

Gozitan Prisoner of War killed at a Satellite Camp of Sachsenhausen

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There is never a shortage of Second World War stories, as new ones are uncovered either in written or oral form. These stories about those terrible war years have now been written for posterity in illustrated volumes, leaving an undeletable record of those events marking the 20th century.

Despite their small size, Malta and Gozo also suffered the horrible effects of battle during the war years. The people of these islands had to defend themselves against Nazi and Fascist forces. Many Maltese and Gozitans had to don uniforms and defend their country; many ended up joining the artillery manning anti-aircraft and coastal guns. There were also those who joined the Merchant Navy whilst numerous others were enlisted or drafted as soldiers in the foreign lands they had emigrated to, to fight against the evil forces that were threatening world freedom.

The story that follows is not an extraordinary one but a lesser-known one, about a Gozitan, from the village of Għarb, Gozo, who under the ugly misfortunes of war ended up as a prisoner of war.

Gozitan Prisoner Shot in Berlin

The story takes us back to 25th March 1941, when the Prince Regent Paul of Yugoslavia was forced to sign the Tripartite Pact, putting his country in allegiance with Nazi Germany. This agreement was not supported by the people of Yugoslavia leading to a *coup d'état* commanded by General Dusan Simovic whereby King Peter II (nephew of the Prince Regent), who was just 17 years of age, took control of Yugoslavia instead of Paul. General Simovic headed the government and immediately broke the Pact. This move shocked Hitler to the extent that instead of invading Greece and Bulgaria, ordered the invasion of both Greece and Yugoslavia. On 6th April 1941, German forces attacked Yugoslavia with 33 Divisions, assisted by about 1,200 *Luftwaffe* planes. Although the Yugoslavs put on a brave fight,

they could do little to contain the overwhelmingly superior and well-equipped German forces. On 17th April, Yugoslavia surrendered.



Guzepp Cauchi at the age of 16. Photo taken in 1926.

Greece was invaded on the same day. In two days, Salonika fell into German hands. On 20th April, the Greek government announced that further resistance would be futile and Greece surrendered the next day.

The Nazi Swastika was unfurled on the 27th April on top of the Acropolis in Athens. British, Australian and New Zealand troops under General Wavell arrived from the North African campaign, landing in Greece during March 1941 in order to assist in the battle. The force, totalling 56,657 soldiers, was led by General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson and included the 1st Armoured Brigade, the

6th Australian Division and the 2nd New Zealand Division. But despite this help, this force was forced to lock in a small area in Thermopylae. It was becoming evident that the British had no other option but to evacuate as many troops as possible from the island. The situation was similar to Dunkirk but under worse circumstances. On 26th April, German paratroopers captured the bridge over the Corinth Canal that joined the Peloponnese with the rest of Greece.

General Wilson was providentially the right man at the right place as he executed a skilful plan by which he managed to save the majority of the army under his command through evacuation to Crete and Egypt. The evacuation of the troops took place between 24th April and the 30th of April. Out of a total of 56,657 troops a little over 43,000 were evacuated, mainly to Crete. Most of the equipment and ammunition was left behind to fall into German hands. Apart from the casualties suffered by the British force, about 11,000 were taken prisoners under the command of Fieldmarshall Wilhem List. Among these prisoners was Ġużepp Cauchi, aged 31, a bachelor from Ġharb, Gozo.

Ġużepp Cauchi (Ta' Neriku), was born in Ġharb on 3rd January 1910. He was the son of Ġorġ, a policeman and Ġulja Mifsud.¹ His mother was from Qala. He had four other siblings: Neriku, Manwel, Lippu and Mari-Tereż. When he was aged 12, he was already demonstrating that he was a promising lad. He was a very courageous and daring person and possessed great skill and determination which later on, served him well in life, but ultimately cost him his life.

He was brought up and lived at house no. 81, Church Street, Ġharb. He enjoyed his time working in a small field or garden owned by his father in the same village. Towards the end of July 1926, when aged 16, he immigrated to Adelaide, Australia. His passport number was 889.²

Many other Gozitans sought to find virgin land in Australia to earn a decent living. For some time, he lived at Innisfail, Queensland and lived close to his cousin Mananni Mintoff. He was 5 feet 6 inches tall, with brown eyes and chestnut hair. Before

enlisting with the Australian Division towards the end of 1940, he worked on bridge construction work and when on holiday he spent his vacation time with Mananni Mintoff.

He also served as a soldier with the Australian 6th Division in North Africa in January 1941 under General Sir Archibald Percival Wavell during the campaign against the Italian forces. Under Wavell, they managed to capture Tobruk and later Benghazi. This streak of luck, under Wavell, lasted until 12th February 1941, when the German General Erwin Rommel arrived in Tripoli and commenced his brilliant offensive. On 4th March the 6th Australian Division and the 2nd New Zealand Division together with British troops were taken to Greece to help the Greek forces.



Ġużepp Cauchi in Australian Army Uniform.

When Ġużepp Cauchi was taken prisoner in Greece towards the end of April 1941, he was taken, together with his mates, on a long and arduous journey to the POW (Prisoner of War)

¹ PRG, Birth 1910/22.

² National Archives of Malta, Malta Foreign Affairs/01/889/26 (NAM/MFA/01/889/26).

Detention Camp or Nazi Stalag in the suburbs of Berlin, where he suffered very bad treatment. This camp was a satellite camp of the much larger Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp. Due to his lively and rebellious nature, Ġużepp tried to escape. As punishment, he was tortured. This also acted as a warning not to repeat any further attempts.

Although he appears to have died in an infirmary in Germany, according to the Parish Archives of Għarb, in reality Ġużepp Cauchi was killed by the Nazis on 4th September 1944, when he tried to escape again.³

During this last attempt, Ġużepp Cauchi had jumped the warning wire of the perimeter fence which was out of bounds to the inmates of the camp. He was shot as he attempted to jump the barbed wire.

This story was uncovered by the Gozitan researcher Frank Bezzina (1925-96) and was confirmed by the same author during 1976, when he compiled first-hand information from other prisoners who were with Ġużepp Cauchi in the same camp.⁴ In fact, one of the inmates of the camp told Frank Bezzina that when Cauchi tried to escape, he already had one foot out of the barbed wire, and his father, who was still alive, had received £50 as compensation.

A few years ago, a monument was erected by the Għarb Local Council and unveiled in memory of Ġużepp Cauchi in Santu Pietru, Għarb.

(This story, which is recorded in the 2020 published book ‘*Il-Qilla tal-Gwerra fuq Għawdex 1940-1943*’ with added details, was written by Frank Bezzina’s son, Charles Bezzina, author of several books on Gozo during wartime.)



The unveiling of the Għarb War Monument by the then Minister of Gozo Juystne Caruana, on Sunday, 25th November 2018.

Charles Bezzina, born in 1961, is a poet and a writer, who has published 20 books. He won twice the Book National Prize for poetry. He is also a researcher about Wartime Gozo, and has published several books about this subject. He is the son of the late Frank Bezzina (1925-96), who was the first writer in the Maltese Islands who wrote on Wartime Gozo in the 1970s. Charles Bezzina worked for 38 years at the Bank of Valletta.

³ Parish Archives, Għarb, *Liber Def.*, Vol VII No. 173.

⁴ See, *L-Oriżont* newspaper, (Malta) of 14 August 1979, 10.