

# **The *Camp Nachrichten* published by the Prisoners of War in Malta in 1914-1916**

by Albert Ganado

## **World War I**

On 28 June 1913, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, the heir to the Austrian throne, and his wife were murdered in the Bosnian town of Sarajevo. Within the space of just over a month, Austria-Hungary and Germany were at war with England and France, joined by Italy on 24 May 1915. Turkey was on the side of the Central Powers, but when Italy declared war on Germany on 24 May 1915 Malta instantly became outside the theatre of war although it was a British Crown Colony. Consequently, it served peacefully as a vital base of support in the Middle Sea for the British and French fleets.

In virtue of legislation passed locally after the outbreak of war, Germans and Austrians aged between 17 and 42 were arrested as prisoners of war. They were later joined by the crews of German and Austrian ships either in port or captured near Malta.

At first, the prisoners of war were interned at Casemate Barracks, Floriana. These were too small to accommodate the increasing number of war prisoners brought over to Malta from time to time from various localities. Larger camps were established in late 1914 in the area of the Three Cities on the east side of the Grand Harbour at Verdala Barracks and St. Clements' Parade Ground. The move from Floriana took place on 3 November 1914.

On the next day, 597 civilian German and Austrian prisoners of war arrived from Egypt, followed on the 1<sup>st</sup> December by another 564. As a result of the declaration of war with the Ottoman Empire, Turkish internees, mostly civilians, were transferred from Egypt to Malta in November 1914 and, by the end of May 1915, their number went up to 150.

Starting from number 1, each prisoner of war was, on arrival at the camp, given a sequential number. By November 1918, about 2650 numbers had been allocated. However, throughout the war years some prisoners were either released or transferred abroad. An illustrious German prisoner of war was Prince Franz Joseph of Hohenzollern. His book on SMS *Emden* contains a chapter on his life as a prisoner of war in Malta. The Austrian Aurelius Doncich, interned in 1914, later occupied the post of conductor of the Camp Orchestra for close on five years, settling in Malta after the war as director of the King's Own Band in Valletta.

Two other famous Germans were imprisoned at Verdala Barracks. One was a young submarine captain, Karl Dönitz, who was destined to become Grand Admiral

and who became the Führer for just twenty-three days after Adolf Hitler committed suicide in 1945, during which he ordered the surrender of Germany. The other was the captain of the German raider ship *Emden*, Karl Frederick Max von Müller, that sank many allied ships in the Far East.

The talents of some prisoners were applied to artwork and printing, with production of postcards for sale to other prisoners. They even produced unofficial facsimile postage stamps with the designation *KAMP POST* or *WAR PRISONERS POST*, et similia. These, together with other material, must have been printed with the use of a lithographic press to which the prisoners had access.<sup>1</sup> But the most important and engaging item that came out from the press was the heavily illustrated in house newspaper or magazine named *Camp-Nachrichten*.

## The story of the Maltese newspaper

The earliest newspaper published in Malta goes back to 1798. Named *Journal de Malte*, it was no more than an official gazette replete with pro-French propaganda. During the first years of the British protectorate, four newspapers were published. The first one was the *Foglio d'Avvisi*, printed in fourteen numbers between 8 October 1803 and April 1804, serving as an anti-French propaganda machine churned by Vittorio Barzoni, the director of the government press, whose sole aim was that of libelling Napoleon Bonaparte. It was followed in 1804 by nine issues of *L'Argo*, and then by fifteen numbers of *Il Cartaginese* in 1804-1805, which were circulated also in North Africa and Asia Minor.<sup>2</sup> In 1808-1809 there were a few numbers of *Gazzetta Straordinaria*. All these newspapers were written in Italian.

Their successor was a much more significant newspaper which was first published on 7 January 1812. The title page, extant in only one of three known copies, was the following: *GIORNALE DI MALTA SCRITTO DALLI SIGNORI VITTORIO BARZONI, E GIUSEPPE CASOLANI. IN MALTA MDCCCXII. Dalla Stamperia del Giornale. PRESSO GASPARE SEVAGLIOS SERGENTE STAMPATORE DEL REGGIMENTO SICILIANO*.<sup>3</sup> It was sold at the government press. The National Library of Malta has two copies of this newspaper, both without the title page. Between 1812 and 20 October 1813, ninety-four numbers were published. This weekly newspaper was superseded by the *Gazzetta del Governo di Malta*, with the first number being published on 27 October, still running today in Maltese and English.

Ever since the start of British rule, agitation for a free press in Malta was without respite. It was only after thirty-eight years, on the recommendation of the Royal Commission of 1836, that the liberty of the press was finally granted, and it was regulated by law in 1839. The first newspaper to be published, *Lo Spettatore Imparziale* was dated 23 April 1838. It is swiftly followed by several other newspapers and magazines, the main newspapers being *Il Portafoglio Maltese*

and *Il Mediterraneo*.<sup>4</sup>

Thousands of newspapers have been published since then, some of which have only the paper's name recorded. Others are unknown, although a few surface from time to time. A bibliography of Maltese periodicals was published in 1977 by the Jesuit Father A. F. Sapienza. It has 1222 entries, an essential basic tool for researchers and bibliographers.<sup>5</sup> In entry number 124 Sapienza wrote as follows:

Camp nachrichten. vol. 1- , 1914- (?)

Cospicua, Verdala Barracks, 1914- (?)

Mimeographed publication of German prisoners of war.

Royal Malta Library has: vols. 2-3, no. 1, 1915-1916.<sup>6</sup>

## The Camp Nachrichten magazine

The author has a practically complete series of this very rare magazine, according to which there were only three numbers in the first volume, all titled thus: *Bilderbogen serie der Malta – Camp – Nachrichten*<sup>7</sup> (Fig. 1). At the bottom of the sheet there is a different dictum in each number, respectively, *Neujahsgrüsse mit Hindernissen*, *Die wunderbare Pille neun*, *Schmücke Dein Heim*.<sup>8</sup> Each issue contains a number of vignettes on two sheets, a good number of which illustrate how keen the prisoners were to receive letters from home.

An unnumbered and undated issue came out in late December 1914, printed in blue instead of black ink. It contained portraits of von Fachbach and Swoboda together with those of the Austrian Alberto Messani and Paul Dietrich.<sup>9</sup> On the same sheet these words are spread around: 1914/1915

/ SYLVESTER BLATT DER CAMP-NACHRICHTEN / MALTA. The new year of 1915 is greeted on the next sheet *PROSIT / NEUJAHR!!!*<sup>10</sup>

A new series started in 1915. The magazine title became simply *CAMP NACHRICHTEN* (not hyphenated). It is number 1 of the second year, dated 17 January 1915. It depicted on four sheets vignettes and four unnamed portraits, but no monograms of the authors.

The next number was a special issue dated 27 January 1915 in honour of the Kaiser Wilhelm II, with his portrait and the German colours on the front cover (fig. 2). It had twelve sheets, of which only six had printed material. It was followed by number three (although marked II), dated 31 January 1915, on life at Verdala

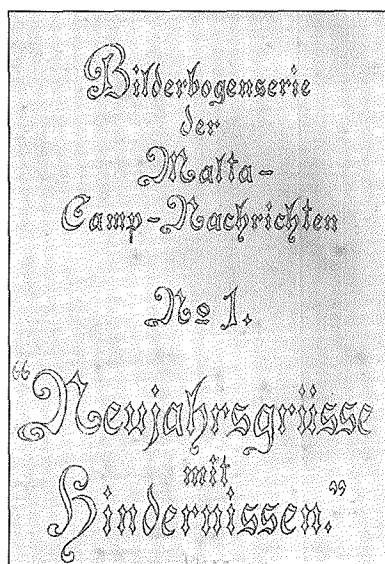


Figure 1

Barracks. From then on the numbers are sequential, published at irregular intervals, the last number XVIII, dated 25 December 1915.

The very first number of 1915 is charged with humanity. In twelve scenes, each accompanied with a rhyming couplet, they narrated the poignant story of frustration in the transmission and receipt of correspondence, away from home and country. It starts with families of prisoners of war writing out their distant news. A son is shown posting letters as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> December. These were then conveyed by train from the German Reich, and entrusted to the well-built Dutch ships. Out of twenty sacks of letters, five fell in the sea before they reached London – *Ankunft in London* – where they were forgotten at the *Information Office* as there was no wish to pass on the New Year greetings. Suddenly, after one month, the censor



Figure 2

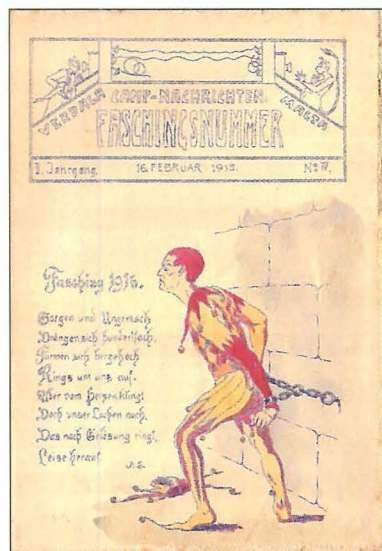


Figure 3

recalled that they must be somewhere. From the surviving sacks, three were sent to the wrong destination. The rest happily arrived in Malta after a further fifteen days. When the censor got to work in his cold room he burnt all the letters to create warmth. When the Postmaster went to the door of his office – *Post* –, he was given an empty sack. True story or not is not the point, it is meant to express the anxiety and anguish of the imprisoned foes (Fig. 3).

The illustrations are initialled A.S. and H.v.F. which stood for Angelus Swoboda, a reporter, and Heinz von Fachbach, the artist.<sup>11</sup> Presumably, these two prisoners of war were also the authors of the illustrations in the second number which, in the same style, tell a different but rather humorous story. It centres around the wonderful *Pille neun*, pill number nine, which was a cure

for all. An English doctor was assigned to look after the health of the prisoners of war. He had a ready remedy for every ailment. Whatever the complaints, such as a broken foot or nose, bladder stone, mental illness, haemorrhoids, etc., he invariably prescribed pill number 9. On one occasion, 'our sweet doctor' was himself out of



sorts, but he did not take pill nine! In the third number one whole page of text is titled *SCHMÜCKE DEIN HEIM* – Decorate Your Home. It is full of furnishings divided in twelve sections, which include, among many other things, bird cages, a bedstead, and a vacuum cleaner! They probably represent the movable effects in the prison barracks. It ends with these words: This is the moral of the story – this is the curse of the evil action (the war?), that at the end one does not get anything out of it.

Apart from the 'curse' of imprisonment in a foreign country, it was the lack of proper postal communication that the detainees found most irksome and intolerable. In a list of 'fairy tales' (*Märchen*) at Verdala Barracks printed on an unnumbered single sheet, it was written that once upon a time a prisoner of war wrote a letter and it actually reached its destination, while once upon a time there was nobody at the post office enquiring about incoming mail.

It is impracticable to examine in detail every single number, but there are some other features which merit special attention. A series of portraits, all unnamed, started with the issue of 17 January 1915. In the same issue, under the heading *Malta Alphabet* the letters A to M were accompanied by a couplet in German and two images, ending with N to Z in the next number, which gave the reality of life at the Verdala Barracks headed *DIE VERDALIADE*. On 16 February at Carnival time – *Fasching* 1915 – a coloured drawing appeared showing a desperate prisoner of war in carnival costume chained to the



Figure 4



Figure 5

wall; crushed, 'but with laughter in our hearts and longing for freedom' (Fig. 4).

On 21 February, von Fachbach depicted the Pope with a quote from the Gospel of St Mark, while a Turkish 'portrait' was drawn by Red on another page. Human figures were drawn by Dietrich. Two issues came out on 1 April; with a ballet dancer signed *R Sch.* on the octavo sheet, and a commemoration in colour of the centenary of Prince Bismarck's birth on 1 April 1815. The red cross, the eagle, and his portrait by Swoboda are also shown.

With the issue of 11 April, the editor started publishing a series of views of Verdala Barracks, including the delivery of goods by a Maltese cart, the

coffee shop, flying the Turkish flag, and the sanatorium. Items in Turkish were also inserted, but the most beautiful number of the camp magazine was that published on 27 April with Turkish flags, emblems, and war trophies in full colour on the front sheet (figs.4, 5). Also in full colour and highly decorative were the portraits inside, portraying two high personalities of the Ottoman realm. Most of the text was in Turkish, accompanied by portraits of Turkish prisoners. It was a special number for the feast of the Ottoman King ascending the throne. Regretfully, the present author does not know Turkish.

By contrast the issue of 11 May, called *Kémeri-Nagy Nummer*, is full of portraits and caricatures in black and white. That of 23 May has the bells ringing for Pentecost, with prisoners enjoying tennis, billiards and chess. Amusements, including the playing of musical instruments, abound in several issues. A vignette showing the detainees crowding at the post office to collect letters is drawn on 13 June (Fig. 6).

The issue of 18 August was a special *FESTNUMMER* in colour, in honour of *FRANZ JOSEF I*, Emperor of Austria – Hungary, with the armorials of both countries on the front page, two portraits, and a two-page spread, headed *VIRIBUS VNITIS* containing emblems and 26 regional armorials (Fig. 7). Inside the back page there is a coloured view of Verdala Barracks, signed by Dietrich, and a view of



Figure 6

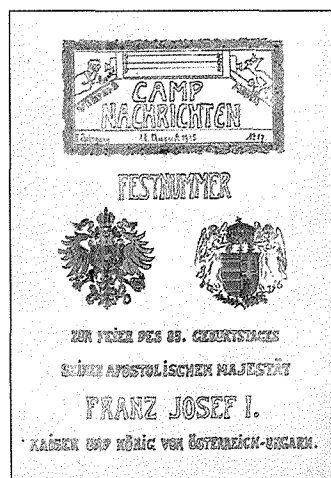


Figure 7

Vienna signed *R. Sch.* Apart from the eight-verse poem by Swoboda illustrating one of the portraits, there are two other monograms. For this occasion, a concert of classical music was organized and two separate decorated coloured sheets were printed, one in German, the other in Hungarian, with their respective armorial bearings<sup>12</sup> (Fig. 8)

While views of Verdala Barracks abound, on 5 September St Clements camp is shown for the first time, with the title *KEMÈRI NAGY NUMMER FÜR DAS ST. CLEMENTS CAMP*, with a game of hockey on roller-skates, life in the camp, and several portraits, all signed by Nagy. The Christmas number came next with the traditional Christmas tree and coloured lit candles squeezed between barbed wire

on the right and an armed soldier on guard on the left. It has the monogram *PD* at the bottom, next to the Maltese eight-pointed cross. The usual poems and vignettes are present, with a Turk selling wares for the 'tourist', including rucksacks, trousers, and several leather articles.

The first number of the third year was dedicated to Wilhem II, Emperor of Germany and King of Prussia, who ruled from 1888 to 9 November 1918. His portrait in a coloured oval of laurels, done by Dietrich, was published on page 3 (Fig. 9). Instead of portraits, domestic animals are shown, mostly dogs. It is dated 27 January 1916, the 57<sup>th</sup> birthday of the Emperor. On the previous day, as part of the celebrations, an exhibition was inaugurated, and an issue of the newspaper listed day by day all the festivities from the 1 to the 26 January. The vignettes include *SPORT FEST*, happy dancing to a band of music, and a huge amount of letters filling the *POST OFFICE ST CLEMENT CAMP* with prisoners

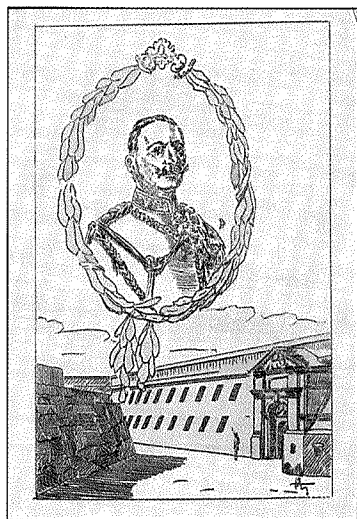


Figure 9

clamouring for distribution. The imprint *Druck: "Camp-Nachrichten", Malta*, is signed by the Austrian editor and publisher Otto Porges.

Just one final word on the paper used by the prisoners for printing their *Nachrichten*. It was of slightly thick good quality, mostly in double sheets of foolscap size, uncut, the colour varying from white to bluish green. It has very distinctive watermarks: the one of the left side has the name *VON WILLER & CO* below a shield (130x90mm) displaying two diagonal flags, while *AL MASSO* is on the right side.

## The magazine copy at the National Library

Apart from the copy of the magazine in the author's *emeroteca*, there is in Malta another



Figure 8

27 June, and 5 September 1915. There are some slight differences between these two copies, such as, colouring is missing on the two Turkish portraits on pages 3 and 5 of 27 April, and on all the pages of 18 August 1915. Loose sheets of musical programmes, the fairy sale issue, and a few others also seem to be lacking. In the author's copy, there are no signatures on the verso of pages 2 and 5 of the issue of 27 January 1915, and possibly some single sheet is missing.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> This introduction to the article has been almost wholly based on the standard book *Malta in World War I – Postal History* written by Alan Green, Dr David Ball and Rodger G. Evans, published in London by the Malta Study Circle in 2013.
- <sup>2</sup> William Zammit, *Printing in Malta 1642-1839*, Malta, 2008, 229-233.
- <sup>3</sup> See the copy of this *Giornale* in the author's collection. For further details of this publication, biographies of Barzoni and Casolani, and a note on the Royal Sicilian Volunteer Regiment, see A. Ganado, 'Bibliographical notes on Melitensia – I', *Melita Historica*, vol. xiii, no. 4 (2003), 378-382. See also Zammit, op. cit., 240-244.
- <sup>4</sup> Before starting publication, *Il Mediterraneo* published a prospectus in Italian and English, titled *PROGRAMMA*. The paper was to be printed, and subscriptions were to be received, by *TIPOGRAFIA IZZO E C<sup>o</sup>*. at 93, Strada Vescovo, Valletta.
- <sup>5</sup> For other bibliographies see the *Supplement* to Sapienza's checklist covering the years 1974-1989 compiled by Ninette Camilleri and Romaine Petrocchino, published in 1990. See also A. Cassola, *Lost Maltese newspapers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century*, Malta, 2011.
- <sup>6</sup> Anthony F. Sapienza, *A checklist of Maltese periodicals*, Malta, 1977.
- <sup>7</sup> Trans. – A series of illustrated sheets of the *Malta – Camp – Nachrichten*.
- <sup>8</sup> Trans. – New Year Greetings with handicaps, a wonderful nine pill, with decorations from your home.
- <sup>9</sup> According to the captions accompanying the portraits, von Fachbach was a special artist, book decorator and press director; Swoboda was in charge of the adverts, small news and reports; Messani was the editor, editor-in-chief and head; Dietrich edited items of literature, art, science, and changes in vocabulary.
- <sup>10</sup> A message of the magazine's New Year's Eve to its readers, and wishing a Happy New Year.
- <sup>11</sup> In September 1916 von Fachbach obtained his release from Malta on compassionate grounds as he had contracted severe tuberculosis (Giovanni Bonello, 'The Salter Album from World War I', *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 17 August 2014, 32-33. George H. Salter (1878-1942), a British officer, had daily contact with the prisoners of war held in Cottonera. His autograph album is kept by his daughter Marylyn Peringer, who resides in Canada. On 15 February 1915 von Fachbach sketched in ink a portrait of Salter in gala jacket with rich-braided epaulettes.
- <sup>12</sup> Some of the prisoners deserve a mention. After their release two of them settled in Malta. Geo Fürst had married a Maltese lady, Helen Debono, in 1912, while Maestro Aurelio Doncich was referred to as 'a very capable conductor' by his fellow prisoner Prince Franz Joseph von Hohenzollern, brother of the Queen of Portugal, who wrote on his camp life in his memoirs. Their comrade was Karl Doenitz, the Admiral of the German navy in WW II. Even as late as 1919 Turkish prisoners were brought to Malta after the Armistice and after two years, on 12 May 1921 they petitioned the Governor of Malta to be released. The petition was signed individually (Malta National Archives, S. of S. 90/21).