, as subordinates collude to create a piece of theatre that serves their superiors view of the situation but that is maintained in their own interests. (Scott 1990, 34)

This duplicity is, I argue, an important process at work in giving of the gifts. Although this camp was not in South Africa it shared a key characteristic with Zonderwater that warrants its inclusion, namely the amicable relationship that developed between the camp command and the prisoners. The gifts, and especially the warmth that is apparent on every page of the autograph album, stand as evidence of this relationship. This is not, however, to say that the gifts did not further some agenda, or were not intended to influence the Captain in some way. The distinction between self-preservation and personal feeling is thus unclear, and this is part not only of the charm of the gifts, but of their function in the myth-complex.

Like *The Story of a Violin*, the autograph album and *The Banjo Poem* specifically, are the tangible traces of the specific Italianness that produced them; an Italianness that, in defeat, chose to risk familiarity in order to maintain a level of civility and humanity. Along with tales of cunning, the soldiers' refusal to allow war to diminish their capacity for gestures of goodwill was to become their hallmark. The archived material from the period serves as a record of this; throughout there are gifts addressed to various officers, ranging from photograph albums to cigarette cases (MHM, ZM). However, it must be remembered that as a foil to the benevolence of these gestures, the POWs were waging a silent war of one-

[12] *Rigoletto* (Verdi, 1850), Act Two, 'Povero Rigoletto'. *La Vita é Bella* (Life is Beautiful) (Roberto Benigni, 1997).

upmanship against their captors, using their gifts to curry favour without compromising their pride.

Illustrative of this is the existence, in the MHM's archive, of a number of intricately decorated officers' batons also given as gifts. It is possible to imagine an interesting reading of these objects given the discrepancy between their literal and figurative meanings. As if in deliberate subversion of the adage 'creating a rod to beat yourself with', these erstwhile symbols of the power of the officer are subsumed under the heading of cultural object. The ownership of the batons is, like Passetti's violin, unevenly split between the officers who would use them, and the POWs who created them. Responsible for transforming the batons from weapons to objects d'art, the prisoners own them in a more profound sense. The appropriation of their symbolic power is completed by the fact that, in increasing their value as art by decorating them, the Italians render them incapable of fulfilling their disciplining function, or even their function as portable status symbols, for fear of damaging the incongruous, exquisite blossoms and vital floral relief work. Undone by what is, I argue, a particularly Italian predisposition to beauty (discussed at length in the chapters that follow), these formerly functional objects, now treasured artworks, find their way into museum displays as aesthetic items of historical import, but remain there because they exude the double narrative of Italian POW identity; the narrative of men who at once wanted to befriend their captors and retain their pride by displays of competency in the realm of culture (in this case the plastic arts).

The gifts presented to Captain Wellard fulfil the same double narrative function. With the sincerity encoded in hand-made objects, they extended the offer of friendship to their jailer and, under the safety of the gesture, gave voice to the men's feelings. The beauty of the gifts (a carved jewellery box and a book of verse) engender an eloquence that allows the POWs to further their various agendas undetected, and the objects therefore present an archive of sentiment. The album represents an act of resistance couched in a compliment, a manoeuvre that enforces the image of fox-like cunning in the Italian prisoner. The resistance is not political, but rather a move against dehumanising circumstances: the ugliness of war checked by the small, fragile and delicate. As a second-order semiological system these objects function as myth by transforming the individual entries 'from signs of language to signifiers of myth' (Barthes 1993, 114-115). Individual messages serve the larger message of

the myth, and so I have elected to analyse Tosto's individual entry with the significance of the gift as a gesture in mind.

Tosto's banjo poem serves a microcosm of the work done by the gesture as a whole, and so the analysis will shift between the two. The positions of aggressor, captive, fascist, and in fact all political and ideological subjectivity, could be put aside so as to give expression to the prisoners as people. Those who wrote in the album (it is likely that some did not write) express, in their wishes for the captain's daughter's future, the feelings and hopes of fathers, husbands, brothers, sons and friends. Some entries make reference to loved ones left behind in Italy, others invoke the longing for home that must have resonated with the captain's family, also in a foreign country.

The Second World War, as ideological and moral struggle with moral implications, is noticeable by its absence in these texts. Given Italy's change of allegiance some observers have noted a tendency among Italians to ignore unpleasant aspects of the past, and suggest as an explanation a sort of defence mechanism.[13] This willingness to live with blind spots may explain, to some extent, the absence of any political expression or reference to the war other than to wish for its end. Self-preservation, not wanting to anger or antagonise the captors, may have been another reason. However, too much thought, care (the album is a substantial document with twenty-eight entries) and highly personal expression appear to have gone into the choosing of this gift for it to represent simply an act of propitiation. So perhaps the album can be read as an oblique critique of the war, or war in more general terms. By addressing the captain's wife and daughter the prisoners are freed to express feelings that, in terms of popular imagination, would find a better reception in the 'softer' hearts of women.

That the instigators of the gifts chose to present them to the women closest to Captain Wellard reveals a lucid understanding, manipulation, and even subversion of the most fundamental condition and result of war. This is the role of dehumanisation. In presenting gifts to his wife and daughter the POWs relied on the Captain's humanity, essentially

[13] This is addressed in Carlo Mazzantini's book *A Cercar la Bella Morte* (1986) in which the lack of broad-based Italian support for the Allies in 1943 is addressed. The book itself was largely ignored by the Italian public, as it did not tally with the foundational myth of the Italian republic, that it was born of partisan resistance to fascist oppression. Mazzantini's main thesis, in the words of Richards is 'that Italians had never really come to terms with the past … The Fascist period had simply been swept under the carpet … Yet, he maintained, Fascism had sprung from a fertile Italian soil' (Richards 1995, 109).

cornering him into reciprocating with equal acts of goodwill. This brings me to a deeper level of resistance to authority.

In disrupting the captor-captive dynamic with personal gifts the Italian prisoners deliver the coup de grace to the circumstances which lock them in conflict with the Captain and the army he represents. The gift was, I suggest, an attempt to disarm the captain with kindness by appealing to him as a family man, and is reminiscent of two of the fox stories by Aesop. In the first, *The Fox and the Crow*, the fox flatters the crow in order to get what he wants.[14] In drawing the captain out of his role as commander and repositioning him in the context of his family, the prisoner has, through agency of the gift, tricked the crow into singing, and in doing so dropping the prize morsel into his waiting mouth. The 'prize' here is the new, more familiar relationship with the captain. According to Scott: 'The safest and most public form of political discourse is that which takes as its basis the flattering self-image of the elite.' (1990,18). In engaging in such a discourse there is the hope that a more relaxed captain will be a more lenient captain. In another of Aesop's fox fables, *The Fox and the Lion*, the fox, after meeting the lion on a number of occasions, becomes used to his powerful presence and risks familiarity.[15] Similarly, the POWs risk retribution in drawing the captain's family into a potential conflict of interest with his work. Both *The Banjo Poem* and *The Story of a Violin* do the work of these fables, mythologising the brazenness of the Italian prisoner in his attempt to make good in a bad situation.

The banjo poem hinges on a musical metaphor: music stands for and fills the space of everything that is good, everything that is left behind or lost, everything that is not the war. In choosing a way to communicate the profound sense of loss that he feels, Tosto reflects on the power that his music has to not only evoke far off places and distant memories, but to actually send messages through his music to those places. Tosto clearly believes music is the

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[14] 'The Fox and the Crow. A crow had snatched a large piece of cheese from a windowsill and was now perched securely on a high tree, about to enjoy her prize. A fox spied the dainty morsel in her beak and tried to think of a way to make this his. "Oh crow," he said, "how beautiful your wings are! How bright your eyes! How graceful your neck! Indeed your breast is the breast of an eagle! Your claws – I beg your pardon – your claws are a match for all the beasts in the field. Oh, if only your voice were equal to your beauty, you would deserve to be called the queen of birds!" Pleased by the flattery and chuckling as she imagined how she would surprise the fox with her caw, she opened her mouth – and out dropped the cheese, which the fox promptly snapped up. Then, right before he departed, he cried out to the crow, "You may indeed have a voice, but I wonder were your brains are." Whoever listens to the music of flatterers must expect to pay the piper.' (Zipes 1996, 212)

[15] 'The Fox and the Lion. A fox had never seen a lion before, and when he finally encountered one for the first time, he was so terrified that he almost died of fright. When he met him the second time, he was still afraid but managed to conceal his fear. When he saw him the third time, he was so emboldened that he went up to him and began having a familiar conversation with him. Familiarity breeds contempt.' (Zipes 1996, 23)

medium that will best communicate his feelings to the young girl, certain that it will transcend all barriers and as such uses his space in the autograph album to write about music.

Tosto 'deceives' (sic) his imprisonment time by playing his banjo, according music the power to alter his sense of time passing. 'Deceive' fits well into the self-styling of many of the prisoners as outlined above, and while it is a free translation it certainly captures the spirit of the camps, where time in those long years of the war was not 'killed' or 'spent' but 'cheated' or 'beguiled'. This description speaks to the trickster qualities of the fox, a motif that, as we have seen, recurs in Italian POW narratives; a motif that suggests that it is the cleverness of the prisoner that ensures his survival. Furthermore, by recounting his experiences in a way that references fable, Tosto unwittingly prepares it for its future role in the myth-complex. An additional musical reference suggests that his songs represent all his feelings of 'homesickfullness' (sic) and are sent as gifts to those girls who, it would seem, he now views with older, wiser eyes. In this poem the pretty girls of his past, whose memories are encoded in his song, are fading.

1.5 Conclusion

The narratives related above illustrate the ways stories about music have been used to articulate an identity. A positive trope of Italianness (as conveyed in vernacular forms) is worked into each story around an activity that is itself considered to be very Italian. In addition to the articulation or affirmation of Italianness, the stories serve to define a POW identity. Once again, the world of music provides an ideal site, in that it is void of any direct references to politics or the war. Stories about a song, or a banjo, or the making of a violin are innocuous enough to pass beneath the radar of would-be censors. Not only did these myths (the objects as well as their stories) survive the war, they also became objects of a peculiar sort of veneration and pride. They live on in archives and museums as second-order signs, as myths that sing and speak the indomitable spirit and creative inventiveness of the Italian nature and soul.

Madonnas and Primadonnas: representations of women

The absence of women was central to the constructed cosmology of the Zonderwater prisoners, and the symbolic addressing of this absence provides insight into their cultural identity. Two figures, both strongly Italian in origin, predominated: one, the Catholic Madonna, answered the spiritual needs of the men; the other, the stage primadonna, fuelled their fantasies. Both modes of representation articulate a way of viewing women that is strongly located within Italian society. In engaging them as symbols, the prisoners not only reproduced the society they had lost, but re-negotiated their identity in relation to an alien environment filled with new dangers: in this regard the construction of 'exotic' female characters gave prisoners an 'other' onto which they could project all the anxieties, hopes and vulnerabilities that their misfortune engendered.[16]

In this chapter, I ask how these two modes of representation differ, and how they are similar; I explore what they tell us about Italian identity, and POW identity. The discussion that follows focuses on traces gathered in the Museum at Zonderwater and the collection of Zonderwater material available at the Museum of Military History in Johannesburg.

The Zonderwater Block Association of Italian ex-POWs created the museum at Zonderwater after the war. It contains a number of objects that were made during the years of internment, as well as some that have a connection to the camp and the historical period. It has, until recently, been a more or less informal collection of books, objects d'art and militaria. The current curator is Mr. E. Coccia who, in his capacity as ZBA president and amateur historian, has been cataloguing and restoring the items for a number of years. He receives donations of objects related to or made in the camp from a variety of sources, and once they have been catalogued some are set up in display cabinets or hung on the walls. The museum is very small and Mr. Coccia has told me that he exercises his discretion on what is displayed. This, I argue, is a crucial feature of the museum: it is going through the same process of 'manufacture' as many other components of the Zonderwater myth-complex.[17]

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[16] The notion of projection onto an exotic other is taken from Said's *Orientalism*, where the construction of group identities (national, cultural and ideological) is seen as founded on a set of binaries. These binaries are frequently skewed and shot through with bias, as part of a broad-based undermining of colonised identities: 'European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.' (Said 1995, 3).

[17] Foucauldian ideas around the production of knowledge are fundamental to this argument, as they are in many research areas dealing with the past: 'today scholars pay greater attention to the particular processes by which

Within the context of the museum, it therefore becomes possible to analyse the constructedness of the Zonderwater myth: as issues of inclusion and exclusion (of deciding what is necessary for the 'accurate' representation of this POW community) are central to my argument, the museum, as archive and process, has proved invaluable.

Before Coccia, a group of ex-prisoners were the custodians of the various articles of memorabilia collected after the war.[18] It was they who, through their presentation of specific stories to the media (see *The Story of a Violin* in the preceding chapter), primarily shaped public opinion of the camp, and thus influenced the political standing of Italians more generally in South Africa.[19] These first curators of the collection made choices about the nature of what was to become the museum and the messages it would convey. Mr. Coccia has a great many connections, not only with ex-POWs, but also with many of the organisations involved with the perpetuation of the memory (and by default, the myth) of Zonderwater. These include army organisations and Italian cultural organisations. He is therefore well positioned to represent the community, and is doing so in a way that is both professional and efficient. However, his particular choices inevitably influence the way that the Italian POW experience in South Africa is remembered.

2.1 Madonnas

Included in the collection at the ZM are a number of objects of religious significance. Most prominent among these are representations of the Madonna, and of the crucifixion (the crucifixion scenes are discussed elsewhere in this work). Though such iconography is typical of Catholicism in general, the forms of the Madonna present in the museum implicate a number of particularly Italian inflections in the spiritual narrative of Zonderwater. This is because the Madonna of Italian lore is a richly nuanced character, expressing a variety of often unexpected values: 'The country is the seat of world Catholicism, yet widely shared

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the record was produced and subsequently shaped, both before its entry into the archive, and increasingly as part of the archival record. (Hamilton et al 2002, 9).

[18] As an additional aspect of the constructedness of the myth-complex, it must be noted that there were ex-POWs who had very little to do with the making of the 'official' Zonderwater narrative. This is explored later in the present chapter.

[19] There is, for example, film footage of a formal event, marking the inauguration of the ex-POW association at which South African Prime Minister John Vorster was the guest of honour (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 4, 00:33). This suggests that some Italians, specifically ex-inmates, moved in the elite circles of South African politics. It also suggests that they needed to produce a narrative for themselves that towed the political line of the day.

Italian beliefs embodied in black madonnas (sic) differ heretically from church doctrine' (Birnbaum 1993, 4).

Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, in her work on black Madonnas, suggests that this finessing of the cult of Mary is traceable to a distinction, in Italian spirituality, between 'black' and 'white' Madonnas (1993, 4). This distinction is frequently quite difficult to make, as literal colouring is not the only deciding factor, and often hinges on a community's discourse around a particular representation of the Virgin (Birnbaum 1993, 3). This ambiguity in the discursive space around the Madonna is echoed in the Zonderwater archives, in which an indication of the centrality of Mary is given without articulating which aspects of the cult were most important to the prisoners. In the absence of POW narratives that interpret the Madonnas of Zonderwater, thereby clarifying their status, an exploration of possible meanings reveals much about the symbolic role of women in prisoner identity.

Birnbaum argues that while the two types of Madonna are often confused, the officially sanctioned 'white' Virgin of the Catholic faith belongs to the church, while the other is accessed by many Italians on a folkloric, vernacular level. The latter's association with subaltern classes is precisely the transgressiveness that has led to her adoption as a symbolic figure for a number of causes, including Italian feminism and communism.

> Differing from liberation theologies centering on the son, the contemporary Italian amalgam of heretical and radical beliefs appears to be stirred by women's insistence on their difference and suggested in the moral and political difference of black madonnas from the subordinated and passive white madonna of the church. (Birnbaum 1993, 3-4)

While this alternative Madonna has a particularly large following in the south of Italy, she also boasts a number of shrines in the centre and north. Her popularity in the south is indicative not so much of her absence in the north, as of the southern capacity to articulate such a figure within its long history of resistance to various hegemonies.[20]

[20] Birnbaum references three highly influential figures in twentieth-century Italian political thinking, all of whom hailed from the south: Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) from Sardinia, ethnologist Ernesto De Martino (1908-1965) Naples, and the statesman Aldo Moro (1916-1978) from Bari. Birnbaum argues that their politics resulted from a long history of resistance to invading cultures (Birnbaum 1993, 19).

Exceptions aside, the distinction between the two Madonna cults in Italy is often indicated by the colour of specific relics. The Madonnas of official Catholicism are traditionally depicted as white women with distinctly Caucasian features. The Madonnas of the alternate cults are most often dark in skin colour, ranging from black to various shades of brown. This distinction is not always easily discerned, as there are cases in which dark Madonnas have been repainted to look white. Despite this blurring, most major Madonna cult sites are discernable as being of one or the other, by virtue of nomenclature or tradition (Birnbaum 1993, 13-14).

The legitimised Catholic Madonna is a model of subservient woman, whose importance is derived entirely from her status as the mother of Jesus. She is the servant of the patriarchal church and fulfils roles that are deemed suitably feminine in accordance with the views of that organisation. She is tender, devoted and, perhaps most importantly, accorded a role as intermediary between humanity and the divine (this latter quality she shares with the unofficial Madonna) (Birnbaum 1993, 105). She is relied upon to intercede for mercy, healing, and is the most powerful in the hierarchy of Catholic saints associated with the day-to-day lives of ordinary people.

The space occupied by the Madonna figure in the popular Italian imagination, however, is that of the merciful mother who listens to the cries of the poor and the voiceless, and champions their causes in her own capacity, that is, with her own power. The vernacular, folkloric tradition around this 'other' Madonna highlights her strength, resilience, cunning and agency. These subversive and heretical characteristics are clearly articulated in the many Italian tales of the Madonna who controls her son, and without whom he is incapable of making decisions or acting with any sense.[21] This is entirely in contrast to the humble mother figure of official Catholic doctrine.

Arguably, in the POW context, the presence of the alternative Madonna can be connected not only to an anti-fascist spirit but also to a more general resistance to authority, patriarchy and organised religion. It is obviously impossible to ascertain the exact significance of the Madonna for such a large body of Italians, representing as they

[21] Birnbaum refers to the *Giufà* stories of Sicily (popular all over Italy) as a set of vernacular Madonna and child myths: 'A startling personification of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's thesis that Mary sent her envoy to do her errands, Giufà does what his mother tells him and wreaks havoc on patriarchal institutions. His mother told her son to shoot a "red breast", meaning a bird, for dinner, whereupon he shot the red breast of a church cardinal.' (Birnbaum 1993, 64)

did a variety of spiritual traditions inflected with regionalism and class politics. However, a number of factors suggest that the vernacular Madonna enjoyed a special status in the camp. Firstly, the majority of the prisoners were NCOs ('non-commissioned officers', or 'privates'), and as such were drawn from the lower classes of Italian society. The high illiteracy rate (Sani estimates that 11,000 prisoners learnt how to read at Zonderwater [1992, 306]) is not only illustrative of this, but also implies that the prisoners were steeped in the 'vernacular' traditions of Italy. Secondly, the Madonnas in the museum are of the scale typical of personal effects, with only one large-scale work – that is, a concrete bust of the Madonna – clearly commissioned for public display.[22] That the majority were for personal worship indicates that the Madonna was central to the religion of individuals, and therefore not only a facet of the official religion. A third factor is the presence of another saint (discussed below) who shares the qualities and reputation of the black Madonna; Santa Lucia.[23] Finally, it is important to emphasize the mobility of the Madonna as a symbol.

I would suggest that the cultural practice of using established symbols of the popular imagination to engage people for a political cause, though not peculiar to Italian politics, finds in Italianness a particular willingness to read multiple meanings, and to recycle ostensibly fixed iconography. A powerful example of mobility and multiple meanings encoded in an Italian cultural symbol occurs in Michelangelo's *David*, at once a symbol of the vigour of Florentine mercantile power in the Renaissance, the embodiment of Italian *bella figura*, and an icon of national artistic pride. These differences in meaning are further articulated by the fact that a copy of *David* stands outside the Palazzo Vecchio, while the original is mounted on a pedestal inside the Accademia delle Belle Arti (McDonald 1998, 24). On the steps of the Palazzo Vecchio, where it was originally placed, *David* still stands as a symbol of Florence; inside the Accademia the statue is presented as art treasure.

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[22] A series of Madonnas, available for purchase at public exhibitions, were produced by POW Scarpa: *Madonna*, *Madonna della Pace*, and *Maternitá* (all abstract); and *Notre Dame* (figurative, with the dead Christ). Eduardo Villa also created a large bronze *Pietá*, also for an exhibition. As they are not part of the collections of ZM or MHM, I am excluding them from the present discussion.

[23] Santa Lucia is counted among 'the others' who, for Birnbaum, resonate with the themes of the black Madonna: 'At the centre of this magic outside the church canon were Mary, other saints, and *gli altri* [the others].' (Birnbaum 1993, 20).

The reworking of cultural symbols continued in the decades around the Second World War, where examples of drawing on myth and folklore to legitimise political movements across the spectrum abound. The foundations of both Italian Fascism and Italian forms of Marxism are rooted in classical myth as well as vernacular knowledges. Examples from the extreme right include Mussolini's frequent invocation of the mythic lexicon of Rome (this included the use of Roman symbols, 'ethics' of empire, and pageantry) to legitimise his imperial project. 'Il duce' frequently called up an imagined Roman colonial legacy (*Romanitá*) that gave Italy a right to dominate by virtue of superior culture. This was particularly useful in the annexation of African states, where Italian aggression was presented as a manifestation of a mythic imperative; in particular, Italy was portrayed as destined to re-conquer Carthage in the form of Libya (Griffin 1995, 43). In a speech delivered in Naples in 1922, Mussolini proclaimed:

> We have created our myth. The myth is a faith, a passion…For us the nation is not just territory, but something spiritual…A nation is great when it translates into reality the force of its spirit. Rome becomes great when, starting out as a small rural democracy, it gradually spreads out across the whole of Italy in accordance with its spirit, till it encounters the warriors of Carthage and must fight them. ('*Il discorso di Napoli*' The Naples speech, 24 October 1922)

At the other end of the spectrum, Birnbaum, setting the context for the cult of the black Madonna, suggests that themes from folklore created a stabilising genealogy for the Italian left.

> Themes of justice, equality, and rights to life of the poor, woven by nineteenth-century southern Italian peasants into moral analogies, are themes today of an Italian left that includes socialists, independent radicals, left catholics, "refounded communists", greens, and feminists, in the wide swath encompassing what is called the "democratic left" of Italy. (Birnbaum 1993, 46)

Yet another example is that of Italian feminism which has also valorised itself through the recovery of the folklore of subaltern Italian classes to strengthen its claim of a pre-existent, indigenous form of feminine power and authority (Birnbaum 1993, 4-6).

Like the *David* and its copy, the official and unofficial Madonnas represent, in a similar bifurcation of meaning, the subservient, powerless female and the empowered protector. In one or the other form, various groups claim her as a figure potentially for

and against the power structures of the church and, in fact, any other male-dominated power system. As already mentioned, the subaltern class politics revealed in the vernacular cult of the Madonna are central to Italian resistance; it is possible, then, that in the context of Zonderwater the 'other' Madonna may have represented any number of causes emblematic of a resistance to (or at least circumvention of) the hegemony of Rome as the seat of Fascism, and even Catholicism itself.

One representation of the Madonna is an embroidered piece of cloth on which is stitched the honorific designation *l'immacolata concezione*. Here her central role in the Catholic doctrine is signalled, 'Immaculate Conception' being the act for which she is remembered and also the act that separates her from other women. The words '*Mater. Boni. Consili.*' along with the anagram supplication *R.P.S.A.* (*ricordo prigionieri Sud Africa*) (see Figure 4.), appear on another piece of embroidery. Here, the Virgin's other function, as comforter and protector as well as force for intercession, is evoked. The medium chosen for these anonymous religious works raises some interesting questions around gender and the identity of the prisoners. Although it is almost impossible to conceive of embroidery as the pastime of choice for twentieth-century soldiers in any context – this despite the long history of male embroiderers, both professional and amateur, in Italy and the rest of Europe (Parker 1984, 1-5) – the incongruous picture of battle-hardened prisoner/embroiderer remains. POWs did all the fine embroidery, executing it with finesse and sensitivity to the effects of colour and stitch. The history of embroidery prevents a clear reading of the practice among the prisoners: on the one hand, embroidery was practised by both men and women as an amateur and professional pursuit; on the other, the art of embroidery, as leisure activity, was, by the middle of the twentieth century, a specifically female domain, rooted in entrenched ideas of the gender appropriateness of almost every activity. [24] The breakdown of divisions between 'women's work' and work appropriate to men, as an unavoidable outcome of war and, perhaps, in the case of the POWs, perceived as an aspect of their punishment, cannot completely account for the practice of embroidery in the camp. This is because embroidery was an elective leisure activity, and not something the prisoners were forced

[24] Rozsika Parker has suggested that it was in the nineteenth century, with the industrialisation of fabric manufacture, that needle-work in general became the sole province of women, and in fact iconic of middle-class femininity (Parker 1984, 150).

to do. There may be any number of reasons for the practice of needlework in the Zonderwater camp; uncovering them may shed some light on the spectrum of traditionally feminine activities that were taken up. Certainly embroidery seems to have had a direct link to religious subject matter here; apart from the work on display depicting Saint George, the rest are all of the Madonna and Santa Lucia.

The act of representing the feminine in an all-male context seems to have opened up various arenas of cultural production historically defined as belonging to women. In attempting to normalise their society 'behind barbed wire', the prisoners practised culture in ways that invoked the feminine. These practices can be drawn into an arc embracing the secular and religious, and the unifying element among them is intense emotionality. The ways in which this emotionality plays out speaks to a specific Italianness, as I suggest in the subsequent discussion of operetta. However, much of the artwork is expressive too.

The Madonna made by a prisoner named Dino Manucci (1941) takes the form of a concrete bust and shows features twisted in anguish (see Figure 5). While the face is obviously that of a young woman, the look of infinite sadness seems to age her. The angle of her head and furrowed brow, common to depictions of the Madonna, suggest the mien of a concerned mother, and given the context, that concern could be read as extending to the prisoners and their plight. The key element in this work is thus the representation of suffering: the Madonna here is neither the virgin of the annunciation nor the sainted mother, serene in her ascent to heaven; she is the mortal woman suffering in empathy with the prisoners who, in creating her image, invoke her.

Yet another religious object, of particular significance because of what it is missing, is the Madonna who has been removed from her original place within a *preserbio* (nativity scene). The *preserbio* plays a very prominent role in Italian Christmas celebrations, with the figure of the infant Jesus being placed in the crib after midnight on Christmas Eve. It is clear that this figure was part of such a nativity scene because she rests on one knee with open arms and eyes cast down, her posture recalling a group tableau in which figures are focused and positioned around the manger. This Madonna formed part of a set that is ruined by her absence. Whatever the reason for her removal

from the original during the Zonderwater years, her value is not diminished – she has her place in the archive as an important religious object in her own right.

Echoing the particular attributes of the black Madonna, there is a strong presence in the camp archive of another saint of similar qualities: Santa Lucia. Her presence is significant when one considers the role of saints within Italian culture, and particularly the practice of keeping small religious shrines. These shrines often include depictions of Jesus and Mary, as well as other saints and even living holy men and women with whom the creator feels a particular affinity. As deeply individualised expressions, they offer insight into the values, beliefs and even history of their makers. Lucia's presence in the archive suggests she may have been taken up as a protective saint by many individuals.

Although biographical detail is sketchy, Santa Lucia is established in the canon of Catholic saints as patron saint of Syracuse and the blind. She was martyred during the fourth-century persecutions ordered by Diocletian (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Lucy 09/02/06). The legends and symbols associated with her place her in a category of sainthood that echoes the vernacular qualities of the black Madonna, as a force of resistance to domination, and a champion of the oppressed. Refusing to yield her virginity to a Roman soldier, she is believed to have plucked her eyes out with a goose quill, and is often depicted holding them on a plate (Birnbaum 1993, 45). She is also credited with saving a Sicilian community from starvation by sending boat-loads of couscous to the island. In some parts of Italy she is associated with the giving of gifts to children (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Lucy 09/02/06). The reinforcement of qualities associated with black Madonnas – through the presence of Santa Lucia – offers some idea of the role (both Catholic and vernacular) she played in the spiritual life of the camp.

Santa Lucia is associated with the blind as well as with light. This is significant for the prisoner trope of POW identity. The *tra i reticolati* (behind barbed wire) trope, discussed elsewhere in this work, emphasises isolation, perhaps even implying a type of social blindness, with the contingent hope of emergence from darkness. It is conceivable that in a camp housing soldiers captured in a war of Roman imperialism, the emergence of this cult would carry particular weight. It seems that POW artists, addressing their particular spiritual needs, foregrounded the particular attributes of the dark Madonna (as

protector of the poor, and also as voice of the voiceless). Santa Lucia is often treated with the same reverence and perceived in the same subversive light as her model.

The most impressive of icons in the museum is a carved wooden statuette, standing about thirty centimetres high (see Figure 6). It depicts Santa Lucia holding a plate containing her eyes. The eyes stare fiercely and carved around them are radiating lines that seem to bring them to life and draw the viewer's gaze. The saint's face is typically serene but, unusually, her hair is depicted as loose and full, her shoulders are noticeably squared and, perhaps most significantly, the light-coloured wood is stained with a very dark varnish. This is in itself not remarkable, but becomes so in relation to the contrasting light wood of the pedestal and backing on which the statue has been placed. The darkness of the statue and her close alignment with the black Madonna cults identify this as an expression of vernacular religion, of a saint whose 'popular' powers exceed her status in the orthodox canon. Such clear markers – loose hair, broad shoulders and dark colour – in no way suggest the ideal and servile woman depicted in most Catholic art.

The second representation of Santa Lucia included in the official collection is more easily recognisable as an orthodox icon. Embroidered on a piece of cotton cloth, Di Matteo depicts his Lucia as a conventional Madonna-like figure (see Figure 7). Demure and pale (the white of the cloth is used to depict her white flesh), she holds in one hand the plate carrying her bright blue eyes, and in the other the quill she has used to pluck them out. Most striking in this portrayal is the fact that in addition to the pair on the plate, she has limpid blue eyes still in her head. This is typical of depictions of Santa Lucia and is intended to represent the restoration of her sight by God as a reward for her sacrifice (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Lucy 09/02/06). Once again, the context of the POW camp adds intensity to this symbolism, as the promise of a reward for sacrifice, which is how many of the men viewed their internment. The caption *Ricordo Prigioniero di Guerra* (Memento of the prisoners of war) seems to confirm this promise.

Santa Lucia, on the one hand, and the Madonna on the other, form one half of the two dominant and legitimized representations of women in the Zonderwater camp. They symbolically fill the void left by nurturers who are far away. They stand for the idealized women left behind: mothers, sisters, wives and sweethearts. In their orthodox forms they are the chaste and pure; in their popular forms they also symbolise, in particular ways,

resistance to the power structures that led these soldiers into their current position.[25] Further, they embody the archetypal Italian mother whose sons can do no wrong; who listens when God has turned his back. This powerful Italian trope is present in other paintings in the museum. One example is Scarpa's representation (1946) of a mother nursing her child, with an artist capturing the scene at his easel (see Figure 8); another is the canvas depicting a man embracing a young woman (sweetheart, daughter or wife) (Figure 9). The family woman is depicted, more often than not, reinforcing popular perceptions and even stereotypes associated with Italianness.

The strong link between Italian men and their mothers is deeply entrenched in the popular western imagination, countering the machismo that is presented to the male-dominated world outside of the home, and suggesting a connection with the more 'feminine' emotions and needs. The representations of the Madonna and Santa Lucia that come to us from Zonderwater thus also signify the vulnerable side of the prisoners; both as mothers and women, they legitimise the prisoner's expression of fear for their future, and their need to feel nurtured and protected.

The religious cult (devotion to the Madonna) and cultural practice (of literal devotion to mother) are mutually reinforcing and informing, strengthening and validating each other through stories and works of art. Birnbaum suggests that, especially in the south of Italy, women, while ostensibly subservient to patriarchal forces, effectively controlled life in their villages and towns.[26] The Italianness of the Madonnas in the camp reaches from religious expression to the foregrounding of the maternal in the Italian psyche. It follows that a group of Italian men on alien territory, cut off from a local population from which they might have received cues for adaptation or assimilation, would try to find ways to invoke the stabilising, normalising power of the feminine as expressed in their own culture.

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[25] This assertion moves out of the realm of conjecture when one considers that thousands of POWs signed the voluntary renouncement of fascist doctrine circulated in the camp (Sani 1992, 300).

[26] 'The mother was the center of the economic, social, and religious life of the peasant family.' (Birnbaum 1993 50-51). 'Her strength was related to a good deal of help she received from her friends. In addition to the particular madonna to whom she was devoted, and to her comari, or close women friends bonded together in Mary in godmotherhood, the peasant woman depended on *mammane* (midwives), *fattucchiere* (healers), *streghe* (witches), and *prefiche* or *reputatrice* (official mourners).' (ibid.)

2.2 Primadonnas

Alongside representations of the maternal via the Madonna is the other aspect of the feminine: that is, of the sexual woman. This 'other woman' in the prisoners' lives strutted her stuff regularly on the stages of the various prison blocks. Separated from her audience in the real world by the proscenium arch, the stage diva represented the unattainable woman, refreshingly oblivious to the misery of prison life, flirting her way around a fictional world. The men who played female operetta roles cast a seductive spell, bringing the lost worlds of love and 'the chase' to life in the genre that glorified woman as object (see Figure 10). Operetta was one of two large-scale musical forms undertaken at Zonderwater, the other being the performance of orchestral and solo instrumental music. Many have attested to the popularity of these wholly POW creations (Albertini interview 2, Villa interview).[27] The operetta with all its glamour and magic, its exotic settings, adventure and misadventure, melodrama and risqué plots must have been a welcome escape for the men, both performers and audience, whose ultimate punishment was exclusion from the world. The importance of these shows for the present work lies in their centrality to the culture of Zonderwater and how it is remembered. They serve the purposes of the myth complex: namely to prove, through concrete examples, the cultural superiority of the POWs, and hence to affirm their dignity and Italianness.

Operetta in the camp was performed in Italian and consisted largely of productions from the British and American repertoire, including adaptations of Sidney Jones' *The Geisha* (1896), Harold Fraser-Simpson and James Tate's *The Maid of the Mountains* (1916) and Frederic Norton's *Chu Chin Chow* (1916). In addition, continental operetta was represented by Léhar's *The Merry Widow* (1905), as well as Virgilio Ranzato's *I paesi dei campanelli* (1926) (Lambe 2001, 497). The programmes from the POW productions indicate that they were based on the originals, and it would seem that the adaptations were often made from memory. [28] These same programmes credit the involvement of POW wig-setters, scene painters, tailors, shoemakers and lighting

[27] In the memorabilia from the camps archived at the MHM, there is evidence of a variety of concerts in the various exhibition brochures.
[28] The gradual development of musical life in the camp is addressed in the following chapter.

technicians, suggesting that no expense was spared in the realisation of productions.[29] The various 'Blocks' each had their own theatre, crew and cast, and developed a unique repertory (Albertini interview 1). Prisoners who were professional performers, directors and musicians in Italy prior to the war were the driving forces and often trained non-professional prisoners in the various crafts and disciplines required (Albertini interview 2).

The many operettas produced at the camp exist only in the memories of ex-POWs, or as photographs in the archives (stills from the productions, portraits of the stars and backstage shots) and programme booklets. With a few exceptions, information on the lives and works of those who brought the theatre to life in Zonderwater is lost. Sketchy memories are all that connect photographs and programme notes, and although the theatre 'women' loomed large, not only in actual shows but also in photographic records, the lives of the actors who played them are all but forgotten.

Through the programme notes a few faces and names have worked their way into the story of operetta and theatre at Zonderwater. From these sources we know for instance that POW Germiniasi played 'Mimosa' in *La Geisha* and the soprano lead in *La Vergina della Montagna*; Giordano played the title role in *La Vedova Allegra* (an adaptation of Léhar's *The Merry Widow*). Of particular prominence, at least according to the photographic record, is an actor named Fernando Abela. Photographs of him performing both female and male roles are to be found in brochures of camp activities and albums in various archives.

Abela's prominence in the photographic records warrants closer inspection, as it points to the place, and placing, of the primadonna in POW cosmology. Interestingly, he has become the face of transvestite roles in Zonderwater through a strange set of circumstances. In the years immediately following the war, he and the Welfare office of Zonderwater carefully compiled photograph albums for various UDF officers who had shown kindness to the prisoners. One such album, now at the MHM, bears the following inscription:

To Captain J.H. Ball,

[29] Programmes from the operettas and plays form a major part of the Italian POW collections at the ZM, the POW archive at the University of the Witwatersrand and the MHM.

> Humble homage to the high spirit of understanding shown to me, allowing me to carry out my artistic activity, without restriction, in all its possible manifestations. Fernando Abela 1946-47.[30]

Because of Abela's involvement in the theatre, many of the photographs included were of operettas and plays. Copies of the pictures in these albums form part of many POW collections and displays, the Zonderwater *joie de vivre* captured as an essential element in their narrative. As a result of his efforts, he is credited with many more roles than he actually played. The Zonderwater Museum, for example, has a large frame filled with photographs of operetta scenes; in the absence of captions, all are believed to depict Abela. Susan Sontag (in *On Photography*) has suggested that the history of the photograph has imbued it with a specific authority as a result of its perceived authenticity:

> A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture. (1973, 5)

When that tacit authority is enforced by a narrative, the result is an almost indisputable piece of 'evidence'. In fact, a number of photographs depict prisoners other than Abela *in travesti*, as is borne out by comparing the photographs with cast lists in the programmes. Encouraging the misconception that Abela was one of only a few primadonnas is the fact that it is difficult to visually distinguish one from the other. This essentialising, a feature of Zonderwater narratives, is a clear example of the mythologisation of the feminine in the camp: those who portrayed women on stage were clearly selected to conform to a type, perhaps to gratify a need for a particular kind of woman. Even if Germiniasi and Giordano are the only men extensively represented in the archived photographs, there were undoubtedly many more playing the many different female parts in the various shows. Their uncannily similar faces and interchangeable poses, the very fact of their exchangeability, helped articulate 'woman' for the prisoners.

Little information on the men themselves is available. However; as with most of the prisoners, they exist solely in the traces of their work. Recorded only as a mass of medical records, many thousands of Italian POWs will never be remembered or

[30] "Al Capitano J.H. Ball. Modesto omaggio all'alto spirito di comprensione usato nei miei riguardi, permettendomi di esplicare la mia attivitá artistica, sensa restrizioni, in tutte le sue possibili realizzazzioni. Fernando Abela 1946-47." (MHM)

memorialised as individuals. A few have managed to emerge from anonymity into the consciousness of those who remember them; their privileged position in the archives may suggest that, through their art, they negotiated a significant boundary of POW identity.

The precise reasons for their popularity are impossible to determine and, until further information comes to light, their profiles must be read from the limited records available and in the context of the Zonderwater collections as a whole.[31] The photographic legacy is, however, very important, in that it serves as one of the key records of artistic life amongst the men. As such it reads as evidence of the sophisticated cultural preferences of the POWs, and therefore fulfils a key function in shaping the myth-complex and furthering its agenda of cultural leverage.

Putting questions of Abela and other individual identities aside for the moment, it is perhaps more important to reflect on the kind of POW who realised female roles at Zonderwater. It is this that has led me on an investigative path exploring the broader framing of the culture of drag at Zonderwater.

The term ‘culture’ is used consciously here, as it soon becomes apparent that the representation of women on stage was taken seriously, and according to a culture of realistic conventions. This fact begs questions regarding the social, historical and creative streams feeding the practice of cross-dressing at the camp. The machismo that permeated Italian fascism left no room for the play that is fundamental to the gender transgression and subversion of ‘proper’ drag, that is, drag that is understood and appreciated by an audience. Far from the heavy hand of fascist ideology, and wanting to produce performances in their own language for their own enjoyment, the POWs were faced with the problem of staging shows without women. While a number of socially, and historically grounded factors minimised this problem for Italians in particular (these are addressed below), the practical and moral issues around the negotiation of gender nonetheless pertained. Before unpacking these in the context of Zonderwater it seems useful to identify parallel practices in similar contexts.

In the absence of the existence of a model for cross-dressing practice in Italian military entertainment in this era, I turn to examples of World War II armies that did

[31] Part of the difficulty of describing the operetta of Zonderwater is that there are no audio recordings. As a result, the operettas must be understood through photographs and narratives.

produce soldier drag performances. The Allied Forces not only accepted, but deemed it crucial to the war effort to allow soldiers to perform in drag – in fact this grew through the course of the war (Bérubé 1990, 68). The military officials of the American forces, for example, were pressured by the soldiers into giving official sanction to soldier shows (which traditionally included female impersonators). These were a crucial addition to the morale-building projects of larger shows staged for American soldiers.[32] By the time Irving Berlin's *This Is The Army* hit Broadway in 1942, the tradition of all-soldier shows featuring drag acts and female impersonators was well established and considered an integral part of the all-male world and public image of the army. With the heterosexuality of these shows firmly entrenched by both official sanction and popular media consensus, the culture of drag in the army was free to develop and even formalise.

Allan Bérubé, in his work on gay and lesbian culture in the American armed forces of World War II, outlines 'three basic wartime styles of GI drag' that took their cue from *This Is The Army*:

> These were the comic routines, chorus lines or 'pony ballets' of husky men in dresses playing for laughs; the skilled 'female' dancers or singers; and the illusionists or caricaturists, who did artistic or convincing impersonations of female stars. (1990, 70)

Bérubé's classification 'styles of GI drag' is based on criteria measuring the actor's credibility as a female. By implication the least believable were clowns 'playing for laughs'. Their entertainment value stemmed from the comic irony of overt masculinity aping femininity, drawing heavily on traditions of burlesque and farce. At the other end of the scale were acts whose interpretive skills qualified them as art. There is no evidence of the burlesque forms of drag in the Zonderwater record; it would seem that female impersonators were of the 'artistic' sort, appearing exclusively in the genre of operetta. Evidence from interviews confirms that there was a polish to the performances of female impersonators and it seems they were expected to portray women faithfully and seriously

[32] In 1941 the Army Special Services Branch (responsible for soldier welfare) was convinced by members of the National Theatre Conference that soldier shows should be set up to supplement USO (United Service Organisation) events. Highly organised and well funded, these shows developed through special training programmes that taught theatre craft step by step, especially adapted for the material constraints of the times (Bérubé 1990, 68).

(Albertini interviews1, 2). The difference in status between the American GIs and the Italian POWs may have served to amplify the role that these skilled actors played in the world of the latter, especially considering that while GIs presumably had some contact with women, the prisoners had none. And so the value of skilled female impersonators was increased and possibly came to mean more to the POWs. When compared with American military drag (which was at first cautiously permitted and always delivered with a thick layer of self-parody to preserve the brand of American heterosexual machismo), the Italian practice suggests more established roots that allowed for freer, less self-conscious play between genders.

An entrenched view of the stage as a historically 'safe' place for the performance of various forms of the feminine is, I suspect, key in understanding the environment in which the primadonnas worked. Catherine Clément has advocated the idea that the theatre, and the operatic stage in particular, is a space in which the male gaze is invited to objectify women, to revel in their suffering:

> Opera concerns women. No, there is no feminist version; no, there is no liberation. Quite the contrary: they suffer, they cry, they die…they expose themselves to the gaze of those who come to take pleasure in their pretend agonies.
> (Clément 1989, 11)

For the men at Zonderwater, wanting to soothe their own suffering and humiliation must have sharpened the desire to see someone else suffer the effects of power. And, in the absence of women, a need for the affirmation of masculinity through the performance of 'normal' gender interactions also emerges. If, in peacetime, conventional chauvinism required the violent and violating enacting of the undoing of women, then how much more essential would this be in a POW camp? Thus it becomes possible to imagine that operetta, usually the simpler, less dramatic sister of opera, might, in this context, be invested with an intensity beyond its normal scope. Adding to this argument, Wayne Koestenbaum, in his work on the relationship between opera and homosexuality, proposes that the transgressiveness of opera, or sung drama, is embodied not in its privileged status as performance, but in the actual process of the union between words and music (Koestenbaum 1993, 176). The enchantment of the genre, its power over us, works on an almost unconscious level, and while we are rendered awestruck and speechless, this 'unspeakable marriage' is

free to persuade us of the veracity of its narrative. 'At the opera, we must forget that language and music aren't mutually exclusive. We want the border between music and words to exist, so that opera can erase the border in an act of apparent transgression.' (Koestenbaum 1993, 177). The suggestion that the operatic voice embodies ambiguity, that it successfully combines the affirmation of traditional gender roles with their subversion, has a number of implications for my ensuing exploration of the fluidity of Italian masculinity. In particular, it signifies the convergence of necessities and desires at Zonderwater that made the operetta stage and the singing voice the ideal tools for representing the sexual woman.

The female characters commonly found in operetta give some indication as to the kind of women that the POW audiences wanted to see. Various readings make it possible to construct what it was that needed remembering or invention at an all-male camp. Great care and attention was given to fine detail, ensuring that a specific image of the feminine walked out onto the stage. The photographic record reveals true pride in the quality of the staging. In some shots the intricacies of effective stage lighting have been taken into consideration, and make-up as well as pose and facial expression are constructed so the female impersonator can be easily read as a believable woman (see figure 10). What is also evident from these pictures is that glamour was at a premium; it seems that, despite very limited resources, no expenses were spared in making female characters as beautiful and as authentic as possible.

Photographs of Abela, Germiniasi and Giordano all provide compelling evidence. On stage they are poised and graceful, and this elegance is captured in the pictures, which are very much in the tradition of publicity shots of a diva. For example, one photograph in which Germiniasi is cast in the role of the 'maid of the mountain' depicts the heroine swooning in the arms of the hero (ZM). The shot abandons itself to the melodrama that was in vogue in Italian cinema in the early years of the twentieth century and personified in actresses such as Lydia Borelli.[33] Even more compelling in its way is one of the shots taken 'backstage', showing the actor preparing for performance (ZM). Even in this frame

[33] Borelli was one a number of Italian actresses who, before the outbreak of the first world, ushered in the cult of *divismo* (the star system) in Italy. Known for her exaggerated gestures and languorous style she was instrumental in defining the Italian melodramatic silent film, in pieces such as Caserni's *Love Everlasting* (*Ma l'amore mio non muore*, 1913). (Bondanella 2002, 7).

(where the intention is to reveal the man behind the role), Abela is already fully made-up, an assistant having only to touch up his lipstick. The illusion of femininity is complete; he has already made the transition. That the practice of cross-dressing for performance was celebrated in an organised and chic collection of photographs indicates that it was embraced by the prisoners as a part of their identity.

One way of accounting for this lies in the cultural-historical dimension. Italy has a centuries-long tradition of men performing women's roles on stage, as well as women performing male roles as sopranos. The practice of castrating young boys to preserve the purity of their soprano voices was, in the case of Italy (and countries under its influence), not only sanctioned but also required by the church at various stages in history. As a result it was tolerated, if not condoned, by the Italian public from the seventeenth through to the twentieth centuries.[34] Although castrati sang in many European countries, they were 'produced' almost exclusively in Italy (Roselli 2001, 267) and while there can be no direct comparison between the complex culture of the castrati and the 'default' drag culture of the POWs, this juxtaposition serves to illustrate the historical flexibility of Italian gendering in the arts in contrast to the rigidity of other contemporary European states. Anti-Italian sentiment has ascribed this flexibility to 'Latin' mores, Catholicism or an essential femininity (read as 'weakness') in Italian culture.[35]

The notion of the feminised Italian male is not, however, a centuries-old negative stereotype generated by non-Italians alone. Silvana Patriarca, in writing about the underlying tropes of the Risorgimento, has suggested that it was also internalised by the Italian intelligentsia of the early nineteenth century: ascribing various vices in Italian society to centuries of foreign domination coupled with feudalism, they saw in the Italian man the qualities of cunning and weakness traditionally reserved for perceptions of the subjugated woman (Patriarca 2006, 3). The combating of these vices was a key aspect in the years leading up to the Risorgimento (Patriarca 2006, 13). The subsequent 'de-feminising' of the Italian man, which included the suppression of both negative and

[34] With the devastating economic collapse in Italy at the end of the sixteenth century, the growth of monastic institutions provided the church with the motivation and 'raw material' for the development of the castrato phenomenon: 'castration for musical purposes was regarded as a specialized form of the celibacy imposed by a monastic vocation and, for the boy's family, one more likely to bring financial security. It did not then attract the obloquy that was visited upon it in the late 18th century.' (Roselli 2001, 267).

[35]Character defamation typified intra-European relations between nations that competed and conflicted in the realms of commerce and empire throughout their respective histories. (Hughes 1991,126-127)

positive qualities categorized as feminine (including the familiar 'solar' aspects of the Italian character),[36] along with the gradual empowering of the Italian woman in the drive towards unification, furnished the nascent Italian national imaginary with permeable gender boundaries (Patriarca 2006, 3-4).

Whether one views the rise of fascism as the tail end of this national 're-virilisation' or not, the fact of this process in the hundred years preceding World War Two accounts at least in part, I argue, for the ease with which the Zonderwater prisoners were able to move from the theatres of war to those of entertainment, from repairing tents to embroidery. This, along with the cultural prominence of the Madonna, serves to confirm that the notion that womanhood as an ideal has had, and continues to have, a profound effect on Italian consciousness. Through the agencies of religion and tradition and politics, rather specific notions of the feminine have formed the basis of modern Italian identity. The result, I argue, is that Italian masculinity is contingent upon an equally complex notion of femininity. So while the arrogance, stubborn pride and directness of the stereotypical Italian of popular imagination are applicable to both genders, so too are the warmth, nurturing and ready tears. Unchecked emotionalism provides the impetus to both extremes.

Evidence of this is found in the unashamed celebration of the mother/son relationship; the relationship wherein Italian gender values differ most strongly from those of other western societies. Men in Italian society are famously (and notoriously) linked to their mothers: in *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni, 1890), an opera that oozes machismo, Turridu bids his mother a dramatic and tearful farewell; it is she who dominates his emotions as he prepares to conclude a typical Sicilian *vendetta*. Similarly, the song *Mamma* (Cherubini, 1941) is a passionate outpouring of love that, were it not Italian, would be construed as Oedipal, a yearning for the return to a mother's arms:

> Mamma, I miss the days when you were here beside me
> Mamma, those happy days when you were here to guide me
> Safe in the flow of your love
> Sent from the heavens above
> No one can ever replace
> The warmth of your tender embrace.

[36] The term 'solar' was coined by literary historian Giulio Bollati, in the influential essay *L'Italiano* (1983), to describe the positive perspective on certain Italian stereotypes (Patriarca 2006, 4). It implies warmth and vivacity.

(Refrain)
Oh, mamma
Until the day that we're together once more
I live in this memory
Until the day that we're together once more.
(http://www.lyricsfreak.com/l/lea+salonga/mama_20081695.html 27/09/06)

Everywhere, the cult of the mother is evident. The excessive emotionalism of Italian men, always close to their aggressively defended facades, is, I suggest, learnt from and triggered by mamma: he is a man at once brimming with a confidence born of being the sole object of his mother's affection, and constantly needing the reassuring presence of the feminine.

Beniamino Gigli (1890-1957) epitomises this man. As a performer whose career spanned the decades around the Second World War, his life provides an insight into the formation of performing masculinity that came to represent Italian opera post-Caruso. Furthermore, his presence in Italian films strengthens the case for citing him as a model of 1930s Italian machismo (Blythe and Shaw-Taylor 2001, 848). In many ways he is a figure open to negative stereotyping. Desmond Shaw-Taylor and Alan Blyth suggest that Gigli was 'always liable to faults of taste – to a sentimental style of portamento, for instance, or the breaking of the line by sobs, or ostentatious bids for stage applause' (ibid). Labelling these 'faults of taste' may constitute a misreading of fundamentally Italian performance qualities, extrovert tendencies that are crucial in opening up performance spaces that accommodate the unusual. It is this culturally grounded performance space that accounts for Italian practices as diverse in scale as the various *carnevale* (the pre-lent carnival) – the subversive qualities of which have been thoroughly theorised (Bakhtin 1968, 197) (Birnbaum 1993, 75) – and the staging of all-male operettas in Zonderwater.

Gigli's memoirs (1957) provide us with a wealth of examples illustrating the reality of this brand of masculinity. They begin with dedications to the memory of his mother and to his audiences, markers that affirm Italianness in their respective ways: the mother, with whom he has the archetypal bond; and the audience, whose role it is to validate the performance of Italian masculinity in symbolic representations. The first page of the memoir begins immediately with a nod to the Italian narrative trope of the

underdog: ‘I was born with a voice and very little else: no money no influence, no other talents.’ (Gigli 1957, 1). Though the fact of his early poverty is true, I include this opening sentence to emphasise the ubiquity of poverty and its contingent shame in the construction of Italian personal narratives of this period. Having established poverty as a framing device, the narrative inevitably proceeds to indicate the convergence of luck and ingenuity that rescues him (see Chapter 1). Following this, Gigli raises another trope found throughout the myth complex of Zonderwater: the need to sing. In the myth complex of the Italian POWs this trope is presented as a cultural imperative. Gigli writes: ‘I *had* to sing: what else could I do?’ (ibid.). Combining the fatalism and exuberant creativity typical of Italians, he expands on this belief in the wholly natural and cathartic qualities of singing.

Gigli then moves directly to the story of his early singing experience, and it is here that he turns to the first of many accounts of his mother. By singing the peasant lullabies that he soon mastered, Ester Gigli wove a complex world of song for the young Beniamino, warning him that ‘in order to sing well one had to be good and kind and feel love in one’s heart.’ (ibid.). Here, the notion of goodness as the foundation of great art is illustrated in a simultaneous lesson in voice and morality. Expressing this early on in his memoirs, Gigli provides an insight into a culturally rooted ethos of singing, and by extension music, that must be similar to that of the POWs who, growing up in the same cultural setting, conceivably absorbed the same set of values.

Gigli also soon addresses the realisation of his Italianness. It is a cultural institution, in the form of the Recanati Cathedral, and particularly the artworks it contains, that is directly responsible for the formation of this part of his identity.

> I felt at home with these marvels, since they were literally on my doorstep, but I also felt reverence for them. At some stage it began to dawn on me that I too was Italian, and I felt glad and proud. Later, whenever my singing was applauded in distant places such as Buenos Aires or San Francisco or Cape Town, I always felt the applause was due more to Italy than to me personally, for without Italy I should have been nothing. (Gigli 1957, 6.)

This statement situates Gigli firmly in his era – the first three decades of the twentieth century – an era important to the distillation of a unified Italian national identity. Likewise, the men at Zonderwater were aware, as products of and participants in the

World Wars, of their identity as Italians in a way that was relatively new. The unification of Italy in 1860 had redeemed the region from description as a 'mere geographical expression' to a united political entity. Three quarters of a century later, this sense of a single, proudly attained identity was a powerful shaping agent in modern Italianness.

Gigli soon returns from his own paean to Italianness to the subject of singing and to his version of the place of singing, as amateur and professional pursuit, in the life of an Italian.

> This, of course, they considered important. To have a *sfogo* – an outlet – is one of the prime necessities of life for an Italian. '*Beniamino si sta sfogando,*' they would say in tones of indulgent approval, when they heard me warbling *Tantum ergo* on my way home from school. 'Beniamino is letting off steam.' Italian children are not trained to be shy or reticent, to imprison their feelings or curb their impulses; on the contrary, long before the days of 'permissiveness', even by parents who never laid eyes on a manual of child psychology, children were always encouraged to let whatever was inside them – good or bad – come out into the fresh air. If it is good, why suppress it? If it is bad, better get rid of it; it might be poisonous, like pus. Either way, a *sfogo* is healthy, a safety valve for the nervous system. This capacity for *sfogo*, acquired in childhood, becomes second nature to us Italians. We explode with anger, excitement, joy, we shout or sing: at once we feel better. I know that strangers to Italy find it somewhat disconcerting, but I think it helps to keep us sane, or at any rate cheerful. (Gigli 1957, 10-11)

Within the context of a POW camp, the notion of a *sfogo* is useful in explaining a plethora of activities that would seem of little importance to non-Italians, music-making being foremost among them. Likewise it explains the increasing importance of music as the term of imprisonment extended.

The development of Gigli's *sfogo* into a career began in an unusual way and has relevance to the shows put on at Zonderwater. At fifteen he made his debut as a soprano in the title role of the operetta, *La Fuga di Angelica* ('Angelica's Elopement') by Alessandro Billi (Gigli 1957, 22). His recollection of this event occasions a mixture of shame, pride, fear and exhilaration:

> I was bewildered enough myself, however, that first evening in the dressing-room of the Teatro Lauri Rossi, when I saw Angelica in the looking-glass. My cheeks were pink, plump and smooth beneath the silky brown curls of my wig; I was a really convincing girl, and I found this rather upsetting. I felt a wave of adolescent shyness, and then a vague sense of panic. Out there in the audience were al the fine ladies of Macerata; worse still, out there was my father. How could I face them?…At any rate, it seemed to win my audience: I could scarcely believe that all

> the applause and cries of *'Bis!'* were really for me. It was overwhelming. I felt like the girl I was supposed to be – I wanted to cry. (Gigli 1957, 25)

This first-hand account shows clearly his strange succession of emotions, moving quickly from doubt and shame to basking in the glory of the applause.[37] The powerful combination of a belief in the *sfogo* and a cultural drive to create music seems to have been enough to justify the transgression of gender roles on stage for both Gigli and his audience. For the men at Zonderwater, the same criteria, coupled with the complete absence of women, were doubtless enough to justify the development of a facile, realistic and expressive cross-dressing culture for entertainment, without the pejorative connotations of perversion that would ordinarily cast a shadow over such stagings.

These excerpts from Gigli's memoirs clearly outline some of the key elements that, under the banner of a national culture, were essential in creating the psychology allowing the POWs to produce the type of theatre that they did. The first is a commitment to creating art, as a point of cultural pride, and the downplaying of other concerns (moral and logistical) to this central commitment. Another is the permeable boundary between gendered behaviours: for example, Gigli is unreservedly moved and influenced by his powerful emotions, while his mother is presented as the rock-solid, immovable authority figure.

The paradoxes of Italian gender identity provided not only the space for representations but also interpretations of women. Having discussed the brand of masculinity that created these roles, I turn now to the roles themselves so as to explore the brand of femininity presented.

In many of the operettas performed in the camp, notions of the exotic are shamelessly exploited. The setting for these exhibitions was most often the Far East. The reason for this probably has more to do with the history of operetta as a genre than any

[37] He mentions that the moral implications of performing the role were potentially grave for him; the reason no female soprano would take the role was because it depicted a less than ideal woman (elopement was frowned upon). Also, the idea of being paid to perform, and perform as a woman, was almost more than his mother could bear (Gigli 1957, 22-23). The lack of decorum that she sensed in the unfolding events offended the deeply held cultural value of the bella figura (see Chapter 1). She exerted pressure on him to decline the role, and only once he had her blessing did he continue. The authority of the mother, and even the complications around the representation of women on stage, speak directly to the centrality of women in Italian culture.

specific choices of camp directors.[38] It is in the imagined haze of opium dens of the mysterious east that the nineteenth-century imagination cast off its shackles. With precedents in opera including Verdi's *Aida* (1871), as well as Puccini's *Madama Butterly* (1904) and *Turandot* (1926), the East was already a substantial, if entirely fantastic landscape. Within the cultural domain, it became necessary for the West to undermine the East, as part of an insidiously uninflected approach to colonialism. Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, suggests that it was crucial to the 'exercise of cultural strength' that the West 'othered' the East; clearly this cultural delineation was essential in justifying the colonial rule of 'inferior' states (1995, 43-44). The trope of the East as the natural home of evil gained momentum through the course of the nineteenth century, and all forms of depravity and licentiousness were projected onto eastern woman, making her the perfect character for any production calling for an exploitable girl. Catherine Clemént argues, in *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* (1988), that the *raison d'être* of the primadonna - in any form, from the legend of Callas to the fictional Bianca Castafiore of Tintin - is to suffer as the object of male fantasy (Clément 1988, 9). And indeed this is exactly what unfolds in a number of the scenarios that are played out in Zonderwater productions. In their double feminine identity – as remembered Italian and fantasized oriental – the primadonnas of Zonderwater's operettas walked the line between affirming and recreating their performing selves, and the needs of their audience.

The story of *The Geisha* is one of pure fantasy in which European men are treated as gods in the magical garden of a Shanghai Geisha parlour. They make love and promises they have no intention of keeping, remaining heroes until the end. In the story of *Cin-Ci-La* a Parisian is called in to educate a young Korean princess in the ways of love. Again with no real accountability or moral structure, the story never leaves the realms of pure male fantasy.

However, there is perhaps another reading of the representation of these exotics that appealed more to the experience of this specific group of men than a generalised male fantasy. The reality of imprisonment in a foreign land made the themes of the

[38] In Grove's, Lambe suggests that operetta as a genre favours "escapist stories, exotic locations, spectacle and effects" (Lambe, A. 2001. Operetta. In *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edition, ed. S. Sadie, exec ed. J. Tyrell, Vol. 5, 495).
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exotic, and their relationship with it, an immediate concern. The danger and excitement of the 'other' was, I argue, a reality for the POWs as they found themselves surrounded by people with whom they had very little in common in terms of either culture, status, language or religion. For a European audience in the early twentieth century, the exotic locale of an operetta was a point of fashion (Lambe 2001, 493), and perhaps, at most, a casual exploration of their relationship with the foreign. For the captured Italian soldiers, on the other hand, the ability to relate to the exotic was a matter of survival.

That Zulu soldiers, armed with spears, were assigned to guard them is something that many ex-inmates recount (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 3, 00:38). This terrified the prisoners and is effectively worked into many narratives within the myth-complex, emphasising the 'primitive' exoticism of their situation. Their achievements may therefore seem all the more triumphal (Sani 1992, 298). Is it possible, then, that in choosing to produce operettas in which European males always emerge unscathed, the POWs were able to allay fears of being overwhelmed by their own situation? That by displacing their anxieties with a fantasy in which familiar characters triumphed, they could vicariously reassert their dominance over place and destiny?

The Parisian in *Cin-Ci-La*, and the naval officers in *The Geisha* were, in a sense, relevant to the Italians as both Europeans and soldiers. Another way in which the men were drawn into the productions was via the comforting presence of the Italian language. These points of cultural and contextual connection are, I argue, a key to the success of these shows, not only as productions but also as valorising events, mixing affirmation of identity with hope for the future. The nature of operetta as a genre (its lightness, its optimism) allowed the POWs to witness the playing out of scenarios that resonated with their own, but always concluded positively.

The programmes that accompanied each production deftly signal the importance of the element of fantasy fulfilment. Souvenir examples are included in the various archives. Each features on its cover a hand-painted depiction of a beautiful woman. There is the suave Sonia (sic) of *The Merry Widow* with her elegant apparel and the sparkle marks drawn to indicate her most notable quality, money (another rarity in the camp where cigarettes were the main currency); there is also the innocently exotic *Cin-Ci-La*. Equally arresting (and stereotyped) are two depictions of The Maid of the Mountains (*La*

Vergina della Montagna); leggy, busty, and overtly sexy, her inviting scarlet lips still call out after over sixty years (see Figures 11 and 12). In counterpoint to the 'highly moral' maid is another rural lass (this time from isolated Sardinia) whose naiveté leads her to becoming a model for an unscrupulous city-type; on the programme cover Primarosa coquettishly steps out from a chorus line of country girls and dandies to steal the hearts of her audience.

These women represent the sexual side of the Italian ideal. They are glamorous, beautiful, in some cases not very bright (although for the most part equal in intelligence and integrity to their male co-characters). The programmes are clearly the result of much thought and illustrate vividly how well the men have effected their disguises. However, to gauge their full impact, one needs to examine an account of the successes of the productions and assess if they lived up to their promise.

Such information is scarce and, curiously enough, there is little documentation of audience response to shows (particularly the issue of drag) in the archives and testimonies, other than that they were very popular. This strategic silence regarding female impersonation is rendered deafening in the otherwise rich and robust narrative of Zonderwater. Like the moralising fig leaf on a classical nude, it begs a closer reading of the surrounding material. Performance details that do emerge have to do with the extensive rehearsal time and staunch support of the camp officials. This comes from Albertini, who claims that during all-night rehearsals the camp staff provided extra coffee and treated the performers as different from their peers in important ways. For instance, those engaged in a production were not allowed to go out with the working groups during the day in case they escaped. Camp management 'did not want to loose an element', as Albertini puts it (Albertini Interview 1). The use of the term 'an element' to describe the performers signals the fundamental importance of theatre events to the smooth running of the camp. It can further be assumed that it was not primarily in the name of art that officers exercised such care. It is known that commandant Prinsloo took the directive from Smuts to keep the POWs happy and healthy very seriously; seeing that entertainments functioned optimally was presumably done in the spirit of Smut's injunction (Sani 1992, 298-299). In all of this, nothing about the all-male casts is mentioned. The female impersonators remain mute.

Tarantino, who was not in Zonderwater but a camp for Italian officers in Kenya, remembers a POW production of *Rigoletto* that has haunted him all his life. However, when pressed as to who played Gilda in an all male camp (apparently this POW production actually went on tour), he said he could not remember if it was a man or not (Tarantino Interview).

This strange forgetfulness, experienced by men like Albertini who, in all other areas have excellent recall, seems to pervade and mask any enquiry into the specifics of these productions. While it is widely acknowledged that they were of an excellent standard, it seems almost impossible to find a POW willing to discuss the fact that men played both male and female roles. This silence may be read in a number of ways.

One would be to say that the portrayal of women by men was a non-issue, simply one of the many unusual outcomes of their unnatural situation. Giovanni Albertini, who is a primary source, has offered much information and shared many of his personal experiences in the theatre life of the camp (he performed in the *teatro di prosa*, not the operettas) without once mentioning that he was a female impersonator on at least one occasion; he played the young niece of the title character in *Charlie's Aunt* by Brandon Thomas. He even went so far as to say that there were men who played women so convincingly that visiting dignitaries expressed interest in meeting them after the show. Albertini was very young and it is certain that his involvement was on the level of simply acting. It is doubtful that he had a hand in negotiating the sensitive drag issue, or was involved in deciding how far it should go into farce. But, obviously, he was responsible for bringing his characters to life, and according to him, only those who showed promise as actors were selected from the auditions (Albertini interview 2). Villa, in recalling the theatre life of the camp, also makes mention of the fact that for many of them it was a confusing or disturbing thing to have young men playing women on stage. He seems to imply that it may have led to homosexual activities, but his main concern at the time was that it aroused the younger men, many of whom, he imagined, had not had sex before (Villa interview). He was already in his late twenties and so, by making this age distinction, distances himself from the issue.

The second way of reading the silence contradicts the preceding argument. That is, that the impersonation of women by men was so problematic that it is not talked about; in the interest of protecting reputations, the whole performance tradition is ignored.

The added dimension of imprisonment increased the soldiers' sense of deprivation and, at Zonderwater, the absence of women formed part of their punishment; drag shows were not simply for laughs, but fulfilled very specific functions in the camp. They were probably, for the majority of the soldiers, the substitute representation of women. These were not mothers or sisters, represented in the sphere of religious expression, but the nubile, young seductresses of fantasy. In a very real way these theatre 'women' were the symbols of a lost life. Perhaps the silence on the matter is one of embarrassment; the sense of deprivation and loss felt by ex-POWs, even after the war, was too profound to sustain any enquiry into the coping methods devised for the situation.

Understanding the meeting point of these readings of a particular silence speaks to the central argument of the present work. That is to say that the identity of the POWs was at once affirmed, and irrevocably altered during their imprisonment. On the one hand, they came out of a culture with an historically flexible sense of gendered behaviour that allowed a potentially subversive art form to flourish. In this way, a received Italianness was affirmed. On the other hand, in an attempt to assimilate into the Anglo-centric culture of South Africa, with its more rigid notions of gender, both during and after the war, the silencing into non-existence of this practice was critical, the result of a stilting of the flow of personal and group narrative. It is at this point, where they are expected to, and in fact do, relinquish words for silence, that the Italianness of the inmates is hybridised with another identity.

The precise nature of this silence, however, is of little relevance given the changes in society over the past sixty years; the sensitivities and secret lives that such silences may or may not hide are secondary to the fact that the operettas are, in the remembering of Zonderwater, a *cause célèbre* and a triumph for the cultural leverage agenda that is so important to Zonderwater community.

2.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that in seeking ways to represent women, the prisoners established the foundations on which they built a community; with at least the simulacra of the feminine, that community could develop along particularly Italian lines, carefully ignoring the realities of war that so offended the *bella figura*.

In gathering the myths created by the prisoners, on stage and in religious art, a very specific and unique picture emerges. These traces of their attempts to physically remake broken lives are the gaps that together constitute an archaeology. That the tangible objects left behind are so closely related to cultural practices, the things that occupy leisure or, in the case of religion, personal time, is testament to clear priorities. While the world around them was desperately short on necessities, they turned potato skins into paint, tomato boxes into mandolins, and cotton-wool from the dispensary into a fur coat fit for a primadonna. In the archaeology of Zonderwater, these objects d'art are more than the products of boredom, or a bid to earn some money; they bear witness to the good life.

To remember veterans and victims of WWII is not uniquely Italian, or South African for that matter, but the creation (by the inheritors of the myth-complex) of a memorial out of the remains and evidence of artistic endeavours, especially musical endeavours, is distinctly Italian and uniquely Zonderwater. Appearance, as understood through the cult of the *bella figura*, was paramount, and this underpinned every assertion of culture, producing a body of work that would eventually be worked into 'evidence' of a civilised imprisonment, that noble 'high spirit of understanding' that Abela saw in Colonel Prinsloo.

Music at Zonderwater

While the specific objects and events discussed in previous chapters illustrate the delicate balance of South African and Italian cultures in microcosm at Zonderwater, it remains to discuss the broader musical life of the camp. This is essential to understanding POW identity, as music was one of the few activities that broke the insularity of the largely self-sufficient Blocks that made up the community as a whole. The range of activities is also significant: from dilettante to professional pursuit, music belonged to, and involved, all prisoners. The evidence suggests that the men also assumed the function of audience as enthusiastically as that of performer, creating a robust and emotionally charged set of musical interactions. This close and particularly Italian relationship with music permeates the archives; it belongs in all forms to the Italian and its enjoyment is his inalienable right. The records also reflect the mixing of various social classes at Zonderwater. From the art music of professional soloists, composers and conductors, to the folk and popular music of the lower classes, as well as innovations unique to the camp, the aural world of each individual was an important marker of his identity.

Before unpacking what music meant to the prisoners, it is important to understand how it developed. The logistics of music-making under such difficult circumstances – in the organisation of concerts, provision of instruments and training of musicians – involved a cross-section of agendas and interactions that, when mythologised, enrich Italian identity in South Africa.

3.1 Light and serious music

There are slight statistical discrepancies between the various sources dealing with music at Zonderwater; the zeal of raconteurs and POW enthusiasts frequently distorts the facts of camp life.[39] Establishing precise lists of repertoire and the ensembles that performed them is difficult, but there are a number of sources that offer suggestions as to the kinds of music that the prisoners would have heard. Art music, by virtue of its scale and use in Zonderwater's public life, attracted more attention from the 'media'. A reliable internal source is the special edition of *Tra i Reticolati* (Behind Barbed Wire), published in July

[39] This is a key element of the mythologising of Zonderwater, and is contextualised in previous chapters.

1943.[40] This special edition of the weekly publication compiled by the prisoners themselves was to commemorate 'The Second General Exhibition of POW Arts and Crafts, Zonderwater' ('*La seconda mostra generale arte e artigianato dei P.D.G. Sonderwater'* [sic]) of 12-28 April 1943.[41] The two-page article on music (author unknown) provides an overview of large-scale, public music-making in 1943, and is also illustrative of the aforementioned Italianness of music.

That there was music in the camp before 1943 is beyond any doubt. However, the article, after recounting the gradual accumulation of instruments (dealt with in detail below), recalls the most impressive musical achievements of that particular year. For example, one of the bands, conducted by POW Mineo, is lauded as the envy of all others of its kind in South Africa (*Tra i Reticolati edizione speciale* [TIR hereafter], 26). The highlights of its repertoire are described as 'varied and vast: Tosca, Cavalleria Rusticana, L'Italiani in Algeri, Boheme, Traviata, Turandot, Aida, Carmen, L'Amico Friz, Beethoven symphonies, Schubert's Incomplete (sic) symphony and Song Albums' (TIR, 26). This is an impressive playlist for an ensemble billed as a 'band'. The extensive repertoire was matched by their size: Albertini claims that they generally consisted of eighty or ninety players, on mostly brass and woodwind instruments (Albertini interview 2). Albertini also offers an explanation for the type of repertoire, indicating that there was a passion for highlights and 'hits' from the opera and classical repertoire, and given the demographic make-up of the camp (namely young NCOs), it is safe to assume that where operas are listed, one can read: overture, interludes, incidental music and arrangements of popular arias (Albertini interview 1).[42] Similarly, the Schubert songs may have been arranged for the ensembles at hand. Even if through substantial reductions and

[40] The editors were POWs Gattamelata and Salus (both officers of rank), the proof-reader was, interestingly, Lt. Sonnabend. This indicates the watchful eye of the camp command on the content of *Tra i Reticolati*.

[41] The edition featured short articles covering a broad range of subjects including: official addresses by camp command concerning the ethos of the camp, opening ceremony of the exhibition, overview, prize-winning work, visitors' impressions, the schools, the theatres, music, a chronicle of Mons. Gijlwijk's (apostolic delegate) visit, crafts, retrospective, and sport. All translations of this text from the original Italian are my own unless otherwise stated.

[42] This mania for 'hit tunes' was a world-wide phenomenon, resulting from the birth of radio and the limitations of recorded sound at the time, hence excerpts and highlights gained popularity as opposed to whole works, especially lengthy works from the classical canon.
(http://www.cisi.unito.it/marconi/raieng.html, 22/11/06).

arrangements, this band was seen as a vital tool of aesthetic education and made regular tours of the various blocks (ibid.).

Many Zonderwater musical achievements came as the result of the commitment of professional musicians like Mineo. Albertini suggests that musical management was in the hands of capable individuals: 'head people, they were professional in Italy…we had a couple from *Africa Orientale*, Abyssinia, for instance my director… competent people, not stupid' (Albertini interview 1).[43] Professional soloists also made great contributions. POW Persico, by all accounts a gifted violinist, is pictured giving an outdoor concert to a prisoner audience of hundreds, many of whom would probably never have had the opportunity of hearing a musician of his calibre in civilian life (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 2, 00:30).

The dominance of pieces derived from Italian vocal works, reflecting the inextricability of music and song in the Italian psyche, is evident in the TIR list; later in the same article the band is congratulated for its accompaniment in the POW performance of Perosi's *Missa Pontificalis* for three voices (TIR 27).[44] The voices for this set mass were trained in one of the camp's own *Scholae Cantorum*, another remarkable feat of musical aptitude and pedagogy working within the limitations of a prisoner of war camp (ibid.).[45] It is clear, then, that by 1943 the musicianship at Zonderwater was immensely sophisticated.

Performances of works from the heart of the Western classical canon (particularly works of the Romantic and Verismo composers) were thus a feature of Zonderwater concert programmes throughout the war. Attended by captors and captives alike, these concerts grew to include guest artists. The 1946 'Vocal and Instrumental Concert', held at the POW Staff Theatre at Zonderwater, is exemplary in this regard.[46] Many of the POW performers were renowned professionals, including pianist Davio Almangano, violinist

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[43] Interestingly, prisoners captured in East Africa were frequently citizens of Italian colonies, and therefore tended to be older, professional family men.

[44] This important liturgical work was the first of two Pontifical Masses composed by Don Lorenzo Perosi. The original (1897) is composed for three voices and is a polyphonic piece that reflects the influence of Renaissance polyphony (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_Lorenzo_Perosi 23/11/06). Here is an example of a score that has not been arranged or rescored to fit the prisoners' requirements, the significance of which is explored below.

[45] These *Scholae Cantorum* (singing schools) are not discussed in other texts, making it impossible to know how singing was taught.

[46] A copy of the programme from this concert is archived at the MHM.

Prof. Nino Martucci, cornet player and composer Prof. G. Vitale, and composer R. Maccari. Visiting performers included Matilde Casoni, a well-known mezzo-soprano and singing teacher living in Johannesburg, as well as a number of her pupils (a soprano, mezzo and baritone), and baritone Mr. Ellis-Clarke of the Zonderwater YMCA (a UDF soldier). Orchestra and soloists performed works by Strauss, Puccini, Chopin, Kreisler, Verdi, Tosti, Mascagni, Ponchielli, Braga, Rossini, Bizet, Schubert, Sarasate, Thomas, Giordano and Paganini (Vocal and Instrumental Concert programme, 1946, ZM).

Besides its important contribution to camp entertainment, education and religion, music also featured in the numerous parades. Ceremony was transformed into pageant on the second of May 1943 when 996 prisoners took the opportunity offered by a visiting Apostolic delegate to be confirmed in a mass ceremony at the POW Hospital.[47] The caption below the photograph from the special TIR edition reads: 'The day of the Confirmation ceremony at the POW Hospital. The band plays while Block 1 parades in formation'.[48] One of the pieces played was Gounod's *Pontifical Hymn* (1897) (TIR, 31), declared the anthem of the Vatican in 1950. Clearly visible in the picture are tubas, trombones, clarinets, French horns and trumpets. The actual ceremony was accompanied by the combined choirs of the first, sixth and seventh Blocks (ibid.).

Art music was part of the public face of POW culture; however, many musicians and amateurs were involved in less formal music-making. Albertini describes the ethos of the camp as one where, surrounded by skilled artists and craftsmen, 'you learn everything, even if you don't want to; your brain is so fresh' (Albertini interview 1). With so much free time, Zonderwater was an ideal environment for studying a musical instrument or developing musical skills; music was an excellent channel for the frustrations of extended imprisonment. This, in conjunction with the fact that those with even the most rudimentary education would have studied *canto* (singing) – a compulsory subject in Italian primary education of the time – created a relatively high instance of basic musical literacy.[49]

[47] Confirmation is an important Catholic sacrament that signifies the candidate's full membership as an adult in the church.
[48] 'Il giorno della Cresima all'Ospedale p.d.g. La "Banda" suona mentre sfila il 1° Blocco inquadrato.'
[49] 'Between the other *meta* [subjects]… there was *canto* in those days.' (Albertini interview 1).

Albertini, in relating his life's story, describes the general musical competence of his own family and implies that this was representative of Italian life in general before the war: 'Yes. They were all playing guitar and mandolin, but by heart, nobody studied music. But you should have heard how they played. Fantastic!' (Albertini interview 1). He also describes his boarding school days in Bologna as a time when '[t]hey were feeding us with music' (ibid.). Between the religious festivals of his youth in the South, the revues and radio orchestras of his teens in Bologna, and the music-filled nights of his time in Naples (in transit to the fronts in North Africa), Albertini makes a strong case for the central role that music (especially vocal music) played in the psyche of the average Italian.

Generally, informal music-making of the kind that he suggests was integral to Italian life, is by definition ephemeral in its afterlife; unless it is recorded this music leaves no trace other than its impression on the memory of a listener. Luckily first-hand accounts of spontaneous music-making among the prisoners abound, especially in testaments from the officers in charge. Non-Italians at other internment sites also remember the singing of the POWs in the context of camps where political tensions made for a more austere atmosphere. These were the camps where the Italians were imprisoned with other nationalities and South African political prisoners, and the love of song of the former made lasting impressions. An Afrikaans ex-prisoner at Koffiefontein, P.J. Lourens, recalls the pleasure of music: 'Naturally the Italians loved to sing, and they did this much better than us Afrikaners; they harmonised with many voices' (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 3, 00:18). He remembers also how they created songs ridiculing their captors – songs that they happily taught to their non-Italian fellow prisoners (ibid.). Similarly, Farmer D. Fernhout's memory of the Italians working on the family farm is also musical: 'We enjoyed them very much. They made music and could all sing' (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 3, 00:42).

Apart from the ubiquitous singing, there was also light music played on a variety of instruments. Archived at the Zonderwater museum, the 'POW Exhibition of Arts and Crafts Brochure of 1944' gives an inventory of instruments. In the orchestral and band categories, 'Mandolines' (sic), 'Guitarres' (sic) and 'Banjo Mandolines' (sic) (POW Exhibition of Arts and Crafts Brochure of 1944, 15) accounted for 44% of all the

instruments, with mandolins alone constituting 34%.[50] Apart from the anomalous 'Banjo Mandolin', a distinctly twentieth-century innovation, these instruments share a long association with folk and traditional music in Italy, and the fact that they were so common suggests a thriving culture of folk music at Zonderwater.[51] Another piece of evidence in the document is in the form of a footnote below the list of instruments, indicating that: 'Private instruments are not included' (ibid.). This suggests that there was music-making beyond the official ensembles and concerts and perhaps also that music was much more integrated into the everyday lives of the prisoners; part of their private world.

Amongst the visual records an impromptu performance of popular music is captured on a postcard sent home by Vincenzo Cuzzola in 1943. While this postcard, housed at the ZM, raises interesting questions regarding the manufacture of the public image of POW camps (dealt with in detail below), it also serves as a practical guide to the kinds of informal music that prisoners would have heard. The picture shows four musicians grouped together in a dappled grove, with a caption for each in the author's handwriting. Seated on a log, Vincenzo Cuzzola of Pellaro in Reggio Calabria, plays a guitar; facing him is Maggi, described as 'ex-boxer (Roman)', who is playing a POW-made mandolin. Standing behind the two are Giuseppe Verardi of Lecce with his violin, and Greco of Cariari (Catanzaro) playing a guitar. The four are surrounded by prisoners looking at the camera: some smile, but most stare. One of these, a bystander leaning against a tree is, for no obvious reason, identified as 'a Calabrian'. The typed caption of the picture reads: '*Un momento di riposo al campo di Worcester*' ('A moment of rest at the camp of Worcester'). A translation of the message on the reverse side reads: 'The three indicated in the photograph – with Mr. Sassi – are found together working at the ceramic factory of Mr. Lain. Wellington (South Africa)'.

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[50] The banjo mandolin was a hybrid instrument with the size, tuning, and courses (double strings) of a mandolin. Its 'banjo' feature is the skin head that forms the body of the instrument. The instrument gained popularity in the heyday of large banjo and mandolin ensembles (late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) but is now a rarity. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banjo_Mandolin 27/11/06).

[51] The mandolin is first mentioned in connection with Italian itinerant musicians of the mid eighteenth century, suggesting a history closely aligned with popular music. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandolin 27/11/06).

It is possible that some distinct cultural perceptions of music are revealed in the postcard in the difference between the printed caption and the explanation given by Cuzzola: the captors speak of music as a leisure activity ('a moment of rest'), while the prisoners viewed it as integral to the day's work ('working at the ceramic factory'). Another point of interest is the description of the regional origin of each musician (including the staring Calabrian). This display of regional awareness is a defining feature of the way in which Italians interact; regional identities carry incredible weight in a society where national identity is secondary to the culture of *campanilismo* (literally, exclusive loyalty to one's own parish) (Richards 1995, 81). Like pieces in a puzzle, the ensemble pictured fits the Southern Italian identity of the various musicians, perhaps also exemplifying the notorious *Mezzogiorno* (South of Rome) culture of *dolce far niente* (doing sweet nothing) and the relatively low-brow music of violin, mandolin and guitar.[52] The uninterrupted performance of Italian regional identity, even in the remote, cultural void of an external work-camp, is evidence of the stabilising and normalising uses to which music was put. The sounds of the familiar made a home of any foreign place, reproducing Italian society down to the smallest sub-divisions of class and region.

There is also the interesting shape of the POW-made mandolin in the photograph. It features a long ornamental extension from the soundboard that arches away from the fret board and then tapers, curving back towards the headstock. This style of mandolin, called F-style (Florentine-style), is a twentieth-century departure from the traditional A-style (pear-shaped) models, and indicates the willingness of POW instrument manufacturers to experiment with form (http://www.mandolincafe.com/archives/builders/a.html 27/11/06). Following this to a logical conclusion, it might be possible to assume that the music the prisoners made on these instruments was also subject to experimentation, or at least improvisation.

3.2 The development of music in the camp

Alongside the many phenomenal feats of engineering and education that emanated from the community, the musical development of the camp holds pride of place in the

[52] This combination of instruments would, with the addition of a tambourine, be a typical accompanying ensemble for the *tarantella* rituals of Southern Italy (De Martino 2005, 299)

Zonderwater myth (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 2, 00:26). Ex-POW Albertini describes the gradual accumulation of instruments in epic terms, beginning: 'it was an incredible thing because they had just arrived, strangers in a strange land, where they didn't speak the language and were dumped in tents' (Albertini interview 2). There is a mythic ring to his description of the captured Italians who, like Plato's fugitive Atlanteans, carry the promise of civilization to distant shores.[53] Nonetheless, the assertion that at Zonderwater: '[M]usic is an activity that occupies hundreds and hundreds of people' (TIR, 26) offers little practical information on how POWs accessed instruments and written music.

There were a number of ways in which the men got what they needed to make music. A few prisoners had managed, against all odds, to bring a mandolin or guitar with them, but for the most part instruments were scarce and 'the first drum was a tin' (Albertini interview 2).One important source was the Welfare Office of the camp. The camp command, recognizing the peace-keeping potential of music, provided most of the materials that the men needed, increasingly investing in musical instruments and events. Prior to this, long before any were purchased, instruments were made from the materials at hand. In this regard, the skilled work of the violin makers has already been discussed, but even more basic instruments were constructed to accompany the songs of the first prisoners of *Tendopoli*.[54] The POWs were adept at making things out of recovered materials; when this skill was turned to music, the results soon passed into legend (Albertini interview 1).

Not surprisingly the progression from the home-made instruments of the early days of the camp to the days of multiple orchestras is rarely covered in the Zonderwater narratives: as a result, the appearance of a full array of instruments seems almost miraculous, a perfect demonstration of prisoner ingenuity and, by extension, Italian genius.

In fact the negotiation and acquisition of instruments was carried out by members of CAPI (*Comitato Assistenza Prigionieri Italiani* – Welfare Committee for Italian

[53] In the *Timaeus* and *Critias* (circa 355BC), Plato suggests that civilization was brought to the Mediterranean by Atlanteans fleeing their sinking continent (http://www.activemind.com/Mysterious/Topics/Atlantis/index.htm).
[54] '*Tendopoli*' was a nickname for early Zonderwater, literally 'city of tents'.

Prisoners). The Lupini family, among many others, worked tirelessly to raise money from the South African Italian community, furnishing the prisoners with the materials they required (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 2, 00:14). That this process was quite a slow one is suggested in the official documentation:

> The first instruments, especially the wind instruments, completely autarchical and ingenious, had the esteem, if nothing else, of good will. Then they began to make violins, guitars etc. and today they even make cellos and piano accordions that have even drawn much admiration at the recent exhibition of arts and crafts. The small orchestras, mostly made up of string instruments, began to play in the oldest blocks: first, second and third. Then some cornets arrived, some old saxophones and one could be satisfied with this, notwithstanding the difficulties of those first months in Tendopoli. But towards the end of '41 a real 'band' arrived at Zonderwater. Over 40 newly forged instruments immediately became the joy of the Italian POWs. (TIR, 26)

The way in which the instruments were written about suggests the almost parental pride with which they were regarded. A year later (1944) POW-made instruments still constituted the majority, but there had been some substantial acquisitions:

> Musical instruments in the camp – 11 pianos, 60 violins, 1 cello, 1 contrabass, 5 flutes, 1 oboe, 38 clarinets, 6 French horns, 24 trumpets, 2 tymps, 150 mandolines, 1 tube bells, 13 flegen horns [sic],[55] 8 barytone flegen horns, 4 tenor flegen horns, 7 bass flegen horns, 1 xylophone, 12 bass drums, 11 tenor drums, 11 pairs of cymbals, 40 guitarres, 5 banjo mandolins, 28 saxophones. (Exhibition of Arts and Crafts Brochure, 1944, ZM)

The range of instruments as listed above, clearly indicates the existence of brass ensembles, orchestral or chamber ensembles and small bands. As mentioned, privately owned instruments are not included in this list, and among these were presumably the many piano accordions pictured in the same brochure. Along with the accumulation of instruments, there was a parallel development in the fields of musical pedagogy and literacy.

Education was central to the ethos of Zonderwater (Sani 1992, 301). The scope of subjects was vast, with each prisoner focusing on his own areas of interest. In the journals of POW Gennaro Solimeo, evidence of the culture of learning is apparent on almost every page: lists of conjugated Italian verbs are interrupted by parentheses of

[55] Developed in the nineteenth century, the flugelhorn (or flegen horn) is known for its 'dark' or 'mellow' sound. It is most often used in jazz and brass bands, and is the melody-instrument of a fanfare-orchestra (http://en. wikipedia.org/wiki/Flugelhorn).

phonetically written Afrikaans, and lessons in geometry are interspersed with snatches of popular songs.[56]

Another journal, that of POW Carlo Cantorello, is, with the exception of a record of letters sent, entirely devoted to music.[57] It provides evidence for the idea that much of the music at Zonderwater was shared or taught from memory. While it is unclear whether this was the journal of a teacher or pupil, the content is geared towards drilling basic musical skills and recording lyrics. It is divided into two sections; each read from one end of the book towards the middle. One side of the journal begins with a libretto extract from Verdi's 'Coro di Matadori' (*La Traviata*), followed by lyrics to three popular songs, *Canzone Tango* (author unknown), *Non ti credo più* (author unknown) and *Nora* (author unknown). Then there is a basic lesson in reading music, marking each line and space of the stave with a solfa syllable. The other half of the book continues the solfa lessons, teaches elementary note and rest values, and has two pages devoted to various interval-based vocal exercises in the treble clef. Yet another set of written exercises belonging to Cantorello was clearly for an instrument. Titled *Salti* (jumps) it reaches four leger lines above and one below the treble stave, in intervals of thirds and fourths at increasing speeds.

The availability of scores for these growing ensembles and soloists is difficult to gauge. However, a number of the operetta, revue and theatre programmes indicate that music in these productions was often a pastiche of remembered hits, borrowed incidental music and original compositions. The translated title page of 6th Block's production of *La Geisha* reads: 'operetta in three acts by Sidney Jones, a liberal reconstruction by L.Vaccà. Orchestration and musical adaptation by Raul Maccari and Riccardo Orsini' (MHM). POW Theatrical Company *Savoia* produced the play *La Locandiera* (Carlo Goldoni) with musical *intermezzi* by established composers and POW Maccari (ibid.). Finally, the *Scatola di Fantasia* Company features additional music by Lehar, Tate, Valverde, and POW Landi in their adaptation of Harold Fraser-Simpson's *The Maid of the Mountains* (ibid.).

[56] These journals are in the possession of his son Luigi Solimeo.
[57] This journal is on display at the ZM.

In addition to music generated from the memories of the men, it is almost certain that Casoni and the members of CAPI would have assisted in bringing musical scores into the camp. That a South African official, baritone Mr. Ellis-Clarke of the Zonderwater YMCA, was involved in one of the concerts suggests that music was a cause in the interests of both captor and captive, and as such it seems unlikely that requested sheet-music was withheld from the culture-hungry prisoners.

This must have been the case when POW violinist Prof. Mino Martucci made his recordings at Zonderwater, accompanied by POW Davio Almangano. The record, made by Gallo Africa (Johannesburg), features an arrangement of Chopin's 'Nocturne in E flat' on one side, and Dvořák's *Humoreske* on the other. Cut in December 1946, it represents the end point of musical evolution at Zonderwater: two months before the last prisoners were to leave the camp, the "strangers in a strange land" had moved full circle from tin can drums to recordings of classical works. This brief sound recording, now housed at the ZM, is, I argue, proof of the prisoners' determination to transcend circumstance; with the expertise, logistical support and contacts necessary for a successful recording, they were able to produce a vinyl monument of their musical achievements in South Africa.

3.3 Music's significance for the captors

In the Second World War both allied and axis powers used psychological warfare not only against the enemy but within their own ranks (Bourkes 1999, 60). The systematic training of soldiers to kill on command, justified and promoted by semi-religious national values, is a powerful illustration of the Foucauldian notion that the modern era is one of conditioning 'docile bodies' (Gutting 2005, 47).[58] Thus individual or natural skill is replaced with disciplined behaviour to create uniform, calculable actions in units that monitor one another through normalising behaviour (Foucault 1982, 170). Apparent in the structure of certain types of institution and particularly in the military and the penitentiary, the aim of punishment became rehabilitation through discipline, as opposed to retribution through torture (Gutting 2005, 80). For the UDF forces, charged with the

[58] In the context of the birth of the modern prison, the modern era begins with the distillation of seventeenth-century concepts of punishment in the eighteenth century (Foucault 1982, 170, 182).

care of thousands of Italian POWs in this instance, finding ways to keep them under control was a mammoth task. Music proved central to this endeavour.

A strong sense of morality underpinned the philosophy of the South African command. Prinsloo, in the foreword to the *Italian POW in the Union of South Africa Brochure* (year unknown) outlines an agenda infused with paternalism:

> Our principle was: discipline coupled with human understanding, firmness mingled with kindness and a deep desire to take into account the peculiarities of the Italian character and the inevitable sufferings of life behind barbed wire.[59]

In practice, this code of conduct pinned certain pathologies onto Italian identity, leading to the construction of stereotypes that formed the basis of the practice of medicine in the camp. Lieutenant Colonel Blumberg, a doctor who worked with the prisoners, states clearly that it was the Italian character that determined the kinds of medical skills required in Zonderwater:

> Hysteria is a common occurrence in all prisons and prison camps, and as the Italians are an emotional people, the incidence of hysteria amongst them was relatively high. The manifestations ranged from hysterical blindness and aphonia (loss of speech) to complete paralysis. In order to combat this hysteria and depression among the POWs the Welfare Section of the camp, in close co-operation with the medical side, started a number of measures to keep the men's minds occupied and to awaken their interest in matters other than their own captivity. (Blumberg, L. 1946, 18)

Lieutenant (later Captain) Sonnabend, in a memo to the commandant regarding the slump in morale, goes further in his assumptions: 'Needless to say that with a temperamental people such as the Italians, the sex privation must also continually prey on their minds and sap many energies.' (*State of morale in the POW camp*, Zonderwater, April 1944. [MHM]). He also outlines the traits desirable in a prisoner and suggests ways to foster these:

> Social welfare must not be confused with philanthropy. Indiscriminate charity is bound to damage the self-respect and self-reliance of the recipient. Morbid tear-shedding and sentimentalism undermine the morale of those whom it was intended to benefit…Discipline must thus remain the basis of all fruitful work in such a camp…The soldier should not just "kill time"; he wants to feel that he is doing something of lasting benefit to himself or to others. Hence preference is to be given

[59] This bilingual, undated brochure is part of the private collection of Francesca Bortolotti.

> to every type of school. Libraries, Music [sic] and Theatre [sic] can also fulfil the double task of entertainment and education. (*Welfare in a POW camp*, TIR)

Music, conceived by the authorities as a controlling, disciplining device, seems however to have taken on a life of its own, almost diametrically opposed to the stated philosophy of the authorities. In spite of Sonnabend's warnings against 'tear-shedding and sentimentalism' (the very traits that Gigli encouraged in his philosophy of the *sfogo*) we learn:

> Encouraged by the Welfare Officers, theatres and orchestras sprang up everywhere in the camp. At first the musicians were unable to obtain instruments, and the ingenuity with which they manufactured them was unbelievable. … from morning to night the air rang with operas, concertos and nostalgic Italian folk-songs. (Blumberg, L. 1946, 18)

Here we see the prisoners appropriate the instrument of discipline: instead of producing docile bodies, or vanquishing tears and sentiment, music arouses nostalgia and provides a channel for positive cultural expression.

Music was useful to the captors in another way: as long as the prisoners were engaged by it, it was possible to produce evidence of their contentment. In the many publicity brochures and pamphlets produced by Zonderwater, there are invariably photographs of musicians. These are most often highly constructed images with the participants posing in the self-conscious way of those instructed to act naturally. This forced nonchalance can be seen in the postcard that Cantarello sent to his family, and in the exhibition brochures. Pictures of music-making seemed to strike the right balance between activity and pleasure, a visual message essential to conveying the health and happiness of the prisoners.[60] While the prisoners' voluntary and material investment in music was a show of culture, an upholding of the *bella figura*, their captors' investment was made with an eye to publicity in a war that did not enjoy the unqualified support of the entire country.

An unforeseen side-effect of the promotion of music is the way that it filled the silence of Zonderwater. Blumberg's phrase 'from morning to night the air rang' (ibid.),

[60] Though under vastly different circumstances, Shirli Gilbert has discussed this function of music in connection with Theresienstadt, where cultural activities were intended to give the impression of normalcy in a camp established for positive publicity (2005, vii-viii).

suggests that it transcended the barbed wire fences that separated the blocks and thus created limited but meaningful communication between prisoners. One can imagine the sound of a familiar song having as profound an effect on a prisoner within earshot in an adjacent block as on its intended audience.

3.4 Music's significance for the prisoners

Although it had particular uses for the camp command, music was something that the Italians felt was fundamentally theirs:

> This art that so diverts the Italian genius, cannot be disregarded. The natural tendency and innate love of our people for this talent of the human spirit has made Tendopoli a completely musical manifestation. (TIR, 26)

The prisoners used music, I argue, to manipulate their social status as much, if not more than their captors used it to political ends. The important discursive space of the operetta stage has already been discussed; the politics of other musical performances, regardless of genre, was equally lively.

POW artist Carlo Sdoya remembers an event that speaks directly to this sense of entitlement to all things musical. At the performance of an operetta the first row of seats was, as usual, reserved for South African officers. A gang (he uses an Italianization of the English 'gang') of Italians arrived and demanded that they be given the front row. When this was denied them, they responded raucously: 'We will break everything' Sdoya comments: 'It was like an earthquake, they broke glass and chairs, they broke everything' (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 2, 00:27). In a POW camp where violence was apparently rare, the choice of an operetta performance for a show of force indicates the importance of theatrical and musical events to social life. However it should be noted that this use of a performance space as the locus of socio-political wrangling, both on and around the stage, has a long history in Italy, where the opera stage in particular has traditionally and conventionally been the site of social conflict (Grout 1983, 621).

Music in Zonderwater was not limited to the performance of existing works. In addition to arrangements written from memory, or pieces learnt from scores, there were also original compositions. Two songs in particular aimed to build solidarity among POWs. Both were composed by POW Giuseppe Filippi (year unknown) and in form and

content suggest a concerted effort to unite the interns through the celebration of common ideals and a shared narrative. Filippi was well-known in the POW community and is remembered for singing his anthems at the Zonderwater memorial service in the post-war years (Solimeo interview). Certain ambiguities of tense in the songs make it difficult to ascertain when they were written; some stanzas may have been written in the camp while others are clearly written from a post-liberation perspective. This may raise certain questions around the legitimacy of their inclusion in a discussion of music composed in the camp. However, based on the fact that Filippi writes from the position of first-hand experience, and given that his songs were accepted as representative by fellow prisoners, I argue that they fit more comfortably in the hypothetical category of 'music from Zonderwater' than 'music about Zonderwater'.

In both anthems nationalistic rhetoric is refocused to support the group identity of a relatively small number of Italians, essentially abandoned to their fate. 'Nationalism makes the political religious and places the nation above politics' (Kapferer 1988, 1). In presenting their plight as sacred duty, the prisoners could align their experience with the expectations of nationalism.

Filippi's song, *Zonderwater Block: Inno del prigionero di guerra* (Zonderwater Block: Hymn of the prisoner of war) draws its emotional content from profound feelings of loss and longing (see Appendix 2 for the original Italian lyrics and a reproduction of the score):[61]

(First verse)
We left one day
called by the Fatherland
strengthened by faith
with the ideal that is to come.
Thus we must defend
our sacred soil,
with our duty alone
we shall fight to the death.

(Chorus)
We are prisoners of war
that fate has spared,
all for you, distant land,

[61] Author's translation. Original Italian lyrics and manuscript by Filippi are part of the private collection of E. Coccia.

so much blood was shed for you.
Shut up behind barbed wire
living thus for many years.
We are prisoners of war
That have returned in freedom;
We thank this land
that gives us life.
We are united by our Italy
With a great loyalty that will never die.

(Second verse)
Awake, the dawn is here;
Soldier, there is war,
defend the tricolour
that will guide you with valour.
In battle
The enemy has come out strong
You became a prisoner
And were transported to Zonderwater.

The piece never leaves the key of D major or its 4/4 time signature. This, together with the dotted rhythmic pattern that recurs throughout creates a strident, martial feeling. It seems that Filippi borrowed heavily from the unofficial Italian fascist anthem *Giovinezza*, which features similar dotted rhythms and ascending phrases.[62] Lyrically, he mobilises language associated with the sacred to make a powerful vow of the first verse, one that binds the singer with the distant nation. It forms a series of progressive, ascending phrases, the striving contour of the patriotic and battle-ready soldier.

The chorus introduces the theme of imprisonment, carefully juxtaposing alongside a thanks for survival, and an assertion of imminent freedom – not liberation (*liberazione*), but freedom (*libertà*), perhaps an indication that, even in song, the prisoners held little hope for a glorious turn of events. Ending with a statement of loyalty to Italy, the chorus has broader musical phrases (four bars as opposed to two bars [bars 1-16]), giving the entire hymn the rousing quality of an anthem.[63]

The final verse is a curious piece of narrative, outlining the capture of the prisoners in a strange blend of ambiguous tense and sentiment. Slipping between present

[62] "The Youth" (words by Salvatore Gotta, music by Giuseppe Blanc, 1909) was in use as a secondary fascist anthem from about 1922-1943 (http://david.national-anthems.net/it-gio.html 27/12/06).
[63] The Italian *inno*, signifies 'hymn' as well as 'anthem'.

and past, it builds the picture of a battle and then ends abruptly in a two-line admission of defeat.

A dedication attached to the score (in Italian and English) reads:

> Zonderwater (Prison Camp). This hymn is dedicated to the 63 000 Italian prisoners of war and in particular to those who remained behind in South Africa.
> The hymn describes the story of the prisoner, his departure from his homeland and the moment in which he was made a prisoner and taken to Zonderwater.

This attachment suggests that the piece was written after the war, but it may have been a later addition. In any case, it is clear that the solidarity built in the time of imprisonment endured to the extent that the men continue to be referred to as POWs and soldiers. Unlike the prayer to be discussed below, there is no indication of the performance life of this piece; it is not known where or how it was sung. The indication of *Allegro Marziale* is given on some versions, suggesting that it may have been used in a parade context. A more likely scenario is that, given the fact that the original consists of a single vocal line, it was performed as an anthem by either groups or a soloist.

Le tre croci: I tre archi (The Three Crosses: The Three Arches) was composed for a specific purpose. Filippi wrote both the words and music (see Appendix 3). Attached to a version of the prayer in the collection of E. Coccia, is the following:

> This is the prayer of the prisoners of war, which is said each year on the first Sunday of November, on the occasion of a military-religious ceremony in the presence of South African and Italian dignitaries and many thousands of Italian residents in South Africa.
>
> With this ceremony the prisoners who remained in South Africa remember their friends buried at Zonderwater and on behalf of the ex-prisoners of war who have been repatriated, salute them while looking at the Three Crosses, a symbol of love…"

Despite this very clear instruction, *Le tre croci* has not been performed in recent years. It does, however, capture something of the bittersweet nostalgia that Filippi felt appropriate to the occasion:

(First verse)
There where the wind murmurs through the green pines
enclosed within four walls:
is the cemetery where
those who died for Italy now lie and rest.

(Chorus)
The three crosses, symbol of love,
that keep vigil over those who gave their life for you.
Our fatherland, how many young ones
rest in eternal peace never to return.
The three arches are their company
extending their hand in protection,
our prisoner friends,
we will never forget you.
The three crosses speak thus
Your brothers you will find here,
we salute you,
O prisoner, who looks down on us.

(Second verse)
They were strong young and cheerful
who for the front of a thankless war
boldly parted with a last goodbye
to their mothers who they would not see again.

The prayer binds a number of key elements of Zonderwater mythology. The central metaphor is that of the Three Crosses, a monument on the premises of the Zonderwater Cemetery, consisting of three arches, with a cross in each. By depicting three crosses (the Catholic symbol of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ on Calvary) the monument symbolises and idealises sacrifice. The central arch (about eight metres in height and three metres across) is flanked by two slightly smaller ones; together they form the backdrop for an outdoor altar. A translation of the Italian inscription on the altar reads: 'Died imprisoned, conquered in the flesh, undefeated in spirit, distant Italy blesses you forever. 1942'. This tribute draws on tropes of martyrdom and adds to the symbolic force of the memorial structure. It is then drawn into a second order of signification by its use in song. Filippi's prayer, set in the natural minor (in this case the sombre key of E Minor), is a study in national pride; addressing the personified nation (*Patria*) directly in mournful tones, it commends the POW dead to the memory/monument of the Three Crosses, their 'symbol of love'.

While these two songs locate the POW in the broader context of the war, the day to day music of the camp fortified the men for the waiting game that defined their time behind barbed wire: 'The Italian POWs love these activities, seeking and delighting in them above all others because it is in music in particular that they recognise the qualities

and harmony of the race' (TIR, 27). Reading beyond the fascist-based race ideology, music seems to have been a POW-motivated, communal way to adjust to their circumstances. This was important given the dramatic divisions between Blocks, even if some institutions and facilities worked across them. Although these were obviously closely monitored by camp management, they included some of the specialist medical facilities ('Medical Care', article in publicity brochure [no date], private collection of Francesca Bortolotti). Contraband culture between Blocks was rife, with the guards of the Native Corps serving as couriers (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 1, 00:38). However, entertainment was the main form of sanctioned exchange between Blocks, strengthening the sense of the POW as something more than an isolated and isolating experience.

The travelling cinema worked its way through the Blocks,[64] as did some of the operetta productions, and while each developed its own musical ensembles, the best of these performed for prisoners in other spaces:

> In blocks 6, 9 and 8 there are the 'choirs', so well harmonised and instructed that they periodically tour other blocks. Directors of these 'choirs' or founders are respectively: sergeant Mogno. (Mo.) Amorelli and (Lieut.) Bezzio. At the first block they have a wonderful 'Schola Cantorum' of over 50 members and the majority of comrades have heard the 'Missa Pontificalis' of Perosi for three voices with the band accompaniment, orchestrated by maestro Mineo with a true artistic sense. (TIR, 27)

In this way, I argue, music began to develop the 'Zonderwater Spirit', consolidating what it meant to be a POW through shared experience. The perceived harmlessness of music made it one of the few forms of honourable exchange between prisoners, rendering the otherwise impenetrable barbed wire between Blocks permeable.

Music not only provided an excuse for communication within the camp, but also for the beginnings of a relationship between the Italian communities in Johannesburg and Pretoria and the prisoners. In the dismal setting of Zonderwater, both captive and captor needed entertainment, and the good relations that developed between the CAPI and the camp command smoothed the way for visiting performers (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 2, 00:14). This was the main way in which prisoners could meet and mix with each other and South African Italian families.

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[64] The caption accompanying the picture of an outdoor cinema reads: 'One of the three mobile cinemas showing nightly in the blocks'. (From the 'Welfare' article of a publicity brochure [no date], in the private collection of Francesca Bortolotti.)

It was through these channels that singer Mathilde Casoni (along with her students and daughters), who became a key figure in the musical life of Zonderwater, came to perform for the prisoners on a number of occasions. The letters of thanks she received, from both officials and POWs, are in the keeping of her daughter, Francesca Bortolotti, who once performed at Zonderwater as a child. They indicate the profound spiritual investment that the prisoners had in music and, like *The Banjo Poem* discussed in Chapter 1, illustrate the combination of love of country, of family and music unique to the Italian prisoner of war. The following is the translation of a letter of thanks issued by the Zonderwater Welfare office to Mathilde Casoni (see Appendix 4):[65]

> The wonderfully successful 'Vocal and instrumental concert' that you gave for the prisoners of this block, will remain an enduring memory in their soul.
> They will carry, to every corner of Our Fatherland, the happy memory that soothed the (flailing) piercing hours of exile.
> At the same time they express their congratulations to your courteous and gracious children.
> Welfare Committee
> 6th Block

Though a little stiff and formal, the letter connects the threads that bind the mythology of Zonderwater: the pain of imprisonment, the love of Italy and its music. In another letter, this time from an individual prisoner, the trace of the concert is noted as a presence in the camp: "In the camp of Zonderwater the echo of your vocal concert still lives…', and in a note to her children, Adriana Casoni is lauded as a 'tiny Italian flower, exquisitely delicate'.[66] The most impressive gesture from the POWs is a poem by POW Bancalà, also dedicated to Adriana (see Appendix 5):

Little Adriana

I felt almost like a robot
And, in the autumn of a thankless life,
And like the annual tree I turn yellow
In anticipation of longed for liberty,

[65] All quoted materials relating to the Casoni family are translated by the author from the Italian originals (transcriptions of which are included in the relevant appendices) in the private collection of Francesca Bortolotti.
[66] The letter was written by POW Vittorio (no further details are given), and the note is one of three, one each for Casoni and her two daughters.

And suddenly, like a happy nightingale,
An angel with a fated voice
And dressed in olive petals
You knew how to speak to me from the beloved land.

In the sweet advent of a blue-green sea,
In the echo of a nostalgic song,
Tenderly, the heart wanted to dream;

Thoughts fly to my little house,
And I forget my prison
In the seconds of hope and poetry…

"Santa, santa Lucia..."
You sang to me o melodious nightingale
It was a beautiful song of my Fatherland
And a salve for pain…
I remember you in this long distant hour,
While I travel through these odious things;
Sweetly your hidden voice reaches
And it invades my heart like the perfume of roses.

It is midnight, and I try to dream
That which I dreamt with you;
It is midnight, and I want to pray to God
For you…But you are oblivious.

O little Adriana

Andrea Natale Bancalà
Prisoner of war camp.
August 1946

Another letter, to Casoni herself, is even more lavish in its praise, and replete with references to Classical myth and the trope of the mother (see Appendix 6):

To Mrs Casoni

Return to sing like a nightingale.
The songs of the beloved land.
With the sweet harmony of that land.

Like outpourings of Euterpe in love
You make us hear from your dear mouth,
So much that enchants the soul.

You couldn't give,
To the unhappy prisoner, a better gift
Than a song that transports him to infinity.

He takes you already closed in his heart,
Now that he returns to his old mother;
And thus confuses the love between one and the other.

Vincenzo Internatini
Zonderwater 16-2-46

The consistency of sentiment between the official letter and the private letters of thanks is a result, I argue, of the clearly defined meaning of music for the prisoners. They viewed it as a direct link to Italy, and it seems that Casoni felt the same way. Her performance and the patriotic repertoire she chose for her daughters, made all the more significant by their symbolic function as reminders of the children left behind (they were both under the age of ten at the time), clearly aligned with the remembered and longed for Italy of the POW imaginary. Her concert was part of a greater commitment to the prisoners, many of whom, near the end of the war, spent weekends at the Casoni family home, enjoying home cooking and some semblance of civilian life (Bortolotti interview).

3.5 Conclusion: music after the war

After the war, Italian ex-POWs continued to use music to express identity. The majority who accepted repatriation carried fragments of Afrikaans songs and language back to the *Patria* as mementos (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 4, 00:51). For those who stayed on, the new and legendary component of Italian South Africa, music retained its privileged role as a tool for positioning the community. Naturally, the musicians among them found or created work in the industry: many instrumentalists joined various orchestras (Mony, W. 2003, pers. comm.) and Gregorio Fiasconaro established the opera school at the University of Cape Town. Filippi's hymns, already discussed, carried the official ethos of Zonderwater beyond the boundaries of the camp and into the civilian life of the community.

One particular moment, thirty-three years after the end of the war, illustrates particularly vividly the power of music as gesture. In 1978, the Zonderwater Block

Association of ex-POWs was still very influential in the Italian community, its members having well-established business and political connections with the South African government (see chapter 5). The *Goodwill Festival 1978* was intended, according to then president E. Mottalini, as a 'spontaneous demonstration of goodwill' between former enemies.[67] Of the many multi-cultural events, one stands out as particularly poignant in its singing of an Italian translation of *Die Stem*. Filippi made the translation, carefully reproducing the meaning of each stanza and, according to the programme note, it was sung by the 'Italian Choir'. While there is no deviation from the sentiments of the original, the very fact of the anthem's performance in Italian exemplifies the tensions that characterised the new life of the ex-POWs: it is at once a homage to their new land and an appropriation of, or more accurately a 'buying in' to their new identity, through one of its key symbols.

It has been suggested that 'the ambiguity of musical symbols allows various contextual usages' (Mach 1997, 67), and furthermore, that the music of a nation is recognised as part of its symbolism (Mach 1997, 62). *Die Stem* has a particularly defined history in this regard; shifting between hegemonic and anti-hegemonic status (Muller 2001, 21). Post-war, white South Africa's strong sense of national pride was passionately expressed in this anthem whose musical and literary building blocks are drawn from a reserve of shared Western notions about the role and meaning of the Anthem (Muller 2001, 21-22). Under this protective ambiguity, and confident in their status as naturalised South Africans, it would seem that the Italians felt free to engage quite radically with their newfound identity, using it as a vehicle for an Italian voice. Under the auspices of an ex-POW goodwill festival, in this case, they drew on the Zonderwater myth-complex to create a kind of retrospective revision of the POW narrative, the performed translation symbolising the happy ending of the musical prisoners. That this narrative continues to play a role in the South African Italian imaginary, as well as in South African perceptions of this community, is clear when one considers that, when the Military History Museum (Johannesburg) installed an exhibit on Zonderwater in the 1990s, an illuminated scroll with the Italian lyrics of *Die*

[67] The brochure for this event is part of the private collection of David Ball. A review of the proceeding was published in *South African Digest*, October 1978.

Stem was included. The story of Italian POWs in South Africa seems destined to be remembered through the conciliatory work of those who invested in its myth-complex.

Remembering and Imagining at Zonderwater

The annual memorial service held at Zonderwater can be understood as the show-piece of the myth-complex. A well established set of events is enacted each year to re-affirm the image of the Italian prisoners in the minds of those who attend. By conceptualising the memorial service (its location, demographics, language and content) as an archaeology of the POW experience I aim, in the pages ahead, to offer varied historical readings, thus multiplying the possible interpretations of a palpable legacy.

The archaeological process that I suggest underpins the myth-complex, was by no means consciously adopted as an historical model, but is rather the result of historical circumstance. The 'conditions of possibility' after the war left many gaps in the foundations of what was to become the historical 'monument': differences in language between captor and captive, the dispersion of the prisoners across continents, initial reluctance to talk about war experiences, and the burning of the physical remains of the camp, are only some of the early constraints placed on what is knowable about Zonderwater. Thus, with no official history of any significance to articulate their experience, and being of little use to the imaginary of post-war South Africa, the POWs were free to create a narrative for their memorialisation that, aside from a few unifying historical fundamentals and embedded attitudes, was mobile enough to fall in under various South African political discourses, as well as maintain the dignity of the prisoners.

A carefully constructed and maintained aspect of this memorialisation is the space in which it is enacted. The first section of this chapter addresses the specific symbolic role of Zonderwater as a locale.

4.1 Spaces and their significance

On the outskirts of the small town of Rayton, east of Pretoria, there is a battered signpost, certainly the only Italian roadside sign in the vicinity. It reads: '*cimitero militare Italiano*' (Italian Military Cemetery) and indicates a right turn. From this point onward the Italian presence overrides all others; the *padstalle* selling fruit and biltong, the tired, rural petrol stations and scrubby veld give way to a different visual palette. After a few minutes on a

dusty semi-tarred road, flanked by typical highveld grasses, elegant ranks of cypress and date-palm loom on the horizon, surrounded by a forbidding stone wall. In the tradition of many South African towns the name ‘Zonderwater’ is written in whitewashed stones on the side of a nearby hill, but there is no settlement, just a small cemetery with a deep sense of its own importance. As a symbolic space it strikes a suitably dramatic chord, setting the scene for the performance of the Italian POW myth-complex (see Figures 13.1-4).

Once through the cast-iron gate the cemetery compound comes into view. An enclosed space created by camouflage stone and sentinel trees, it is filled with a collection of buildings and structures that have become important to the way the Italian POWs are remembered. Contained in this property is the cemetery itself, where those who died during imprisonment are buried. There is also a small, single-room museum, a single-room chapel, an outdoor altar (which forms part of a monument) at the end of a processional avenue, and a number of commemorative works in the gardens. It is significant that though the cemetery is situated within the perimeters of the old camp, it is the only part that remains. The cemetery itself and the buildings that surround it, enclosed by a tall stone wall now electrified for security purposes (further isolating it from the surrounding veld, nearby housing project, and correctional facility), form a microcosm, or more appropriately, a reduction to essence of what it is that was held dear by the prisoners.

The museum, in particular, exemplifies this. On display are a number of artefacts made by POWs, or in some way connected with the period; many of these objects have been donated to the museum and are presented according to a ‘best of’ principle. Although this process has been detailed in previous chapters, its *raison d’être* has particular resonance with the present discussion, because in presenting the magnificent craftsmanship of the prisoners, the museum contributes to the work of the myth-complex. Unlike many museums, particularly military history museums, that attempt to communicate key events and characters and are filled with facts and figures about their given subject, the Zonderwater museum assumes *a priori* knowledge of many aspects of the prisoners’ experience. In the absence of any ‘hard’ historical information, the emphasis of the collection seems to be on impressing rather than educating. For example,

the reality of defeat, an experience shared by all the men, is neatly sidestepped. The museum strives to present a *bella figura*, always maintaining a semblance of dignity in the way it memorialises.[68] There are no photographs or commentaries documenting Italian submission in North Africa, the arrival of POWs in South Africa, or the humiliation of the de-lousing that they endured on disembarking. Nor are there any photographs of the early camp.[69] The various displays do not pretend to tell the story of the Italian POWs so much as communicate a sense of what it is they achieved during their imprisonment. There is a concerted effort to represent and remember them as doers, rather than defeated captives. Furthermore, the image projected is not of the humble handiwork of defeated men, but of the artistry of imprisoned genius, of the Italian prisoner as indomitable creative force. This unabashed self-promotion highlights my central argument that the prisoners and their descendants went to great lengths to portray themselves and their experience in particular ways for particular reasons. I have already suggested that the process of constructing the Zonderwater museum has much in common with the Foucauldian archaeological model, wherein de-contextualised material traces are assembled to create a history that, together with many other such discontinuities, form the 'monuments' of a general history (Foucault 2003, 8). This is in opposition to the more traditional view of history that reads history as the linear, complete narrative into which fragments and traces are made to fit (ibid. 9-11). The traces housed at the museum are therefore not the illustrations of an already complete POW history, but the actual source of a history and memory (ibid. 8).

In displaying the finest pieces of art, crafts and literature in the collection, the museum is consciously taking control of its role as memory (as opposed to archive in the stricter sense), 'editing' the available material to present the best image. This in no way detracts from its impact; although it does not conform to some of the basic conventions of a traditional museum, it speaks eloquently to its own purpose. It also echoes the overall

[68] The importance of *bella figura* as an entrenched trope in Italian culture cannot be overstated. The centrality of dignity in the Italian psyche is so profound, that it (amongst other things) compelled Mussolini to construct false building facades along the route that Hitler was to take in Rome, rather than reveal a city in ruins (Richards 1995, 19).

[69] There is material evidence of all of these. The capture of Italian soldiers in North Africa is recorded in the photograph archives of the Military History Museum in Johannesburg. The de-lousing of Italian POWs is recorded in a news-reel of the time (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa* 1989, Part 1). Photographs of the early camp are rare, but those extant form part of the Italian POW archive at the Military History Museum in Johannesburg.

theme of the cemetery complex: that of memorialisation. In many ways the space serves as a mausoleum, holding the 'remains' of the prisoners in the form of examples of their work; because of its location in the cemetery compound, it is more concerned with honouring the memory of the men than presenting the whole of POW experience.

The processional avenue runs perpendicular to the rows of graves, separating them from the chapel and museum, answering the need for ceremony. At the end is a small piazza, at the opposite end of which is an altar, forming part of the monument called *The Three Arches* or *The Three Crosses*. This monument features prominently in Zonderwater literature and consists of three arches, two of which flank a central slightly taller one (about 8m high), with a cross in each.[70]

The gardens are yet another expression of the POW world as mediated through the myth-complex; it is obvious at first glance that they have been conceived in a European idiom. Rayton, Cullinan and their surrounds are areas of shrub land, very arid, desolate and inhospitable; by contrast, the Zonderwater cemetery is always green, with lush lawns, huge pine and cypress trees, date-palms, beautiful flowerbeds and rose bushes. The contrast between the cemetery and its surroundings exemplifies the ownership of the land by the Italian POWs who proudly declared an act of mastery over the portion of nature in which they were sentenced to suffer. To see, even today, a small island of green in a sea of dusty browns suggests the power of the original statement made. Considered in tandem with the many works of art (statuary and fountains, memorial plaques, copper angels and modernist sculptures), the sense of a place apart is overwhelming.

That this cemetery complex is maintained to this day by the labour of prisoners (from the nearby correctional facility) and money from the Italian government is, equally, indicative of the force of the cultural leverage played out during the POW era and entrenched in the following decades. The ambitious landscaping of this memorial space communicates the message that was so important to the Italian prisoners: that the men held at the camp would retain their forms of civilization at all costs. The cemetery gardens, in particular, support the notion that the myth-complex originated in the war years: it is not simply an imaginative overlay, created by subsequent generations of

[70] The symbolic significance of this monument is discussed in Chapter 3.

Italians living in South Africa. The prisoners literally worked their surroundings to fit the idea they had of themselves; the established trees indicate a sixty year-old sustained vision of what their memorial would look like: a piece of Italy in Africa, complete with monuments and processional avenue.

4.2 Burials at Zonderwater

The cemetery is the centre-piece of the complex, and to be buried at Zonderwater is still the wish of many of the remaining ex-POWs. As such, the emotionally fraught debates, rumours and stories that are continually generated around the status of the cemetery are worth noting, in that they constitute the newest layer to be added to the myth-complex of Zonderwater. The first of these stories unfolds during the internment period.

The prisoners were supplied with pine for coffins. During the course of their imprisonment they realised that the tables and benches at which they ate were made of a better quality wood. Learning that this was stinkwood, a very durable and beautiful local wood, a plan was hatched to exchange it for the inferior pieces given them for coffins. As is the case with many of the legends from the camp, this story is associated with a particular object: the painting *Impressione d'un Refettorio* (Impression of a Refectory) by F. Scarpa (1946), a copy of which is on display at the Zonderwater museum (see Figure 14). In this case the story is associated with the picture by the curator Coccia, as he tells it to visitors to the museum.[71] The painting is a simple depiction of what must have been a typical meal at the camp: a multitude of prisoners, dressed in drab khakis, their faces blurred and indistinct, are seated at long benches and tables where they are eating a meal served from steel tubs. In the same way that the operettas are remembered through photographs, and cunning is remembered through the retelling of the violin stories, so the Italian love of beauty and quality – even in coffins – is remembered through the painting and the story attached to it; once again it is narrative that powerfully articulates an identity.

The painting itself is a marvellously coded object, working in the service of cultural leverage: after the war the South Africans would discover that the stinkwood

[71] Coccia has gathered these narratives from ex-POWs informally over many years. The exact provenance of each is often difficult to establish and thus they frequently enter the myth-complex anonymously.

tables had been gradually replaced with pine, in the service of their captives' aesthetic sense. As in the case of the captain's bench that became a violin, the success of any plan to dupe a captor adds extra value to the object that records it. The tables, and the coffins they became, together with their narrative, the painting, and the cemetery compound in which it all comes together, form a discursive node in the myth-complex; a point at which a version of Italianness is indelibly inscribed in places, things and events. Connected by narrative, the cemetery, museum and identity together constitute small victories of subversion for the ex-prisoners, and subsequently, the inheritors of the myth.

Clearly the prisoners derived immense enjoyment from undermining the camp command, but there is also a case to be made for the notion that many of their actions stemmed from a sincere cultural commitment to the *bella vita* (the good life), as not only the best way to live, but the best way to live as Italians. Illustrative of this is the discovery, made recently at the cemetery, of a bottle of wine in a coffin: a wine made in the camp, with the deceased's years of imprisonment recorded alongside his name, 'Romeo Marziani, '39-'45'. The importance of this Epicurean gesture is that it shows the small, ostensibly private ways in which Italianness imbued the lives of the community, even beyond the grave. Naturally, once the bottle was discovered, it immediately found its way into the museum, and thence the myth-complex.

The small chapel behind the museum, reserved strictly for the ashes of ex-POWs who died after the war, is itself a myth in the making, and the centre of a recent controversy. Over the past few years some ex-POWs have expressed their wish to have their ashes placed in the chapel at Zonderwater (Coccia, E. 2004, pers. comm.). This does not sit well with those charged with the upkeep of the cemetery complex, who contended that the defining feature of a military cemetery is that it contains only the remains of soldiers who died during a war. The emotional intensity of this conflict raises the important question of why burial at Zonderwater means so much to ex-POWs.

It seems that burial at the POW cemetery, or even a niche in the chapel, confers a particular kind of status and identity; one that transcends any of the usually negative associations, instead promising a sense of ownership and home-coming. The POW reading of the cemetery falls somewhere between viewing it as a town and the site of a military event. This reading designates Zonderwater as a town that was the result of a

conflict, and as such invests it with meaning beyond its function as a site of internment.[72] The evidence suggests that during their imprisonment the men themselves were aware that their war was over and they had returned to their pre-war identities and needs; thus developing Zonderwater along the lines of a civilian camp.

Yet the ceremony (discussed below) speaks in a military voice, commemorating a type of military victory.[73] The memorialisation of Zonderwater has transformed, again through the agency of the myth-complex, a place of defeat into a place of military glory. This has already been discussed in some ways, but it is important to note that after the war the POWs began to process their experience in terms of a sacrifice for their country; that it took the form of internment as prisoners of war seems, in the process of memorialisation, to make little difference to their subsequent perception as war heroes. The desire and even determination of the ex-POW to be buried there may also point to a desire to be remembered as a part of the Zonderwater magic, to become a part of the myth.

To this end, and after much in-fighting, the committee responsible decided to make of the chapel an additional, but separate, space for ex-POWs wanting to be buried in the Zonderwater cemetery. Although they will not be buried side by side with those who died in the camp, they are at least close enough to be absorbed into the myth.

The spaces and buildings at Zonderwater thus form the nexus of the myth-complex, the sacred ground on which the prisoners were and are buried and remembered. Despite their permanence, however, it is only during the memorial service that these spaces are brought to life.

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[72] Albertini's testament seems to suggest that Zonderwater functioned (in terms both of character and economy) as a town and not a POW camp: 'So there was a lot of business transaction in the camp. Like a town we had a market, a real market outside, you could buy anything.' (Albertini Interview 2). This suggests a remarkable lack of regimentation within the camp. Earlier in the same interview, Albertini describes the range of characters and skills included in the Zonderwater demographic, painting it as an enterprising cosmopolitan town rather than an internment facility where life was on hold.

[73] The uniqueness of this lies in the fact that many World War Two POW narratives emphasise the victim status, presenting them as the victims of human rights violations rather than as military heroes. Though this is determined largely by circumstance (we cannot begin to compare the Zonderwater experience with that of American soldiers captured by the Japanese), it nonetheless points to an important difference in the ways that Zonderwater is imagined. The issues of prisoner slavery and reparations to American POWs held by Japan are still hotly debated; in these POW narratives, the tone is much closer to that of Holocaust narratives (http://www.newnation.org/NNN-US-POWs-sue-japs.html, 27/09/2006).

4.3 The memorial service

Every year, on the first Sunday of November, Italians from all over South Africa gather at Zonderwater to remember the prisoners of war. Not all Italians, or South Africans of Italian descent, identify with the POW myth-complex; those who do, however, memorialise and become part of a particular type of Italianness, an Italianness established and nurtured by the mythology generated in the Zonderwater camp.

Although the Italians for whom the myths are significant constitute a single stratum of South African Italian society, the narratives are not the cultural property of a homogenised group; rather, individuals and organisations are drawn together by identification with the particular history and ethos. Included in this small but influential community are the prisoners themselves (both during the war and as civilians after the war); their families and descendants in South Africa and Italy; some Italians already established in South Africa during the war; and the South Africans inextricably linked with the narratives (like the Prinsloo and Ball families).[74]

The community constellated around the myth-complex spans sixty years, a number of generations, at least two main languages and a number of nationalities. However, I will focus here on the prisoners and their descendants who consciously engage in remembering Zonderwater.[75] These two groups identify strongly with the Italian aspect of their identity, despite the regional and class divisions that complicate it in Italy itself. Almost six decades living in Africa has created further layers. Benedict Anderson, in discussing the construct 'nation', offers an explanation of the often arbitrary and entirely psychic nature of group identification: "It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (1991, 6). This communion, according to Anderson, does more to consolidate a sense of

[74] The ex-POWs, or 'Zonderwater boys', as they were affectionately known, had considerable influence in South African-Italian relations after the war, and frequently acted as the voice of South African Italianness (Sani 1992,302). Their disproportionate authority in defining a distinct brand of Italianness in South Africa is, I argue, a direct result of the promotion of the myth-complex as the dominant Italian South African narrative.

[75] The subject of the relationships that developed across cultural divides at Zonderwater and other Italian camps, would make a fascinating study. The alliances that developed between black South Africans, Afrikaner nationalists, English-speaking South Africans and Italians each illustrate the ease with which the latter moved between and through the strongly divided South African political landscapes (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 2, 00:15).

identification than imposed, convenient or more easily justifiable labels: ‘Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined’ (ibid.). The identifying style of the community of the Italian POWs is that of the powerful narratives of the myth-complex; stories that capture a moment in history, an ethos of survival and a cultural idiom.

These stories form one component of the myth-complex, the other, the annual memorial service held at the Zonderwater cemetery, is the myth-complex in performance. As the public and social enactment of the myths, this service is, at once, a manifestation and confirmation of the hybrid identity of the POWs and many of their descendants. It achieves this, I argue, by employing the language, symbolism, and forms of memorialisation.

The image of the POW, in the context of the memorial service, is mediated through three main discourses: military, religious and cultural. These discourses of power are especially prevalent in the rituals of the service. They create, respectively, the archetypal forms of the hero, the martyr and the trickster, and together generate an irresistible, quasi-fictional character, all the more compelling for its basis in historical fact. In mobilising these three discourses, the myth-complex is able to infuse the material contents of the cemetery and the service with symbolic significance, building the multifaceted, mythic image of the POW on a foundation of first order signification provided by established discourses. The power of the languages of religion, war, and culture to legitimise the image of the POW as central to the development of the South African Italian community (and South Africa as a whole), is abundantly clear in the memorial service.

Many of the discrepancies between the imagined and the historical POW are addressed in the discussion that follows. Given their age, high illiteracy rate and psychological state on arrival, it is almost unthinkable that these young men had as profound an effect on the development of the country of their captors as Coccia suggests in his speech (discussed below). While there can be no doubt that Italian skills were employed in a number of important and ambitious construction projects in South Africa, to extrapolate from historical fact a glowing character profile of a community, requires the careful positioning of select narratives and manipulation of notions of culture. The

image projected is one that presents the prisoners as willing custodians and ambassadors of a profound cultural legacy. Religion, too, plays a key role in representing the POWs in a particular way. By setting up a series of parallels and echoes between various Catholic narratives of sacrifice and suffering and those of the POW, the latter is transformed from prisoner into martyr. Finally, the ceremony affirms the men's identity as war-heroes by enlisting the markers of this status in ritual: uniforms, marches, flags, and a fly-over maintain the martial tone of the event. All these elements work to make the memorial service the face of the myth-complex.

What follows is an account of the memorial service that took place at the Zonderwater cemetery on the seventh of November 2004. The date of the service annually is calculated to the first Sunday of November and as such coincides with memorial services for World War Two veterans, as well as the Catholic month of the dead. Blending these three key aspects of military history, religion and culture, the timing of the service indicates the spirit in which it is held.

The event begins mid-morning with a procession past the graves. Represented in the procession are various Italian cultural, regional and military associations, as well as representatives from a few South African military organisations. The procession moves down the avenue between the graves and museum, accompanied by suitably solemn music from the military bands. It comes to a halt at the end of the small piazza, which is flanked by rows of seats. On the opposite side of the piazza is the altar of the *Three Crosses* monument. When the procession comes to a stop the South African and Italian flags are raised and the national anthems sung. An Italian Catholic mass follows. After the religious service, some of the more prominent guests make speeches. This is followed by the laying of wreaths at the altar. When all of this is done, the crowd disperses and families traditionally gather for lunch: a picnic, or a meal at home. Some of the delegates are invited to a formal meal.

The participants in the procession include the above-mentioned representatives, ex-POWs and a contingent of representatives from various Italian cultural and regional associations.[76] Throughout the subsequent ceremony they stand with their banners along

[76] Regional identity features prominently in Italian identity (Richards 1995, 80). The distinctly Italian concept of *campanilismo*, that is, parochialism focused on the smallest possible units of society (e.g.

the avenue, bearing testimony to the variety and richness of the cultural imaginary of South African Italianness. These unique voices add to the ceremony and are in some cases imprinted on the spaces. An example of this is a small concrete plaque, beneath a copper angel in the cemetery, memorialising the Florentine prisoners of Zonderwater.[77]

The presence of broader Italian cultural associations (Comitato Italiani all' Estero – Committee of Italians Abroad, and the Dante Alighieri Society in particular) speaks to the powerful impact of cultural leverage. The creations and achievements of the POWs (small-scale works of art and furniture in the camp, and large public works spread around the country) constitute an impressive testament to Italian ingenuity. It follows that Italian associations make much of this, their presence ensuring the continuation of an important agenda, that is, the use of the material results of the Italians' internment as cultural leverage.

After the procession, by raising both flags and singing both anthems, the participants in the memorial service perform their own dual identity, simultaneously projecting a negotiated and ostensibly balanced identity on the POWs who lie in the cemetery. Though the intention is to acknowledge both nationalities, it must be noted that the gesture works better in theory than in practice, as the singing of *Fratelli d'Italia* (the Italian national anthem) is considerably louder and more impassioned than that of the South African anthem.

Following the laying of wreaths, there are a number of speeches, among them one by Emilio Coccia (discussed below). After the speeches, a Catholic mass is said in Italian: this is the most important aspect of the ceremony, identifying it as sacred. The POW dead are indirectly associated with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, as people who humbly gave of their lives for a cause; here the cause is patriotism.[78] The way that POWs died during their imprisonment is very different to the way that those who died on

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neighbourhood, village or town), is clearly in evidence at the Zonderwater memorial, where every regional association that is able to, sends a representative.

[77] The inscription reads: 'imperituro ricordo gli ex P.O.W fiorentini' (abiding memento of the Florentine ex-POWs) and is decorated with the Florentine Lily (similar to the fleur-de-lis, it is the heraldic symbol of Florence).

[78] The inscription on the altar reads: '*Morti in prigionia, vinti nella carne, invitti nello spirito, l'Italia lontana, vi benedice in eterno. MCMXLII*.' ('Died imprisoned, conquered in the flesh, undefeated in spirit, distant Italy, blesses you forever. 1942').

battlefields gave their lives, and this is perhaps why it is so important that they are made heroes. In mourning them, the ex-POWs in the years after the war may have found a way to mourn the loss of a portion of their own lives, to remember their own sacrifice and, most importantly, to give meaning to this experience.

The most important participants in the memorial service are those who lay wreaths at the foot of the outdoor altar. The following list taken from the order of service document, names those who laid wreaths at the 2004 service: Valerio Astraldi, the Italian Ambassador; Major General D.M. Mofokeng, on behalf of the South African Government and on behalf of the Chief of the South African National Defence Force; Lt. General Michele Corrado, representing the Italian Defence Force; Vittorio Sandalli, Consul General of Italy; Major General Carlo Gagiano, on behalf of the South African Air Force; Mr C.L. Olckers on behalf of the Commissioner of the Department of Correctional Services; Zonderwater Block ex POW Association; Zonderwater Block ex-POW Association (Milan); Light Horse Regimental Association; Alpini National Association; Carabinieri Association; and Comitato Italiani all'Estero.

The mixture of institutions and individuals designated to lay wreaths each year follows on directly from the camp rhetoric, particularly narratives of complete harmony between South Africans and Italians. An extraordinary harmony did exist, but it should be noted that nowhere in the memorial service (or indeed the museum) is any mention made of the two to three thousand hard-line fascists (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 3, 11:57), or the few incidences of racial violence that occurred within the camp (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 1).

The co-mingling of South African and Italian cultural markers is especially evident in the case of the South African Major General with an Italian name (Gagiano), and the presence of representatives of both national militaries. Also of interest is the laying of a wreath by a representative of the Department of Correctional Services, highlighting the fact that the Zonderwater area still contains a correctional facility. This is the only indication that the commemorative service is not a service for fallen soldiers, but a service for POWs. One additional military feature of the service is that all key ceremonial moments are accompanied by the South African Air Force Military Band, whose solemn, wistful music sets the tone for the ceremony. In arranging the repertoire

for brass and woodwind, the band infuses it with a distinctly military flavour. In 2004 they played, amongst others, arranged versions of Grieg's 'Morning' (from the *Peer Gynt Suite no.1* op.46), and the second movement of Beethoven's *Pathétique* (Piano Sonata no.8 in C Minor op.13). Both these works have established places in the canon of Western classical music, and their use in the context of the memorial service adds to the prestige and status of the event and, by extension, those who are being remembered. While the music serves to build the emotional intensity of the occasion, its primary function is to signify a military event. Clear evidence for this is found in the actual performance of the works. The distinctly martial orchestration for brass and woodwind has already been mentioned; the frequently strident performance style further emphasises the military context. The human element, the personal identity of those remembered as incapacitated soldiers, is over-shadowed by a strong collective military uniformity.

4.4 Coccia's speech

The ex-prisoners, of whom there are fewer each year, are often unable to travel from Johannesburg and further to attend the memorial service: thus it now falls to children, grandchildren, extended family and representatives of various interest groups to attend the service and, by extension, do the work of memorialisation. That so many South African Italians continue to feel the compulsion to attend, even when there is only a remote personal link to the camp, contributes to a curious aspect of the memorialisation. This, I maintain, is evidence of the fact that the Italian POWs of Zonderwater represent an origin point of the modern Italian South African community. This manifests as deep reverence for the prisoners, and their perceived heroism. Their bravery, creativity and sacrifice are widely believed to have saved them, and the notion that they survived by virtue of an exemplary set of moral and ethical principles is deeply entrenched. The place of the Italian POWs is central to the psyche of the present Italian South African community; they represent the best of Italianness. Their lionisation goes beyond admiration of their skills; many regard the POW era as a promethean exchange, wherein civilisation was brought to a backward nation.[79] This is abundantly clear in the address

[79] There is a widely held belief among Italian South Africans of the war generation that the contribution of Italians to the development of infrastructure in South Africa has never been fully acknowledged. This is

given by Emilio Coccia at the memorial service of 2004. The following is a translation of an extract from that speech:

> One hundred thousand young Italian soldiers arrived at these camps still covered in the sweat, dust and acrid smell of the last battle.
>
> They arrived with small bundles of the few objects saved during their capture, but with the great baggage of quality of a people who were materially poor, but rich in thirty centuries of history.
>
> Trust in God, pride of their Italianness, love of their families, profound spirit of adaptation: these were the pillars on which they leaned their will to survive, to return free, to return to their loved ones.
>
> And all this shows through, in detail rich in human feeling, in the hundreds of documents and testimonies that our museum, the museum of the Italians, jealously guards. Every possible activity was employed by them to keep body and spirit occupied, in the knowledge that each day completed represented a step towards liberty.
>
> From their labours, often carried out to the limits of possibility, sprang works of art, engineering (and here it is worth mentioning, among others, the mountain passes of Du Toitskloof, Bainskloof, Outeniqua and Montague that they extended or constructed from nothing) and other works of fine craftsmanship that are still useful objects to those who had the fortune to obtain them.
>
> These are therefore the youths we are here to remember: those that won the battle for life and those that, here, in front of the Three Arches, and who in other cemeteries of South Africa, rest in the shadow of the cross.
>
> In spite of advanced age, some of those who survived those long years of imprisonment are present today, as are some of the widows of those who have gone.
>
> Their presence renews the message that was handed down from our predecessors, the message that we want to communicate to the present and new generation:
>
> Italians, remember always with deference and respect. Never forget those who knew war and suffered long years of imprisonment, sometimes ending with the supreme sacrifice; who served their distant native land with honour and loyalty.

It is significant that this passage comes from the Italian section of Coccia's speech. The part delivered in English was mainly to thank and acknowledge the South Africans who helped the POWs. The emotional content is left for the Italian part; a reiteration of myths bound into the Zonderwater experience. All important elements of the myth-complex are there in the correct proportions, constructing the image of the prisoner from select pieces

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due, in part, to the Italians' status as POWs, and to the rise of nationalism in South Africa after the war leading to their marginalisation. Italian ex-POWs maintain that it was their agricultural, artisan and engineering know-how that formed the foundation of core post-war industries (such as farming and mining) in South Africa.

of history, culture, ideology and politics. In analysing segments of Coccia's speech we get an idea of the shape of the myth-complex.

At the very beginning Coccia mentions the 100,000 young soldiers, still covered in the sweat and dust of the last battle. This is clearly an exaggeration: 100,000 is the total number of POWs at Zonderwater in its busiest period, but they did not all arrive at once, nor even direct from battle. Neither were they all young. The invocation is rhetorical, of course; it draws the details of the individual prisoner experience into the mythic portrayal of a hero: the young, battle weary soldier, the ideal.

The next mythic marker identifies the rich culture that the young POW brings with him, in contrast to his material poverty. The implications of this are twofold. First, the reference to material poverty immediately places the soldier in the category of underdog. The underdog, as a theme in Italian folklore (discussed at length in Chapters One and Two), wins sympathy and respect, as well as makes virtues out of cunning and shrewdness. Second, Coccia is at pains to say how little the soldier was able to physically bring with him, and in place of this, imbues him with the wealth of a thirty centuries long history, and kind of intrinsic cultural capital. This link between the captured soldiers and the full sweep of their nation's history seems as inviolate as their link to the present Italian South African community. As Benedict Anderson has observed, connecting groups of people that are separated by time and geography is achieved by a cultural imagination capable of forging histories into a cohesive, shared national narrative (Anderson 1991, 7).

Coccia's invocation of what Anderson terms a 'horizontal comradeship' as the dogma of national discourse allows him to legitimise equating his audience with his subject's identity; connected by their Italianness he is able to catalogue their shared virtues.

Coccia then discusses the qualities that, as he says, were 'the pillars on which they leant their will to survive.' These pillars are faith, love of country and family, and a spirit of adaptation. Such qualities can be read from the content of the museum in their celebration of nation, family and religion, and even more, their creative adaptability.

The next section of Coccia's speech suggests that POW work is significant beyond its usefulness, that it is physical evidence of an inherent 'goodness'. He describes

the documents held in the museum (these include textbooks, memoirs, diaries and letters, all written in the camps) as displaying 'detail rich in human feeling'. Most of the creative work done in the camp, from literature to sculpture, can indeed be described as rich in detail, the result both of an abundance of time for such work, and the commercial impetus.[80] Coccia's description hints at a complicated notion: that the work is inscribed with the pain and complexity of POW experience, filtered through a culture given to emotionality (Patriarca 2006, 3)(Marazzi 1997, 278 and 281).

It is important to note how Coccia emphasises the value of POW contributions to the young South African nation by way of architectural and engineering work. In listing the various mountain passes, engineered and built with Italian labour, he draws attention to the centrality of Italian skill to South Africa's development. The use of prisoners' labour was apparently permitted in terms of the Geneva Convention, but engaging their skills for the purposes of their captors was not. This ethical debate is overshadowed in this context by the fact that the work done by POWs is now used to fulfil the agenda of the myth-complex. The listing of the impressive structures built (roads, bridges, mountain passes, churches, farm buildings and at least one private residence) is crucial to understanding the agenda of cultural leverage; namely that Italian ingenuity and sweat went into the creation, taming and civilising of South Africa.

Coccia's speech ends with a statement that clearly defines it as doing cultural work. What he calls 'the message' is the very stuff of the myth-complex and its present and future custodians, addressed simply as 'Italians'. In summary, it is reduced to four key words: remember, sacrifice, honour, and loyalty. It is also worth noting that these qualities are all used to refer to the 'native land' of Italy. Here, a key motive of the myth-complex is revealed: the sacrifice of Italian POWs provides an inspiration for South Africans of Italian descent to retain a sense of patriotism to Italy. As the direct inheritors of the legacy of Zonderwater, Coccia, in his capacity as president of the Zonderwater Block Association, charges the South African Italian to continue the POWs' work; that is,

[80] A thriving market for hand-crafted goods ensured that all the furniture and decorative work produced by the prisoners was at exhibitions held at the camp, and through dealers who sold on behalf of the prisoners in Johannesburg and Pretoria. The Lupini family, for example, as part of their efforts to support the prisoners, supplied the prisoners with wood, and sold the furniture from their home (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa* 1989, Tape 1).

loyalty to Italy and Italianness. This patriotism is not intended to have political consequences for either South Africa or Italy; it is a mark of cultural distinction, allowing South African Italians at once to distance and differentiate themselves historically, forming a distinct sub-culture within white South Africa.

4.5 The symbiosis of ritual and space

Part of the effectiveness of Coccia's speech lies in the evocative setting in which it is delivered. As part of the ritual, it locks the cemetery complex into a symbolic role that includes all ex-POWs, not just those who are buried there. The importance of this, I suggest, is that it helps the ex-prisoners deal with the complicated feelings engendered by their experience. As already discussed, the Italian POWs were robbed of an essential aspect of their identity as soldiers: their capacity to fight for their country. This placed them in a very difficult and dangerous psychological space. Imprisoned and sent to a distant country for an indefinite period to wait out a war in which they could no longer participate, the threats of dejection and depression were very real. Ways had to be found not only to stimulate their minds and maintain morale, but also to configure their experiences in a way that validated them as men and soldiers.

To make heroes of their dead was crucial to this. The death of a comrade in arms in the context of the camp was a very serious blow to morale. Ex-POW Eduardo Villa, recounting his first visit to Zonderwater, ten years after his release, became visibly emotional: 'It's too hard. Because the memory of a lot of people comes back. And when you think of the dead people. Was too much.' (Villa Interview). At no other point in the interview did Villa become so affected. These were not men who fell in combat; they died as prisoners and the meaninglessness of their deaths was an aspect of life in the camps that needed to be mythologised. In doing so the other prisoners were able to create a sense of purpose for themselves as well as a validation of the deaths of their friends. The celebration of the dead is key to the memorial service. The issue of the dead is addressed in literature, art works and music that came out of the camp experience. The most impressive of these are the pair of mosaics *Perché?* and *Why?* by V.R. Giovitto (year unknown). In *Perché?* ('Why?') a POW struggles with the barbed wire that entraps him, and in *Why?* an Italian soldier, or POW, cradles a fallen comrade, holding up a

clenched fist in defiance and anger. The pair is prominently displayed in the museum and impresses upon the viewer a sense of the desperation, frustration and fear of the soldier and POW. Discussed in detail elsewhere in this thesis is the manifestation of the fear of death in the music that was composed in Zonderwater.

The virtues of the deceased are emphasised to the exclusion of all else, possibly because they are not remembered as individuals, but as idealised prisoners. This is not done in the manner of some other war memorials (of the 'unknown soldier' variety); the image of the Italian POW is very subtly wrought: it is as if the cemetery and its annual ceremony are the place and time to mourn the plight of all the men, those who died as well as those who survived. Perhaps the ritual and site provide an opportunity for all those left behind to mourn their own lost years and their own social 'deaths'.[81] As proof of this one can consider the fact that many, in the rows of graves that exist in the cemetery, are incorrectly named. The prisoners are memorialised as a group even if they were laid to rest in individual graves.

4.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the theatricality of the Zonderwater cemetery and its annual memorial strengthen and feed the myth-complex in particular ways. By legitimising the remembering community's perception of the prisoners, the service standardises the mythology: engaging the language of war makes war-heroes of defeated men; the sanction of religion hints at the possibility of martyrdom; and the designation 'cultured' makes a virtue of a necessity (keeping themselves occupied for six years). For those who remember, Zonderwater has retained its significance through the uncertain decades since the war. It maintains a space into which the small South African Italian community has been able to inscribe an identity, and to reposition that identity when necessary: from the deep respect that the ex-POWs continued to have for their captors (members of the Union Defence Force, a scion of the waning British empire), to the Goodwill Festival of the seventies (the logo of which saw the colours of the two republics supporting a pair of white hands clasped in friendship), and the close relationship between ex-POWs and the

[81] A number of things suggest that this might be the case. Eduardo Villa, despite his positive perception of his years as a POW, is acutely aware of the sense that he 'started late', that his life began after the war (Villa Interview).

national party.[82] In the years leading up to the end of apartheid, there is evidence of a careful manipulation of the language around Zonderwater so as to clearly cast the Italian POW as a fellow victim of oppression. The film documentary of 1989 features a volume dedicated to the narrative of *I Neri Bianchi*, (the white blacks), a term used to suggest the similarity of the state of servitude endured by both Italian POWs and black South Africans (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, 1989, Tape 3). With the political forces of the day just visible below the surface, the ceremony serves as a vital tool to this community's capacity to continue imagining a place for itself in South Africa; each year it adjusts itself, and in so doing makes subtle changes in the way South African Italians perceive their identity.

Despite changes in position contingent on the political context, the substance and form of Italianness promoted by the myth-complex remains. In promoting the cultural products of Zonderwater over the political affiliations of its members, the image of the POW stays flexible, able to assert itself under any regime. This is a remarkable achievement given the rampant fascist background of Mussolini's Italy. Highlighting the craftsman and artist in the POW emphasises his humanity, and in doing so, neutralises him as a political entity.

[82] The Goodwill Festival was held in 1978, and was intended to encourage friendships between South African and Italian veterans (*South African Digest* 20 October 1978).

Conclusion

The agenda of the myth-complex seems to be the articulation of a particular kind of Italianness; the establishment of a mood and atmosphere representative of the Italian prisoner of war experience. As to the purposes of this complex imagining, I have proposed two main aims. Ostensibly contradictory, they are engaged in different contexts for different purposes, and it is in the dynamics of this binary that the identity of the Italian POW is best expressed. On the one hand the myths aim to present an image of effortless harmony between the prisoners and their captors, and from this to extrapolate the model of an Italian South African hybrid identity; on the other, they aim to prove the cultural superiority of the Italians.

The core features of strength, sacrifice, patriotism and ingenuity are constantly highlighted in mythologised examples of artistic achievement: careful arrangements of exuberant fables and calculated silences create a lovingly crafted image of the prisoners. However, the result of the ex-POWs' efforts at consolidating this picture since the end of the war has in fact revealed far more about Italian identity and its operation in exile. The story told by the monuments, ceremonies, artworks, museums and music, along with the testimonies of those who tow the official line about Zonderwater, is a complex and unique mix of machismo and sensitivity, feelings of admiration and derision towards their captors, and a simultaneous rejection and embracing of their fascist background. Through all their attempts to maintain a *bella figura*, it is a decidedly vulnerable and human face that emerges through the songs, poems and art: a nostalgic view of a homeland and way of life that has set the tone of Italian identity in South Africa.[83]

In Chapter One of the present work the usefulness of some of the received forms of Italian story telling in helping the prisoners process their experience is revealed. Both *The Story of a Violin* and *The Banjo Poem* give us insight into the musical core at the heart of the prisoners' imaginings: music as an escape, as a subtle protest and as a connection to the world they had left behind.

[83] This is evident when one considers the increase in attendance of the annual memorial service and the renewed interest in Zonderwater as a side-effect of the growing popularity of the Reyton/Cullinan area as a tourist destination.

While the notion of 'culture's' capacity to elevate and heighten experience exists as a general trope in western culture, in Chapter Two the specific expression of this notion in relation to addressing the absence of women in the camp illustrates the prisoners' commitment to it. Drawing once again on a culturally specific set of norms, the prisoners emphasised the feminine through powerful religious representations. In addition it seems that the theatres they built were the sanctioned free space they needed to engage as a community with identity affirming representations of the feminine; stylised and objectified as they were.

The musical life of the POWs has significance beyond the roles of subtle subversion and coping mechanism established in Chapters One and Two. Chapter Three offers the account of the growth of that musical life as a legacy to the present day Italian South African community. That POWs could develop a musical culture with such limited resources highlights many of the positive characteristics that form part of the oral tradition of the POWs and their descendants. Furthermore, the prisoners' own awareness of the role music played in the forging of their identity as a group is evident throughout the archival material. This conscious identification with music as one of their key modes of expression is invaluable in any assessment of the group's identity.

The ritual spaces in which the POWs are memorialised serve as a backdrop against which their descendants continue to retrospectively remould the identity of the prisoners and, by extension, their own. Chapter Four explores the complexities of realigning with changing notions of what it is to be South African while still retaining a sense of rootedness. Within this process music, as an ostensibly non-threatening tool of culture, continues to play a central role.

Exceeding the range of the present work are the narratives of countless relationships and alliances that further enmesh the seemingly insular ex-POW community and the broader arena of post-war South Africa. Prominent among these are the marriages of Italian prisoners to Afrikaans women, and the naturalisation of these families to Afrikaans culture (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 4, 00:46). The reverse occurred too, of course, with South African soldiers finding wives in Italy and bringing them back to South Africa (Janse van Rensburg, C. 2003, pers. comm.). There were also the then scandalous relationships between Italian ex-prisoners and black women, leading to a sub-

culture of deported ex-POWs in Italy (Villa interview). Finally, the friendships between prisoners and their guards from the African core forged bonds of loyalty that extended well beyond the war (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 2, 00:15). These narratives form an indispensable part of the history of many communities.[84]

The myth-complex is able to expand to include these narratives and, while malleable, certain fundamentals of the POW image are so well entrenched in the popular imagination that they are not likely to change. A good example of this is Major General D.M. Mofokeng's speech, at the memorial service of 2004, in which he spoke of Italian prisoners as 'musicians, artists and craftsmen' and contributors to the building of the South African nation; this is little different to the sentiments expressed by Minister of Foreign Affairs R.F. Botha in 1987 (*Captivi Italici in Sud Africa*, Part 4, 00:49).

As the change in South Africa's political climate over the past twelve years encourages the uncovering of previously untold histories, it will be interesting to follow the changes that occur in the tone of Italian POW stories. There can be no doubt that, regardless of the extent of the changes required, the myth-complex will continue to display the flexibility that has ensured its survival through South Africa's turbulent post-war history.

[84] The era also provides inspiration for the literary world. In 2003 Etienne van Heerden included a fictional Italian ex-POW as the title character of his novel *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati* (Regan Books) (http://www.etiennevanheerden.co.za/salviati.htm. 19/01/2007).

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Appendix 1.

This is a transcription of the original Italian (ZM) with translations.

G. Pasetti
Storia di un violino.
(Story of a violin.)

Page 1
Sulla panca lo sprimbocche (1)
sta leggendo il bollettino
mentre dietro, capolino
sta facendo un prigionier.

(On a bench the springbok
Sits reading a paper
Meanwhile behind him
A prisoner looks on.)

Page 2
Guarda il caso! Il prigioniero (5)
è un liutaio rinomato,
quella panca l'ha stregato
quindi coglie l'occasion.

(Look what's going on! The prisoner
Is a renowned luthier,
He likes that bench
Therefore he seizes the opportunity.)

Page 3
Rischia aimé la cosa rossa (9)
e cosi piano pianino
fa' sparire il malandrino
quella panca e se ne va.

(He risks, alas, the dangerous cause
And so quietly
The scoundrel makes the bench disappear.)

Page 4
Col martello e lo scapello (13)
batte e taglia con ardore
ed in capo a poche ore
terminato è il suo lavor.

(With hammer and knife

He feverishly cuts and hammers
And after a few hours
Finishes his work.)

Page 5
Pizzicando lo strumento (17)
lui s'avvede al accordo
che il violino è un poco sordo:
sembre un gatto nell' amor.

(Plucking the instrument
He comes to the decision
That the violin is a bit dull:
It sounds like a cat in love.)

Page 6
Ed allor con furberia (21)
Per aver molti danari
Dice:, - questo Stradivari
è un modello original!! –

(And so, cunningly
To make lots of money
He says: "This Stradivarius
Is an original model!!")

Page 7
Lo sprimbocche dice: - gudde!! (25)
ha una voce ch'è un portento
yes!! Io pago lo strumento
tre sterline! very well!! -

(The springbok says: "Good!!
It has a marvellous voice
Yes!! I will pay three pounds sterling!
Very well!!")

Page 8
Questa storia che ho contato (29)
è una storia originale
capitata a un certo tale
e quel tale sono me.

(This story that I have told
Is an original story
That happened to a certain person

and that person is me.)

Appendix 2.

The songs below (appendices two and three) are transcriptions of originals that form part of the private collection of E. Coccia.



ZONDERWATER BLOCK

(Inno del prigioniero di guerra)

Parola e musica di
Giuseppe Filippi

(1a Strofa)
Siamo partiti un dì
chiamati dalla Patria,
soretti dalla fede
con l'ideale dell'avvenir.
Difendere così
il nostro sacro suolo,
con un dovere solo
combatterem fino a morir.

(We left one day
called by the Fatherland
strengthened by faith

with the ideal that is to come.
Thus we must defend
our sacred soil,
with our duty alone
we shall fight to the death.)

(Ritornello)
Siam prigionieri di guerra
che la sorte risparmiò,
tutto per te, lontana terra,
quanto sangue si versò.
Rinchiusi dentro quel reticolato
per molti anni vivere così.
Siam prigionieri di guerra
ritornati in libertà;
noi ringraziamo questa terra
che da vivere ci dà.
Uniti siamo per l'Italia nostra
Con grande fede che giammai morirà.

(We are prisoners of war
that fate has spared,
all for you, distant land,
so much blood was shed for you.
Shut up behind barbed wire
living thus for many years.
We are prisoners of war
That have returned in freedom;
We thank this land
that gives us life.
We are united by our Italy
With a great loyalty that will never die.)

(2a Strofa)
Sveglia, che l'alba è già;
soldato, c'è la guerra,
difendi il tricolore
che con valor ti guiderà.
Nella battaglia uscì
forti il nemico altero.
Fui fatto prigioniero
e trasportato a Zonderwater.

(Awake, the dawn is here;
Soldier, there is war,
defend the tricolour

that will guide you with valour.
In battle
The enemy has come out strong
You became a prisoner
And were transported to Zonderwater.)

Appendix 3.



LE TRE CROCI

(I tre Archi)

Parole e musica di
Giuseppe Filippi

(1a Strofa)
Mormora il vento là tra i verdi pini
rinchiusa dentro fra la quattro mura:
è il cimitero dove già ripose
chi per l'Italia è morto e giace qui.

(There where the wind murmurs through the green pines
enclosed within four walls:
is the cemetery where
those who died for Italy now lie and rest.)

(Ritornello)
Le tre croci, simbolo d'amor,
vegliano sempre chi la vita ti donò.
Patria nostra, quanta gioventù
riposa in pace eterna e non torna più.
Sono I tre archi loro compagnia

e di lassù li tendono la mano,
amici nostri della prigionia,
noi non vi dimenticheremo mai.
Le tre croci dicono così
i tuoi fratelli oggi si ritrovan' qui,
un saluto porgono a te,
o prigionero, che ci guardi di lassù.

(The three crosses, symbol of love,
that keep vigil over those who gave their life for you.
Our fatherland, how many young ones
rest in eternal peace never to return.
The three arches are their company
extending their hand in protection,
our prisoner friends,
we will never forget you.
The three crosses speak thus
Your brothers you will find here,
we salute you,
O prisoner, who looks down on us.)

(2a Strofa)
Erano forti giovani e giocondi
che per il fronte dell'ingrata guerra
partiron fiera e l'ultimo saluto
alla lor mamma che non rivedran'.

Le tre croci…

(They were strong young and cheerful
who for the front of a thankless war
boldly parted with a last goodbye
to their mothers who they would not see again.)

Appendix 4.

Author's transcription of a letter to Matilde Casoni, by the Welfare Committee at Zonderwater (private collection of F. Bortolotti).

Z.W. li 26 novembre 1945
Casoni, Matilde
Johannesburg

Il riuscitissimo concerto "Vocale e strumentale", offerto ai prigionieri di questo Blocco, resterà imperituro nel loro animo.
Essi porteranno in ogni lembo della Nostra Patria lontana il grato ricordo che ha lenito le lancinanti ore dell'esilio.
Nel contempo esprimono alle Sue gentili e graziose bambine le loro felicitazioni.
Il Comitato Welfare
6° Blocco

Appendix 5.

Piccola Adriana, poem by POW Bancalà (private collection of F. Bortolotti)

Come un automa quasi mi sentivo
E, nell' autunno della vita ingrata,
Al par d'albero annoso m'ingiallivo
Nell'attesa di libertà bramata,

(I felt almost like a robot
And, in the autumn of a thankless life,
And like the annual tree I turn yellow
In anticipation of longed for liberty,)

Quando, simile al rosignol giulivo,
Un angiolo da l'ugola fatata
E vestito di petali d'olivo
Seppe parlarmi della Terra amata.

(And suddenly, like a happy nightingale,
An angel with a fated voice
And dressed in olive petals
You knew how to speak to me from the beloved land.)

Nel dolce sovvenir d'un glauco mare,
Nell'eco di nostalgica canzone,
Teneramente, il cuor volle sognare;

(In the sweet advent of a blue-green sea,
In the echo of a nostalgic song,
Tenderly, the heart wanted to dream;)

Volo la mente a la casetta mia,
Ed io dimenticai la mia prigione
Negli attimi di speme e poesia...

(Thoughts fly to my little house,
And I forget my prison
In the seconds of hope and poetry…)

"Santa, santa Lucia..."
Tu mi cantasti o rosignol canore:
Era un bel canto della Patria mia
E balsamo al dolore...
Io ti ricordo in quest'ora lontana,
Mentre m'aggiro tra le odiose cose;
Soave mi sovvien tua voce arcana

E il cuor m’invade come odor di rose.

(“Santa, santa Lucia...”
You sang to me o melodious nightingale
It was a beautiful song of my Fatherland
And a salve for pain…
I remember you in this long distant hour,
While I travel through these odious things;
Sweetly your hidden voice reaches
And it invades my heart like the perfume of roses.)

È mezzanotte, e cerco di sognare
Quel che con te sognai;
È mezzanotte, e voglio Iddio pregare
Per te ... Ma nulla sai,

O piccola Adriana.

(It is midnight, and I try to dream
That which I dreamt with you;
It is midnight, and I want to pray to God
For you…But you are oblivious.

O little Adriana.)

Andrea Natale Bancalà
Campo di prigionia

Dedication:
Piccola Adriana
Quando tu sarai mamma io sarò vecchio. Allora mi ricordero meglio di te ed è della gioia che mi desti in prigionia. Tu sarai lieta di ramentare l’onda di poesia che dovesti ai tuoi fratelli colpiti dalla sfortuna. Ti bacio teneramente.
Andrea Natale Bancalà

(Little Adriana,
When you are a mother I will be an old man. I will fondly recall you and of the joy that you brought to me in prison. You will happily reminisce on the waves of poetry that you gave to your brothers struck by misfortune. I kiss you tenderly.
Andrea Natale Bancalà)

Appendix 6.

Author's transcription of a letter to Matilde Casoni, by POW Internatini. Zonderwater. (private collection of F. Bortolotti).

Alla Signora Casoni
Torni a cantare, come un usignuolo.
Le melodie della patria amata.
Con i concenti dolci di quel suolo.

(To Mrs Casoni
Return to sing like a nightingale.
The songs of the beloved land.
With the sweet harmony of that land.)

Effluvi d'Euterpe innamorata.
Ci fai sentir dalla tua cara bocca,
Tanti che resta l'anima incantata.

(Like outpourings of Euterpe in love
You make us hear from your dear mouth,
So much that enchants the soul.)

Tu non potevi, dono più gradito,
Offrire all'infelice prigioniero,
Che il canto che trasporta all'infinito.

(You couldn't give,
To the unhappy prisoner, a better gift
Than a song that transports him to infinity.)

Egli ti porta già chiuso nel cuore,
Or che alla vecchia mamma fa ritorno;
E si confondo l'uno e l'altro amore.

(He takes you already closed in his heart,
Now that he returns to his old mother;
And thus confuses the love between one and the other.)

Vincenzo Internatini
Zonderwater 16-2-46

Figures

NB. Images and photographs have only been included where the quality of reproduction will add to an appreciation of the subject.

Figure 1.

The three images below are highlights from the original manuscript in the ZM.



Figure 2.

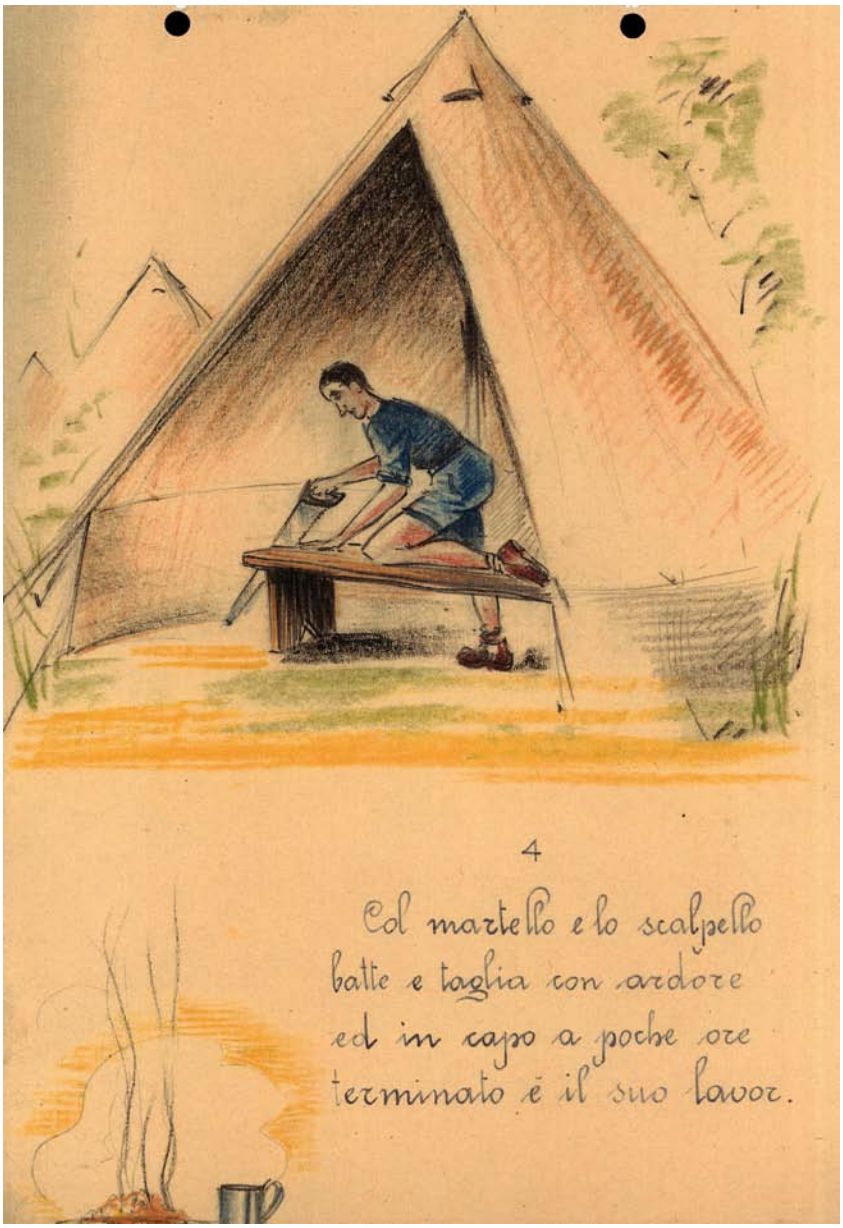

4
Col martello e lo scalpello
batte e taglia con ardore
ed in capo a poche ore
terminato è il suo lavor.

Figure 3.


ORDER!
VERY GOOD!
7
Lo sprimbocche dice: « gudde !!
ha una voce ch'é un portento
yes!! io pago lo strumento
tre sterline! very well !! »

Figure 4.
Mater. Boni. Consili. POW embroidery, Zonderwater (ZM).



Figure 5.
Madonna. Dino Manucci (1941), Zonderwater (ZM).



Figure 6.
Santa Lucia statue. Anonymous, year unknown. Zonderwater (ZM).



Figure 7.
Santa Lucia embroidery. M. Di Matteo (1942). Zonderwater (ZM).



Figure 8.
Untitled. Scarpa (1946). Zonderwater (ZM).



Figure 9.
Untitled. Scarpa (no date). Zonderwater (ZM).



Figure 10.
Giordano in the title role of *La Vedova Allegra* (The Merry Widow) (date unknown). Zonderwater (MHM).



Figure 11.
La Vergina della Montagna. Programme, Zonderwater (MHM).



Figure 12.
La Vergina della Montagna. Programme, Zonderwater (MHM).



Figure 13.
Images of Zonderwater cemetery complex (author's photographs 2004).

13.1.
The cemetery



13.2.
The chapel



13.3.
The Three Arches



13.4.
The procession



Figure 14.
Impressione d'un Refettorio. Scarpa (1946). Zonderwater (ZM).



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