

Advertiser (Adelaide, SA: 1931-1954), Thursday 21 November 1946, page 6.

Naples – when Italian Prisoners Return Home

The author of this article, Col. A.W. Sandford, is a son of Sir Wallace Sandford. While on his way to Hamburg to re-joining the British Army of occupation, he travelled in a ship transporting returning Italian POW.

See Naples or die! At least it is with some apprehension that the traveller returns to the city in 1946 after an absence of seven years.

The dawn had not broken as our troopship rounded the promontory of Sorrento, leaving the sombre mountainous shadow of Capri to port and steamed into the bay. The vessel was still painted her wartime grey, and moved through the grey mists towards grey encircling shores in silence over a glassy sea and concrete posts waving them above the heads of the jostling crowd.

The air was still heavy and humid from the rain of the previous night. A few passengers were stirring, anxious to catch a first sight of Vesuvius or the islands, but the only visible (and audible) movement on the upper decks was the chatter of the lascars swilling down the chipped and uneven planks.

From the decks below a constant murmur of hushed excited voices could be heard – over three thousand prisoners, straining their eyes to catch their first glimpse through the grey mists of the docks where they hope to find parents, wives, children, friends, lovers or at worst the attentions of the Italian Red Cross and a rail warrant to freedom.

The light grew slowly more intense as we approached the entrance to the harbor, and one could discern dimly the shaped of buildings in the distance and shipping nearer at hand. Quite suddenly as the pilot clambered aboard from this ramshackle launch, the first rays of morning struck a cluster of white and pink villas on the headland, away to port – Posilippo, the ‘garden suburb’ of the town. The city itself shielded by Vesuvius was still plunged in grew gloom, but these scattered villas and palaces on their romantic terraced cliff glittered fiercely in the sun.

By this time more passengers had begun to appear and were standing in twos and threes on the boat deck leaning over the rail. They watched the sun strike the ancient castle on Capodimonte as we slipped into the harbour mouth and stared in surprise at the city which began to appear, like a stage effect through the dissipating mist.

Battered Harbour

The harbour was impressive. The carved stone arms of the kingdom of the Two Sicilies still stand on the western mole, as they stood in Nelson’s day and between the pillars could be seen among the trees towards Posilippo, the glittering white cube of the Villa Emma, where Lady Hamilton held court.

The massive Castel Nuovo still dominates the docks but the splendid new quays built of reinforced concrete by the Fascists have stood far less well than solid Bourbon stone masonry the effect of high explosive bombs.

The murmur of the returning prisoners of war had grown to a loud babble as they saw the Italian warships huddles ingloriously against the naval mole and two large liners burned out and rusted lying on the bottom of the city Side. Another liner had capsized just beneath the eastern mole, and in the centre of the docks, an American troopship was discharging across the hull of another capsized and rusting casualty. This they observed in a second and then all eyes were turned to the nearest quay which was clearly made ready to receive us. Stevedores were busy trundling gangways, there were lines of trucks drawn up, lines of carabinieri and here and there the scarlet caps of British military policemen.

Then all at once the prisoners seemed to see in the shadow of the damaged gallery rows and rows of dark-clothed men and women, and a good many children too. These struggled and shouted and gesticulated from beyond the police cordon in the shadows striving to make themselves heard above the yelling of soldiers and stevedores and the raucous braying of a brass band which struggled on to the quay without a conductor and burst at once into a rendering more vigorous than accurate of "Funiculi, Funicula".

Greetings

As we tied up alongside the braying of the unco-ordinated band and the shoutings of the soldiers increased women screamed in hysterics and yelled up the decks for Antonio, Giuseppe or Giovanni. Some of the more cautious had prepared placards with the names of their loved ones in bold lettering and they struggled on to empty oil drums and concrete posts, waving them above the heads of the jostling crowd.

Not a moment was lost, and the plum-coloured uniforms became to stream down the two gangways clutching blankets and kitbags home made wooden suitcases and canvas rucksacks, walking in a quick orderly line towards the reception group and waiting trucks beyond the crowd. Here there was more screaming, more fainting and hysterics as those who were Neapolitans, or whose families had the wealth and opportunity to meet them, hustled them off, squabbling over the baggage, jostling one another in their excitement, laughing, weeping and chattering to the dock gates where they were swallowed up by the town.

Anxious Faces

For over an hour it continued as the thousands streamed ashore, and the anxious faces under the damaged gallery slowly melted away. A few remained, however, till the very end, shouting no longer, rushing forward no more to buttonhole a sympathetic looking soldier dazed by his homecoming, to ask whether Vittorio this or Giacomo that were not perhaps still abroad. They stood silent now, huddled in little groups in the protection of the concrete pillars puckering up weather-beaten peasants' or fishwives' cheeks straining their eyes to scan the empty decks, refusing to believe in their hearts what the cold voice of reason told them they knew already - that he was not aboard.

Hope died hard, and even when the first of the British passengers began to stroll down the after gangway some of them still lingered on. The passengers, in smart uniforms and gay frocks began to gather on the quay hesitant at the last minute whether they should see the town and look for silk stockings, cameos, gloves, flasks of wine and salamis or whether they should make the expensive taxi ride to Pompeii but still some of the hopefuls waited.

The crew had begun to go ashore when the last of these moved disconsolately away. There were three of them: an old man, his wife, and a younger woman – their daughter-in-law or their son's betrothed, it seemed. The women were weeping unashamedly as they stumbled through the grimy puddles towards the dock gates but the old father, a fisherman, was dry eyed. He said nothing, but patted his old wife on the arm. He appeared to be completely absorbed in the task of folding carefully the placard bearing his son's beloved name. He would keep it with his nets and sails and paraffin flares until the arrival of the next ship load of war prisoners.

Living Spectacle

The Greeks, of course used to purge themselves of compassion by acted tragedy but a living spectacle such as this has a slightly different effect. In justification of their misfortune which these people undoubtedly sought themselves by the most dishonourable pretext for war in modern European history, one had constantly to remind one-self that at least they received their prisoners back sound, healthy and well cared for.

Nor need one a sympathy be unqualified. As the first of the prisoners began to disembark, the whole scene was flooded with sunlight and it could be observed that the waiting families below were neatly clothed, and none seemed hungry: no Hongkong horrors here.

A band of the eternal Neapolitan street arabs, quick and unfriendly as sparrows, dressed in tattered sailor suits or bare-legged beneath ragged Italian plus fours, had clambered on to the roof of the concrete gallery and were whining to the passengers to buy tawdry silks, basketwork or olivewood cigarette boxes, imitation cameos and vile mass-produced mosaic necklaces. The prices of all these abominations, were quoted not in the devalued lira (900 to £1 sterling), nor in forbidden sterling but in illegal cigarettes. A certain amount of trading was done. From time to time a couple of lazy carabinieri – no longer in their picturesque uniforms, and three-cornered hats, but in shabby filed grey with military style cap- would saunter along and shoo the urchins away, but as soon as the 'Raiders Passed' had been signalled in the quay below, up would come the ragamuffins once again to continue their barter.

City Scenes

In the city itself the black market trading is not very different. The two main articles for sale seem to be cigarettes and bread. Little booths are set up in the gutter and the vendors squat on camp stools or old packing cases in the open street waiting for purchasers to come by. It is quite common to see an elegantly dressed man stop his car draw out a tattered ten lire note, buy one cigarette, and drive on.

Bread too, which is theoretically available only on presentation of ration card, is always readily sold.

Every two or three days, we were told, the police would raid the streets, where this humble illicit trading is done. They overturn the stalls, seize the goods for sale, search the vendors, pocketing every centesimo of cash they find. For half an hour or so they leave a great wrack of grief and confusion, in their wake but then the stalls are quickly set up once more, new

stock is produced from under cobblestones, from empty cisterns, false windows, hollow walls and the trade goes on.

A Petrol Cache

The big dealers, one is informed, prefer the outer suburbs. Tales are told of military dumps which lack adequate guards, from which as many as five hundred tyres have vanished in a night. A great many Neapolitans will proudly tell you of the big petrol cache. It is quite simple, they say, one simply drives into a certain suburban street, outwardly the same as any other, and at a given signal a large area of cobblestones rises into the air by means of hydraulic life mechanism and an elaborate system of petrol pumps is revealed. It is quite simple they say, but costly, therefore the benzine is very expensive indeed. We were not in Naples long enough to check the truth of this story, but it has a wide and a proud currency. Even throughout all the years of Fascist regimentation and the war, the average Italian has not lost his admiration of anyone who can cheat the authorities. There is no true socialistic spirit there.

For the ordinary man, wages and salaries have risen a very great deal. They are, however, lagging very far behind the cost of living. For the rich, luxuries seem reasonably plentiful but only for the rich wines and liqueurs are available in large quantities, and even chocolates and rich sugary cakes are to be found in every pasticceria – at a price. One imported luxury at least seems to be available to more or less the same people who had it before, excellent Brazilian coffee.

The Unrationed

Laughter, temperament and the opera are, of course, unrationed. Certain goods such as silks, manufactured wool, leather and tomato paste are being exported in growing quantities but the pundits in the cafes will assure one gravely that they have great fears for the economic stability of the country when and if Unrra's support (especially in grain) is withdrawn.

Fortunately for them, all such thoughts were far from the minds of the returning prisoners. They clinked at familiar buildings in the sunshine, all their apprehensions and memories were swallowed up by the noisy and colourful file of the Neapolitan streets. Whether from Bari or Palermo, Ancona or Milan, the smells, the noises, the colour and the movement – home.

1946 'Naples— When Italian Prisoners Return Home', *The Advertiser (Adelaide, SA : 1931 - 1954)*, 21 November, p. 6. , viewed 22 Apr 2018, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article35767842>