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## From Tobruk to Clare: the experiences of the Italian prisoner of war Luigi Bortolotti 1941-1946

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### ABSTRACT

The paper explores the personal account of an Italian prisoner of war, Luigi Bortolotti (1916-1980), who has left a 300-page diary manuscript that relates his experiences from the time of his capture in Tobruk in 1941 until he was repatriated to Italy in 1946. After being placed in camps in Ismailia and Suez, Bortolotti was shipped to Australia where he spent nearly three years in the POW camp at Hay (New South Wales). Early in 1944 he was sent to work on a farm in Clare, South Australia, a country town to which he would return to settle as a migrant in 1948. The paper follows Bortolotti's daily, often mundane account of his life as a POW in the context of the events of the time and highlights the mental and physical stress and sense of hopelessness that he and many other Italian POWs felt in the Hay camp during their years of confinement. It re-evaluates what has too easily been labeled the "fair treatment" of Italian POWs in Australia and a wartime experience that has been called "not a bad thing".

Over half a million Italian soldiers were taken prisoner during the second world war. Most were taken to camps in Great Britain, the United States, North and South Africa, India and Australia ([Conti 1986: 436](#)). Australia, at the request of Britain, took a total of 18,432 POWs between April 1941 and February 1945, approximately one quarter of whom were shipped directly to Australia from Egypt during 1941, and three-quarters via POW camps in India between 1943 and 1945 ([Fitzgerald 1981: 171-2](#)). In Australia the largest camps in which POWs were placed were Cowra, Hay and Yanco (NSW), Murchison, Myrtleford and Tatura (Victoria), Gaythorne (Queensland), Marrinup and Northam (Western Australia). In May 1943 the War Cabinet approved a recommendation that Italian POWs use their labour more effectively by being allocated to private farms, without guards but under the

supervision, in each of a number of designated Area Control Centres throughout Australia, of a handful of Army staff who were responsible for the local POWs' well-being and good behaviour ([Saunders 1995: 24](#)). Australian farmers in need of labour applied to the Army to have up to three POWs work on their farm. By 1945 over 80 POW Army Control Centres were operating in six States and over 10,000 Italian POWs were employed on farms for the token wages of 15 pence per day. [\[1\]](#) Despite the war having come to an end, in early 1946 POWs were still labouring on farms, the excuse being that it was impossible to obtain ships immediately to repatriate the Italians, but clearly also because the POWs continued to be useful to the economy ([Cresciani: 1989: 217](#)). [\[2\]](#)

The presence of Italian POWs in Australia has been studied by a number of scholars, amongst whom are Alan Fitzgerald (1981), Gianfranco Cresciani (1989), [Philippa Watt and Elizabeth Brooks \(1993\)](#), [Bill Bunbury \(1995\)](#), Kay Saunders (1995), and [John Hall \(1997, 1998, 1999a, 1999b\)](#). [\[3\]](#) Some of these have concentrated their attention on POWs in particular States. None has looked specifically at POWs in South Australia (SA), where eleven Control Centres were established to supervise a total of 1,454 POWs, which was the peak number of Italians on SA farms in March 1945. [\[4\]](#)

This paper, however, is not a study of the overall activities and experiences of POWs in SA, but it looks instead at the personal account of one Italian POW, Luigi Bortolotti, who has left a diary manuscript, which I have been able to access, thanks to his son Peter, who still lives in Clare SA where his father spent two years on a farm as a POW.

The diary, which is dedicated to Luigi Bortolotti's mother and family, is in the [Preface](#) called by him simply *appunti*, jottings, that would reveal his "state of mind and the various fortunes of [his] life as a prisoner of war". [\[5\]](#) He says modestly that he is no Pellico or Giusti, writers not surprisingly chosen as his highest literary models: Silvio Pellico for his *Le mie prigioni*, the account of Pellico's imprisonment in an Austrian gaol in the Nineteenth Century; and the Tuscan Giuseppe Giusti, another Risorgimento patriot, whose autobiographical prose was a scholastic model in the early Twentieth Century. The diary is the three-hundred page hand-written account of the years 1941-1946, the period that extends from the "the sad day of my capture to that longed-for day of my release". [\[6\]](#) [Bortolotti](#), a twenty-four year old sergeant who had been an office clerk before the war in his home town Maiano (Udine), was engaged in administrative duties in Tobruk in the 69th Infantry Regiment, Sirte Division. [\[7\]](#)

The diary commences in the early morning of the momentous 21 January 1941 when British and Australian troops launch their attack on Tobruk, which they overrun in just two days, capturing 27,000 Italian soldiers. [\[8\]](#) Bortolotti is awoken by the British bombs falling overhead and shortly after by the enemy machinegun fire. Shaken by the rapidity of the British and Australian advance and the total absence of Italian air defences, he takes refuge in an underground shelter with some other soldiers. When the Australian soldiers menacingly reach the entrance to the hide-out, his sergeant major decides to surrender and lead the men out. As he lines up with other soldiers captured nearby, he despairingly reflects on the futile role he has played in the war as a member of the office staff:

What have I managed to do for my beloved country? I curse the day that I didn't have other duties with some unit, such as a commanding officer of a squad, where, even if unsuccessful, I could have made the ultimate sacrifice, though in the tasks assigned to me I have discharged my duty as a soldier and have always pleased my superiors. [\[9\]](#)

His despair increases when two Australian soldiers search him and take from him everything he has, wallet, money and photographs: "You can just imagine our state of mind! ... The two enemy soldiers acted just like a shepherd with his sheep". [\[10\]](#) In his official report three years later, General Umberto Barberis, commander of the eastern side of the Tobruk garrison, who was captured on the same afternoon, noted that the Australian soldiers who arrested him appeared to be drunk and took from him not only his pistol and binoculars, but also his wallet, wristwatch, and gold fountain pen. [\[11\]](#)

Bortolotti believed that Italy would avenge the defeat of the Italian soldiers by counter-attacking with the planes in the air and the armoured vehicles on the ground that had not been there to support them before. But nothing happened. He was not to know that over seventy Italian aeroplanes had already been destroyed on the first day by the RAF while they were still on the ground, and that the Italian commander in North Africa, Marshall Rodolfo Graziani, had refused repeated requests to send in some bombers because they could not be protected ([Bongiovanni 1996: 105](#); [Bocca 1997: 267](#)).

Together with more than 2,000 Italian prisoners Bortolotti was marched back to Tobruk to be put in the prison camp originally established there by the Italians. Hungry and exhausted, he was fearful of not surviving another day:

With no sleep, demoralised by the humiliating defeat that we had suffered and by the lack of food and water, I couldn't stand it any more. I pushed myself along as though supported by some superhuman force [...] I was quite sure that during this day my life was destined to come to an end. [\[12\]](#)

But he was unable to sleep that night because he had just learnt of the disaster that had struck Italian POWs in another camp nearby, when some aircraft flying above saw the fires lit by the Italian POWs to keep warm and dropped several bombs on them, killing several hundred and wounding many others. The Italian POWs, including Bortolotti, were convinced that it was the work of the RAF, whereas Gavin Long, in his Australian history of the capture of Tobruk, attributed the carnage to a squadron of Italian aircraft ([Long 1952: 234](#)).

On 25 January Bortolotti estimated that as many as 40,000 extremely thirsty and hungry Italian POWs, including himself, were squeezed into the 600 x 600 metre camp. Anxiously waiting to be transferred somewhere else, away from the horror and turmoil, he described the desperate scene:

We seemed to be a lot of madmen, all dirty and unshaven and covered in sand and sweat. The mass of soldiers was beginning to be rather scary. [...] Still no departure. The numerous cine-cameras that were there filming this skirmish couldn't get enough of the horrific spectacle. Screams everywhere. Some are looking for their brother, others their cousin or someone from their village. A priest

shouting and invoking the help of the Almighty assures everyone that they'll soon give us food and water, and runs to answer every call, offering words of comfort to all. There was such bedlam that we didn't manage to get to the food distribution in time. Will we get out of this unscathed? Lots of gunfire to keep the mass of men under control. They shot one soldier as he was trying to get through the barbed wire. He probably wanted to go and look for food.[\[13\]](#)

Bortolotti witnessed the death from cold, hunger and thirst of a number of the Italian POWs crowded into the camp. He observed Australian soldiers surreptitiously mingling with the mass of Italians, taking possession of watches, money, and even photographs of the men's relatives, as well as rings, including wedding rings and other valuables. The "nicest" (*i più bravi*) among the Australian soldiers gave half a flask of water in exchange. One Italian paid an Australian 3,000 lire for one flask of water. [\[14\]](#) It therefore came as no surprise to Bortolotti when, on 15 February, as he was finally put on a small ship, some of the British soldiers "advised us to hide from the Australians anything we had of value or that we treasured ... I wonder why?". [\[15\]](#)

He was taken to a POW camp on the outskirts of Alexandria, where a thousand prisoners were being held. Here the living conditions were better: reasonable food, sufficient water and some cigarettes. A week later he was again moved, this time to a larger camp in [Ismailia](#). This provided the first occasion in the diary for Bortolotti to give evidence of his skill as a draughtsman. At this point he included a detailed sketch of the lay-out of Ismailia camp, something he would also do when he arrived at the Suez camp and finally at Hay in NSW.

Three weeks later he was transferred to the [Suez camp](#), and placed in Camp No. 2, where 1,200 Italian POWs were housed in tents. For food they were given some biscuits, meat and tea. Those who crowded around the kitchen for their share were beaten with truncheons by the British soldiers. Unhappy with the behaviour of the POWs, the British camp commander forced everyone to line up and run laps around the camp. Those who weren't able to keep up were beaten with truncheons. Many POWs collapsed exhausted and in pain. When the prisoners complained and began to destroy all the work that they had done to make the camp more attractive, the camp commander had a change of heart and treated them with more respect.

Two months later, in May 1941, together with 2,000 Italian POWs, Bortolotti embarked on the *Queen Mary*, bound for Australia. The Australian soldiers on board were, in Bortolotti's eyes, completely different from those he had encountered in Tobruk ("Australian officers, exquisitely polite, tried to please everybody"). [\[16\]](#) On 26 May the ship reached Sydney. First off was the body of an Australian soldier who had been bayoneted to death the day before in a quarrel with a British soldier. On the pier all the POWs were issued with a magenta-coloured overcoat "that makes us all look like cardinals", noted Bortolotti. [\[17\]](#) At Hay he was put in [Camp No. 7](#) and given command of Hut No. 8.

The camp at Hay became Bortolotti's prison for nearly three years, from May 1941 to February 1944, after which he would be sent to a farm in Clare, South Australia. Just under two hundred pages of the diary, two-thirds, are devoted to his day-to-day activities and to events occurring in the Hay camp. The extreme tediousness of life in the camp is often reflected in the minutiae that he noted down and that aided his physical and mental survival: the final scores of the camp football

matches, which he always watched but in which he did not participate, since he did not consider himself skilful enough to play (the most noteworthy features of his brief reports of matches were the not-uncommon fights that broke out between the supporters of the “Milano” and “Napoli” teams, an indication of the irrepressible, passionate regional loyalties); worrying about having enough cigarettes (in the first months the POWs were given none at all, except for the tobacco bought at the canteen when the Papal Nuncio arrived and distributed some money, but later on the POWs received a ration of 35 cigarettes a week) (Cresciani 1989: 197); playing cards; describing the extremes of the weather; reading Italian novels supplied by the Italian Red Cross; going to church on Sundays; mentioning the rare letters he received from his family, which took from four to six months to arrive; listing the names and Italian addresses of some of the other POWs, almost as though he felt the need to provide a record of their existence in the camp; noting the occasional good meal that the POWs were given, like the one on New Year’s Day 1942, which consisted of *gnocchi, arrosto, patatine, e cipolle impanate, caffè, frutta e dolce*, all prepared by the Italian POW cooks; mentioning the pencil drawings that many POWs and indeed Australian soldiers asked him to make from photographs of their family, wife or girlfriend (one Australian camp sergeant considered him such an artist that he asked him to do no less than five enlargements of the one photo of his Australian girlfriend), and each time Bortolotti expected at least some Cooe or Capstan cigarettes in return; being involved in the frequent plays and concerts that Italian POW theatre and orchestra groups put on, either as actor or more commonly as set designer (he was always in demand to paint the sets); keeping a record of the very meagre amount of money that he and the other prisoners of war were irregularly paid (an agreement between Italy and Australia allowed for the payment, starting from 1 October 1941, of 10 shillings and 5 pence every three weeks for non-commissioned officers and of 14 shillings and 7 pence every six weeks for soldiers, issued as payment cards).

Since [the POWs](#) had access to newspapers such as the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Bortolotti occasionally interspersed his diary with brief notes on the progress of the war. His loyalty to fascist Italy and his interest in the outcome of the war clearly waned between 1941 and 1945, as he gradually felt more distant geographically and spiritually from the events in Europe and South East Asia and as his own life became more isolated and inward-looking. In December 1941 he noted that the newspapers “carry the news of Japan’s brilliant naval victories on its first day in the war” [\[18\]](#) and in the same month, when things were not going so well for the Axis in Russia and Cyrenaica, he commented: “I still have complete faith in our victory. Nothing will make me lose heart”. [\[19\]](#) In November 1942 he noted that “Tobruk is in English hands”, “Benghazi is under English rule” and “the newspaper reports are not satisfactory for us”. [\[20\]](#) The fall of Mussolini in July 1943 deserved only the entry: “The newspapers carry the news that in Italy Badoglio has taken over government from Mussolini”. [\[21\]](#) On 9 September 1943, when he noted that Badoglio had asked the Allies for an unconditional armistice, his previous pro-fascist and pro-Axis view had been replaced by “What will become of us after all this suffering?”. [\[22\]](#) At the end of April 1945, when Mussolini was killed and war ceased in Italy, Bortolotti did not even bother to record the fact: he was too excited about the two weeks’ fishing vacation he had just spent with the Jarmans in Clare, to whose farm he had been allocated.

There are a number of diary entries for 1942 and 1943 that betray the boredom, strain and suffering of living in the Hay prison environment. Similarly to what Lucio Sponza found in the case of Italian POWs in Great Britain, sometimes the

low spirits and depressive mood pushed prisoners beyond the limits of endurance ([Sponza 1996: 210](#)). In January 1942 Bortolotti noted that “five or six in the camp show signs of insanity”, in February 1943 “Private Violante has been taken to the hospital with mental illness”, in December 1942 a prisoner committed suicide when sent to work in the woods outside of the camp, and in the same month a POW drowned in the river near Camp 8. A month later, when another POW from Camp 8 drowned, Bortolotti added: “A little too often lately you can really tell that no one is in their right mind any more”. [\[23\]](#) At the end of 1942 he attempted to sum up and come to terms with his own monotonous existence:

Continue the usual strolls around the camp, the usual worries and the usual quarrels that stem from this boring existence that has made most of us worse than children again. Usual life, usual meals, usual boring idle talk, just like in a small town [...] Little by little (and this is starting to be serious) we are losing our head and beginning no longer to have the strength to talk logically because otherwise at a certain point you’ll realise that you have gone off on another line of reasoning that has nothing to do with the one you began [...] We must give each other courage and try to keep each other on track, in the hope that soon this existence will draw to an end so that we can revert to our true occupations with our families. [\[24\]](#)

By mid-1942 the boredom and tensions in the camp had found expression in violence. Bortolotti received news that five Calabrians and two Sicilians in Camp 8 had attacked each other with knives and that one of the Sicilians was apparently near death. An Australian officer who had tried to separate them had reportedly been stabbed in the shoulder. In another incident in March 1943 Private Antonio Grammatico was knifed in the face, and two weeks later a POW from Lecce was clubbed by ten or so Calabrians to the point that he had to be sent to the infirmary. The biggest brawl, however, occurred the following month when the leader of the Calabrian gang, Don Alfonso Valonà, who had just been released from prison following the March clubbing of the POW from Lecce, was the initiator of a battle that turned the camp square into what Bortolotti called “a horrible battle field” where there was “a flurry of clubs and the flashing of knives”. [\[25\]](#) Valonà was clubbed on the head and face, his friend Miggiano had a slashed cheek and a dozen others were slashed or clubbed. The Australian guards, who intervened at the last moment, escorted the Calabrians to prison. Bortolotti admitted not having been present until the last moment when the battle was at its most furious and at a point when it would have been too dangerous to try to stop the fighting. No doubt shaken by the incident, he concluded: “This has been a very painful scene, perhaps the worst of my imprisonment, including my days in Tobruk”. [\[26\]](#)

One other way in which the boredom and frustration had their outlet in action was in the attempts to escape from the camp. In August 1942 two POWs broke out but were seized two hours later in civilian dress. At the end of the same month the Australians discovered a number of tunnels in various camps, one of which, under Camp 8, extended 150 metres past the wire fence. Almost simultaneously, two POWs escaped from Yanco and were found extremely hungry two days later. Bortolotti, when recording these events, added the note that, as a result of the attempted escapes, surveillance was increased to the point that the Australians became almost unbearable. [\[27\]](#) Yet, in October another POW escaped from Camp 8 and was tracked down the day after, “lucky not to have been killed by an Australian sergeant”, according to

Bortolotti. The most well known of the escapees was Lieutenant Edgardo Simoni, who escaped twice, the second time in November 1943. His first break-out was from Murchison POW camp in June 1942, following which he managed to remain at large for nearly eleven months, thanks in part to the assistance given him by the pro-fascist Jesuit priest Fr Ugo Modotti. [28] Simoni was sentenced to six months' imprisonment in the Hay detention barracks, from which he escaped in November leaving behind a note "Sorry for the trouble, have a pot of beer to my health. Goodbye for the present". [29] Bortolotti was sufficiently impressed by Simoni's second daring escape that he included in the diary the day's newspaper cutting with photograph of Simoni, alongside which he added: "Let's keep our fingers crossed. I hope that he can spend another eleven months (outside) just like the first time". [30] Simoni, however, was captured two months later in Melbourne and sentenced to 28 days' imprisonment in Myrtleford camp. [31]

By 1943 the monotony and hopelessness of camp life led Bortolotti to decide that his diary entries would only record "just the happenings I consider the most important, if I can call them that". [32] Even so, in his diary he usually managed to record only events of little consequence, such as receiving a letter, going or not going out to work, planes flying overhead, the distribution of cigarettes. Clearly, the portrayal in the diary of this desperate and empty existence suffered by him and by the other POWs at Hay by no means matches the view of POW life held by Alan Fitzgerald who in his *The Italian Farming Soldiers* summed up the POW experience as "not a bad thing" (Fitzgerald 1981: 170). [33] One wonders what further suffering, breakdowns and tragedies would have occurred in the POW camps if the Italian prisoners had not had, towards the end of 1943, the opportunity to be placed on farms in rural Australia, even with all the shortcomings that accompanied this Australian government initiative. As a non-commissioned officer Bortolotti had the choice of accepting or refusing the offer to be sent to a farm. But he had no hesitation in putting his name down in September 1943 and, when in early February 1944 the day finally came for him to leave Hay, he wrote excitedly "I am so happy it's as though I am being sent home!", [34] and on arrival at Clare, South Australia, his farming destination, he enthusiastically noted: "There is a sense of freedom in the air". [35]

Of the thirteen Italians who, including Bortolotti, were transported to Clare together in readiness to be assigned to a farm in the area, he was the first one to be chosen by an employer.

An Australian as tall as me arrives in a truck. No doubt an employer who had put in a request for a prisoner. It's strange, but we immediately seemed to like each other before we had even spoken [...] He asked me if I wanted to go with him and work on an orchard. Really emotional. To be chosen out of 13 was already something. [...] Through the Australian interpreter he again asked me if I wanted to volunteer to go with him. Wholehearted approval. [36]

The Army had supplied the farmers with specific regulations about how to treat the POWs. These included: provision of suitable lodging quarters and full board; three meals a day; restriction on allowing POWs to leave the property (except on Sundays when POWs could go freely up to a mile from the property between the hours of 10 am. and 4 pm. if wearing magenta-dyed clothing); ban on going into villages or towns, shops or houses other than the employer's house; ban on congregating with other POWs or fraternising with members of the public. In

addition, POWs were not permitted to prepare food for other persons, and the daily hours of POW work were not to exceed those of civilians employed on a similar type of work. [\[37\]](#)

Bortolotti quickly found that his new employer, Mr Leslie Jarman, his wife Edna, and children Robert, Doreen and Donald, were very welcoming, and did not seem to heed any of the instructions stated in the government's rural employment scheme. The first evening he was put in the bedroom with [Robert, their son](#), and invited to the evening meal. He realised then, at the dinner table, what an enormous impact his three-year imprisonment had had on him and on his ability to socialise with civilians:

First evening meal. Feeling very self-conscious. Since I'm sure I'm shaking like a leaf, I point out that I am not hungry. Don't laugh, but for a man who has been locked up in a prison camp for so long, it is extremely hard – when with a family, with a lady guest, and the lady of the house – to adopt a pleasant manner and other ways I had forgotten. Graces in the prison camp are serious discourtesies for a refined family. I accept a cup of tea and then feeling very awkward and foolish I return to my room. [\[38\]](#)

Even after three days of work grubbing trees and pulling up fences, all of which he enjoyed, “meal time is the one thing that I am frightened of”, he wrote. [\[39\]](#) Within a week he was trusted to be in the house alone in the evening, and the following day he went fishing with Mr Jarman. More surprisingly, within two weeks his employer drove him to meet a local Italian civilian, Giovanni Gervasi, also from Friuli (Nimis), who was a brick manufacturer in Clare. A week later he spent the whole Sunday at Gervasi's and noted in his diary: “I am beside myself. It just may be possible. We eat Friulan-style food”. [\[40\]](#) After this, he dropped in every Sunday. Within a couple of months he was fraternising with two other POWs in the Clare district, Giulio Ivaldi and Angelo Bastianelli, and eating agnolotti “at Giulio's place”. At Gervasi's house he even met a second cousin, Fausto Furlani, who had settled in South Australia in 1939. On Christmas eve 1944 he spent the night at Gervasi's and remained there Christmas day (“Wonderful day for a prisoner”), [\[41\]](#) and stayed as many as three nights the following Christmas. By now he felt he was one of the Jarman family and did not mind being called “Luigi Jarman”. But he did occasionally quarrel with his employer, whom he considered rather tight with his money and demanding when he at times required his POW to work long hours for the official 15 pence per day POW pay. By now Bortolotti, who frequently went fishing and rabbiting with the Jarman family and was in constant close contact with Gervasi, felt very much at home in Australia and in Clare. He began to entertain the thought that this would be a good place in which to settle after the war.

In February 1946 the Army informed him that he would be sent to Loveday camp in preparation for his repatriation to Italy. Saying farewell to his farming family the following month “was quite dramatic. Like me, everyone was crying”. [\[42\]](#) He was destined to stay as much as nine months at Loveday before finally embarking on a ship. As in all the other prisoner of war camps “in this camp too life is unbearable”, [\[43\]](#) an opinion shared by many other POWs at Loveday, according to Loveday Intelligence Officers, who in June 1946 noted the severity of what they superficially called “internment weariness”. [\[44\]](#) For Bortolotti it was a time for reflection on his two years spent in Clare: his initial timidity, overcome after a few days, thanks to the kindness and spontaneity shown him by the Jarman family; the interest shown him by



Mr Jarman, who before this “had had a very bad opinion of Italians, which according to government policy or information received suggested that we were some kind of skilled Arabs”; [\[45\]](#) the quarrels with Jarman, who was at times excessively demanding and meticulous; the subsequent bonding of reciprocal friendship and trust.

He was concerned about his future: “What will I do? Where will I go? What will become of me? When will I have some peace of mind?”. [\[46\]](#) At Loveday he received frequent letters from the Jarman and the Gervasi family, all of whom “promise me faithfully that they will do everything to fulfil my wish and as soon as possible make an application to enable me to return to Australia”. [\[47\]](#) The day in November 1946 when he finally boarded the Strathmore at Port Adelaide did not provide the exhilaration that he had expected. His time in Australia had taken its toll:

After six years of waiting the departure doesn't turn out to be what I thought it would. We go on being what we were. It seems extremely hard to shake off the suffering of imprisonment. In short, it doesn't seem at all real to us. Everyone is, or seems to be, worried about the future. [\[48\]](#)

When the Strathmore reached Suez on its way to Italy, his painful time as a prisoner of war in Africa came flooding back: “We see in the distance the camp where we suffered so much and the pier where we embarked on rafts that took us to the Queen Mary. Awful memories”. [\[49\]](#)

The diary ends as the ship taking him back reached the Mediterranean. In his last entry, dated 3 December 1946, he highlighted once more the suffering that the Australians and imprisonment had inflicted upon him and his fellow POWs:

The Australians are those who more than anyone else made us suffer the worst days of imprisonment, first materially and then morally. Even if in the period, previously described by me, I stated that I had spent some happy times, it is because I can't help being fair-minded and considering the good with the bad. [\[50\]](#)

Bortolotti did in fact return to Australia as a post-war migrant, sponsored out by Leslie Jarman. He was so keen to emigrate that he returned to Australia as quickly as possible, by aeroplane in August 1948, a little over 18 months after he had left, and settled in Clare, working first as a brickmaker with Giovanni Gervasi and later as a line assistant for the Electricity Trust of SA. [\[51\]](#)

How many other Italian POWs returned to Australia as migrants after having been repatriated? The Australian Department of Immigration reported that by March 1951 it had received “a number of applications”. [\[52\]](#) John Hall in his 1999 essay offers a “guesstimate” of around 20% (Hall 1999a: 61, note 78). It is possible, however, to provide a more precise calculation, at least for South Australia. Archival records include the full names of a total of 746 Italian POWs who worked on farms in South Australia during the war. [\[53\]](#) When these names are checked against National Archives Alien Registration Cards to determine how many of these 746 Italians returned after the war and initially came to South Australia, we find 70 returnees, or 9.4%. It is likely, therefore, if a similar proportion applies to other States, that the percentage of ex-POWs who returned to Australia as migrants was about 10%. Whether many of the 70 South Australian ex-POWs would have emigrated in any case remains a moot point. The regional origins of many of the 70 show that they

came from regions that were depressed economically, and had relatively strong community connections in SA (e.g. over one-third of the 70 were from Campania, the largest group present in South Australia).

A curious case involving two of the 70 ex-POWs who came back to SA is that of Cosmo Fardone and Giuseppe Masciantonio, both from Molise, who had been friends in the Hay POW camp. In 1963, they happened to run into each other in the Adelaide Central Market, not having seen or heard from one another during the previous seventeen years. They renewed their friendship, met their respective families who had also settled in Adelaide and a year later, in 1964, Masciantonio's son married Fardone's niece. [\[54\]](#)

In conclusion, the two years that Bortolotti spent on the farm in Clare were probably exceptional not so much because his employer, Mr Jarman, and his employer's family, treated him well, but because while in Clare he was especially fortunate to be in prolonged contact with an Italian civilian immigrant, Giovanni Gervasi, from his own region, who gave him constant support and with whom he developed a close friendship, undisturbed by Army officers at the Clare POW Control Centre or by other civilians. There were others in SA who had more difficult experiences on the farms, as the censored extracts from letters home show. Antonio Padovano wrote from Naracoorte:

My work is looking after the cows. Do not believe that we prisoners are free. [...] If up to now our gaolers are the ones who have put barbed wire around me to shut up my youth, at present I am chaining myself up with my own hands, because every blessed hour I have to take this cursed poisonous barbed wire in my hands to shut in the cows, and also me. [\[55\]](#)

Pietro Giacon in Lameroo: "These people demand so much of us Italians, and they would like to treat us as Indians – work without eating". [\[56\]](#) Filippo Chiaracane in Clare, 10 July 1945:

I am a prisoner and I work from morning till evening without earning anything. [...] The Italian blood is sweet enough and the Government thinks it can drink our blood forever. The war has been over for three months and nothing is being done about our repatriation. [\[57\]](#)

Timmacenzo Marchetti, from Mount Gambier, 23 June 1945:

Our repatriation is not spoken of, it is a little hard, patience, patience, but one loses it. I think they will sell us like slaves. If they might consider us humans and not galley slaves. We have also done our duty to the laws of the state, and it is time they took some interest in us after 5 years of exile, deprived of every liberty. [\[58\]](#)

Antonio Serracino from Mount Gambier, 9 February 1945:

I, as you know, have a bad leg and they do not concede this to me, because they wish to force me to work, but I cannot, and so I do not know how it will end up one fine day because I can no longer keep my head as before, therefore may God pardon me for what I will do. [\[59\]](#)

The mental and physical suffering that is evident in these and in other extracts from POW letters, and in much of what Bortolotti writes in his diary, especially while in the Hay camp, sits rather uncomfortably alongside the conclusion too-easily reached by Kay Saunders in her 1995 article where she considers that “the story of the Italian POWs in Australia is neither eventful nor horrific. There are no inspiring tales of self-sacrifice or heroism. [...] A detention camp or farm in the Antipodes was not a difficult way to spend the years of the war” (Saunders 1995: 28-9). It is true that during the war years “only 101” Italian POWs died in Australia compared to several thousand Australian POWs who lost their lives in Japanese camps (Fitzgerald 1981: 116; [Alcorso 1992: 31](#)). At the same time, one cannot easily dismiss the long-term effects of the so-called “fair treatment” (ibid.) that many Italian POWs received in Australia. As Cresciani so poignantly concludes in relation to these Italian POWs, “the psychological, mental and physical stress of long years of confinement, of isolation, of meaningless life, left an enduring mark on their character” (Cresciani 1989: 217). Of the protracted pain of these six long years Bortolotti’s diary gives a first-hand, detailed and deeply moving account.

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## NOTES

[1] National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA): A1308 712/1/34 "Italian Prisoners of War – Repatriation". See also NAA: A 373/1 6221 "Employment of Italian POWs", which contains advice for prospective employers.

[2] Conti notes that "finita la guerra, [i prigionieri italiani] furono trattenuti ancora per molto tempo dai paesi detentori, con la giustificazione delle difficoltà di trasporto, ma in realtà perché utili all'economia di quei paesi" (Conti 1986: 8).

[3] Fitzgerald (1981) is a general popular account that unfortunately does not provide footnote references; Cresciani (1989) is an excellent broad study, with most attention given to POWs in NSW; Watt & Brooks (1993) consider some POWs in Victoria; Bunbury (1995) concentrates on Western Australia; Saunders (1995) is a general study; John Hall (1997, 1998, 1999a, 1999b) uses both archival resources and oral histories to provide detailed and well-researched contributions to the study of Italian POWs in Northern NSW.

[4] NAA: D1915 SA19913/2 'Employment of POWs'.

[5] I am grateful to Peter Bortolotti of Clare, South Australia, for allowing me access to his father's diary and to some photographs. The diary, written in an elegant hand and in correct Italian, is a bound collection of exercise books (pages unnumbered), with dated entries and containing three detailed camp maps (Camp No. 9 Ismailia, Camp No. 2 Suez, and Camp No. 7 Hay, NSW), two newspaper cuttings (*Sydney Morning Herald* 3 Nov. 1942, "War prisoners build dairy", and 24 Nov. 1943 "Escape from P.O.W. Camp" [Edgardo Simoni]), and four photographs (one missing) of the Jarman property, Clare SA.

[6] "[...] giorno triste della cattura a quello tanto aspettato della liberazione" (Diary entry "Prefazione").

[7] Distretto Militare di Udine, Ufficio Documentazione e Matricola, il foglio matricolare "Luigi Bortolotti". Bortolotti was born in Maiano (Udine) in 1916 and died in Clare (South Australia) in 1980.

[8] Long (1952) notes that a total number of 27,000 Italian prisoners were counted in the prisoner cage at the end of the two days.

[9] “Cosa ho potuto fare io per la mia cara Patria? Maledico il giorno che non ho avuto altri servizi presso un reparto, quale comandante di squadra, ove avrei potuto, anche senza esito, sacrificarmi, anche se in quello assegnatomi, abbia fatto rimanere sempre soddisfatti i miei superiori adempiendo il mio dovere di soldato” (Diary, 21 January 1941).

[10] “Non occorre descrivere il nostro stato d’animo! ... Quei due nemici agivano come avrebbe agito un pastore con le sue pecore” (Diary, 21 January 1941).

[11] “Alle 14,30, soldati australiani, che mi parvero in stato di ubriachezza, penetrarono lanciando bombe a mano nel locale ove mi trovavo [...] ed intimarono la resa a me ed agli ufficiali del mio comando, facendoci uscire all’aperto ove mi tolsero la pistola, il binocolo, il portafoglio, l’orologio da polso, una penna stilografica d’oro” (Report by Generale di Divisione Umberto Barberis to Generale Pietro Gazzera, Alto Commissario per i prigionieri di guerra, Rome, 29 Nov. 1944, D.S. 3039, Ufficio Storico, Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito, Rome). Conti, who also refers to this same report submitted by Barberis, considers the theft of these personal belongings an “atto certamente condannabile” (Conti 1986: 12). Historian Gavin Long describes the capture of Barberis (wrongly called Berberis by Long) and his staff by the company of Captain C.J.A. Coombes (Long 1952: 227). Lieutenant F.I. Phelan, who was instrumental in capturing Barberis’ artillery headquarters situated in a concrete dugout, is described by Long as “the impetuous leader of the carrier platoon” (ibid). Phelan also captured General Della Mura, who was in charge of the 61st Italian Division (Long 1952: 227 & 235).

[12] “Non si aveva dormito, demoralizzato per lo smacco subito, per la mancanza di viveri e acqua, non ne potevo più, tiravo avanti come fossi sorretto da una forza sovrumana [...] avevo la certezza che durante il giorno si doveva chiudere la mia esistenza” (Diary, 22 January 1941).

[13] “Sembravamo tanti pazzi, sporchi di sabbia, tutti sudati, barba lunga. La massa incominciava a far paura [...] Ancora nessuna partenza. [...] Giravano in questa mischia numerose macchine da presa cinematografiche che non si saziavano mai di quell’orrido spettacolo. Urla da ogni parte. Chi cerca un fratello, chi il cugino, chi il paesano. Un prete che grida e invoca l’aiuto dell’Altissimo e assicura che ci daranno acqua e viveri, corre ad ogni richiamo e ha parole di conforto per tutti.

Non facemmo a tempo alla distribuzione viveri, tanta era la confusione. Usciremo illesi?

Molti spari per contenere la massa, uccisero un soldato che tentava di uscire dal reticolato. Voleva forse andare in cerca di cibo” (Diary, 25 January 1941).

[14] “Niente distribuzione, manca l’organizzazione. Ispezioni clandestine da parte di soldati australiani, che vanno levando orologi, soldi e perfino fotografie di congiunti, anelli, fedi, e qualunque oggetto prezioso. I più bravi danno in cambio ad orologi e anelli mezza borraccia d’acqua. Ho visto perfino dare 3000 lire per 1 borraccia d’acqua” (Diary, 26 Jan. 1941).

[15] “... ci consigliavano di nascondere agli australiani qualunque cosa di valore o a noi cara ... Perché?” (Diary, 15 February 1941).

[16] “Ufficiali australiani, di una bontà squisita, cercavano di accontentare tutti” (Diary, 7 May 1941). Italian POW Arnaldo Gatti also noted in his diary that on board the *Queen Mary* four months later that he was “struck with the courtesy shown to us by Australian officers” (Fitzgerald 1981: 9).

[17] “Ci distribuiscono un gavettino e un pastrano rosso. Sembriamo tutti cardinali” (Diary, 26 May, 1941).

[18] “[I giornali] riportano brillanti vittorie navali del Giappone nel primo giorno di guerra” (Diary, 10 December 1941).

[19] “Sempre completa fiducia nella nostra vittoria. Nulla vale per abbattemi” (Diary, 16 December 1941).

[20] Diary, 15 November 1942; 16 November 1942; “[...] le notizie dai giornali non sono soddisfacenti per noi” (25-27 November 1942).

[21] “In Italia, come dai giornali si ha notizia che il Governo, da Mussolini è stato assunto da Badoglio” (Diary, 29 July 1943).

[22] “Che sarà di noi dopo tante sofferenze?” (Diary, 9 September 1943).

[23] “Un po’ troppo spesso da qualche tempo si vede proprio che nessuno ha tanto buon senso più” (Diary, 4 January 1943).

[24] “Continuare le solite passeggiate per il campo, le solite preoccupazioni e le solite liti derivate da questa vita noiosa che ha reso maggior parte di noi, nuovamente, più che bambini. Solita vita, soliti ranci, solite noiose chiacchiere come in un piccolo paese [...] Si sta un po’ alla volta (e questo incomincia a diventar grave) perdendo la bussola e a non aver più la forza di fare un ragionamento perché altrimenti a un certo punto ti accorgerai di essere uscito con un altro che non ha niente a che fare con quello iniziato [...] Diamoci coraggio e cerchiamo di tenerci un po’ in carreggiata, con la speranza che presto abbia a terminare questa vita per ritornare alle proprie occupazioni presso le proprie famiglie” (Diary, 26-31 December 1942).

[25] “La piazza principale era un orribile teatro di battaglia. Agitazione di bastoni e scintillio di coltelli” (Diary, 28 April 1943).

[26] “Questa è stata una scena molto dolorosa, forse la peggiore della prigionia, compresi i giorni di Tobruk” (Diary, 28 April 1943). A POW dentist, Edmondo Petrella, who was in Hay, told Flavio Giovanni Conti that at the Hay camp there used to be clashes “di tipo mafioso” between Sicilians and Calabrians (Conti 1986: 352). In his diary entry of 5 September 1944 Bortolotti noted that the newspapers reported that at the Hay camp Private Passofiume had murdered Francavilla and Mancuso, “who were the group that terrorised the camp” (“già della squadra che terrorizzava il campo”).

[27] “Per le scoperte di gallerie in vari campi di concentramento, per le spese fughe

di internati o prigionieri, gli australiani hanno aumentato la sorveglianza da diventare quasi insopportabili” (Diary, 2 September 1942).

[28] NAA: A 11626/1 POW 1 and A 7919/1 104029 “Simoni Edgardo”.

[29] NAA: A 7919/1 104029 “Simoni Edgardo”.

[30] “Iddio ce la mandi buona con tutti gli auguri di potersene fare altri undici mesi come la prima volta” (Diary, 24-25 Novembre 1943).

[31] For more information on Simoni and his escapes see Fitzgerald 1981.

[32] “[...] qualche evento, dei più importanti se così posso chiamarli” (Diary, 1 January 1943).

[33] See also Cresciani’s emphasis on the “more dramatic, complex and disturbing reality of POW life” (Cresciani 1989: 209).

[34] “Ma che devo andare a casa che sono così contento!” (Diary, 9 February 1944).

[35] “Si sente un po’ d’aria di libertà” (Diary, 12 February 1944).

[36] “Arriva con un furgone un australiano alto come me. Certo un padrone che aveva chiesto un prigioniero. È strano, ma subito entrammo in simpatia, prima ancora di averci parlato [...] Mi chiese se volevo andare con lui, si trattava di un frutteto. Emozione. Scelto fra 13 è già qualche cosa. [...] Nuovamente con l’interprete australiano mi ha chiesto se volevo andare con lui volontario. Un bell’assenso” (Diary, 12 February 1944).

[37] NAA: A 373/1 6221

[38] “Prima cena: molto impacciato, accuso di non aver fame perché sono sicuro di tremare come una foglia. Non ridete, ad un uomo rinchiuso in un reticolato per tanto tempo è assai difficile poter assumere un contegno buono al contatto di una famiglia con un’invitata, una signora padrona di casa e altre cose che in me erano dimenticate. Delicatezze del campo sono sgarbatezze grosse per una famiglia distinta. Accetto una tazza di tè e me ne torno goffo alla mia cameretta” (Diary, 12 February 1944).

[39] “Col mangiare, unico mio timore” (Diary, 16 February 1944).

[40] “Non credo a me stesso. Possibile solo solo. Si mangia alla friulana” (Diary, 28 February 1944).

[41] “Il S. Natale l’ho trascorso coi Gervasi. Il Boss ha permesso di star fuori anche la notte così ho potuto assistere alla S. Messa di mezzanotte, poi ho dormito dai Gervasi. Bellissima giornata per un prigioniero” (Diary, Christmas 1944).

[42] “Il distacco dai padroni è stato alquanto tragico. Tutti come me piangevano” (Diary, 5 March 1946).

[43] “Come in tutti i campi di concentramento anche in questo campo la vita è insopportabile” (Diary, 1 November 1946).

[44] “Internment weariness among PW [in Loveday] is apparently spreading and becoming more severe. This is evidenced not only in statements by PW and the many official enquiries of the possibility of repatriation by Compound leaders, but by the increasing number of offences by PW requiring disciplinary action in recent weeks. Five PW are at present undergoing detention” (NAA: A 373 11718 “Italian prisoners of war held at Loveday Camp South Australia – Report”, 28 June 1946).

[45] “[...] degli italiani aveva una pessima opinione che secondo la politica o informazioni giungevano qua che noi eravamo una specie di arabi specializzati” (Diary, 1 November 1946).

[46] “Cosa farò? Dove andrò? Che sarà di me? Quando sarò un po’ tranquillo?” (Diary, 1 November 1946).

[47] “[...] mi giurano di fare di tutto per aderire alla mia idea, per fare pratiche non appena sarà possibile, per farmi tornare in Australia” (Diary, 1 November 1946).

[48] “Dopo sei anni di attesa la partenza non è la manifestazione che si credeva. Continuiamo ad essere quel che eravamo. Sembra sia molto duro levarsi d’addosso la sofferenza della prigionia. In poche parole non ci sembra vero. Tutti sono, o sembrano, preoccupati per l’avvenire” (Diary, 7 November 1946).

[49] “Vediamo da lontano il campo dove tanto abbiamo sofferto e il molo dove c’imbarcarono sui zatteroni che ci portarono sul Queen Mary. Brutti ricordi” (Diary, 2 December 1946).

[50] “Gli australiani così saranno quelli che maggiormente ci hanno fatto soffrire, prima materialmente e poi moralmente, le più brutte giornate della prigionia. Anche se nel periodo, da me descritto antecedentemente, ho dichiarato di averne passati di felici periodi, tanto non posso farne a meno di essere giusto e considerare secondo il buono e il cattivo” (Diary, 3 December 1946).

[51] For Luigi Bortolotti see NAA: A367/1 C 87312 and A439/1 1952/11/7972. He was naturalised in Clare in March 1955. For Giovanni Gervasi see NAA: D400 SA 1954/651 and AP 5/1 1946/5618.

[52] NAA: A 432 1951/1292 “Entry into Australia of former Prisoners of War”.

[53] NAA: D1918 S1 “POW Labour Nominal Rolls”; D1918 S2 “POW Labour Nominal Roll”; D1918/0 S3 “POW Labour S3 Nominal Roll”; AP 613/1 130/1/25 “POW rural labour”; D1918 S4 “POW Labour Nominal Roll”; D1918 S5 “POW Labour Nominal Roll”; D1920 31 “POW Correspondence”.

[54] I am grateful to Amy Morris for this information.

[55] NAA: D1920 28 “POW – Censorship, mail extracts”.

[56] NAA: D1920 28 “POW – Censorship, mail extracts”.

[57] NAA: D1920 30 “POW Mail Extracts”.



[58] NAA: D1920 30 "POW Mail Extracts".

[59] NAA: D1920 29 "Censorship, Mail Extracts".

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# PREFAZIONE

"Alla mamma, ai familiari, ai pochi che leggeranno questi miei appunti..."

Non sono un Pellico, né un Giusti, ma questi appunti da me scritti, vi riveleranno tutto il mio stato d'animo, e le vicissitudini di prigioniero.

In questi, ho seguito tutto quello che, in questa parentesi di vita, ho impiastrato, sperato, sofferto, ed anche gioito ed appreso.

Inoltre, tutti i nomi più cari, vi sono racchiusi come oggetti preziosi e il tuo, Mamma, è in primo piano. Esso è stato, quello che mi ha dato la forza di riportare tutte le vicende del passato.

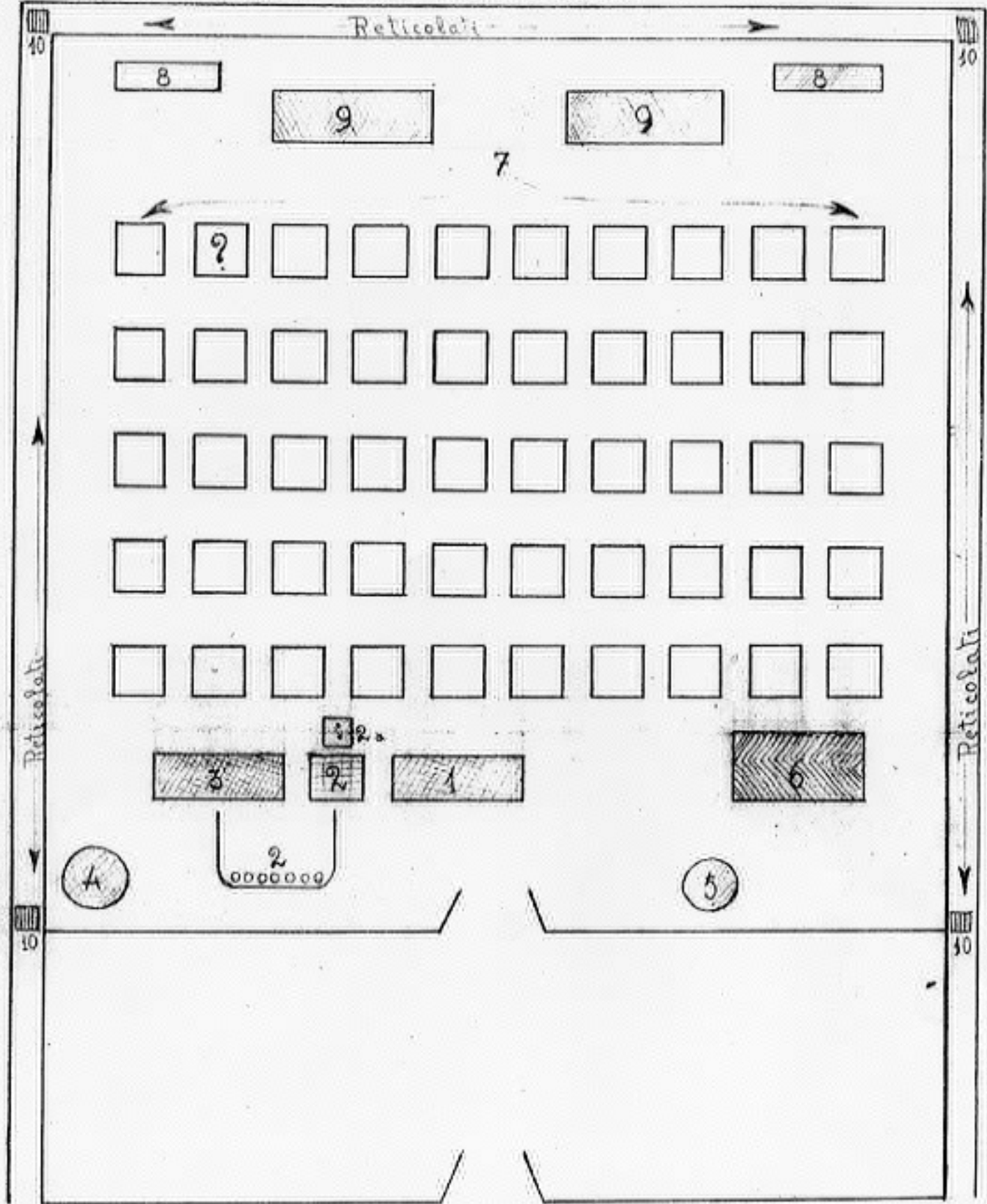
Non ho certamente dimenticato quello del mio papà, fratelli, sorelle e famigliari. Non ho escluso le vecchie conoscenze ed amicizie d'un tempo.

Bortolotti diary, page 1. Courtesy Peter Bortolotti.



Luigi Bortolotti

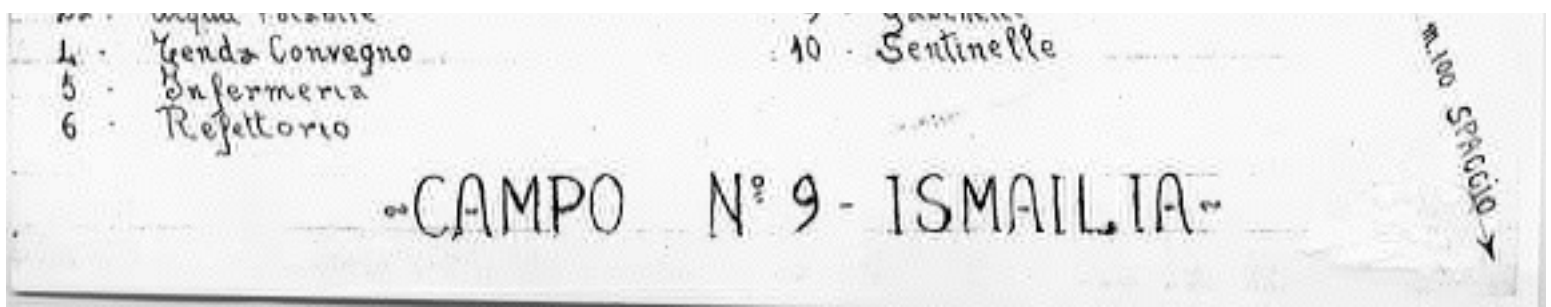
A circa Km. 1,5 Campo Internati Italiani



- 1 - Ufficio
- 2 - Cucina
- 2a - Acqua Potabile
- 4 - Tenda Convegno

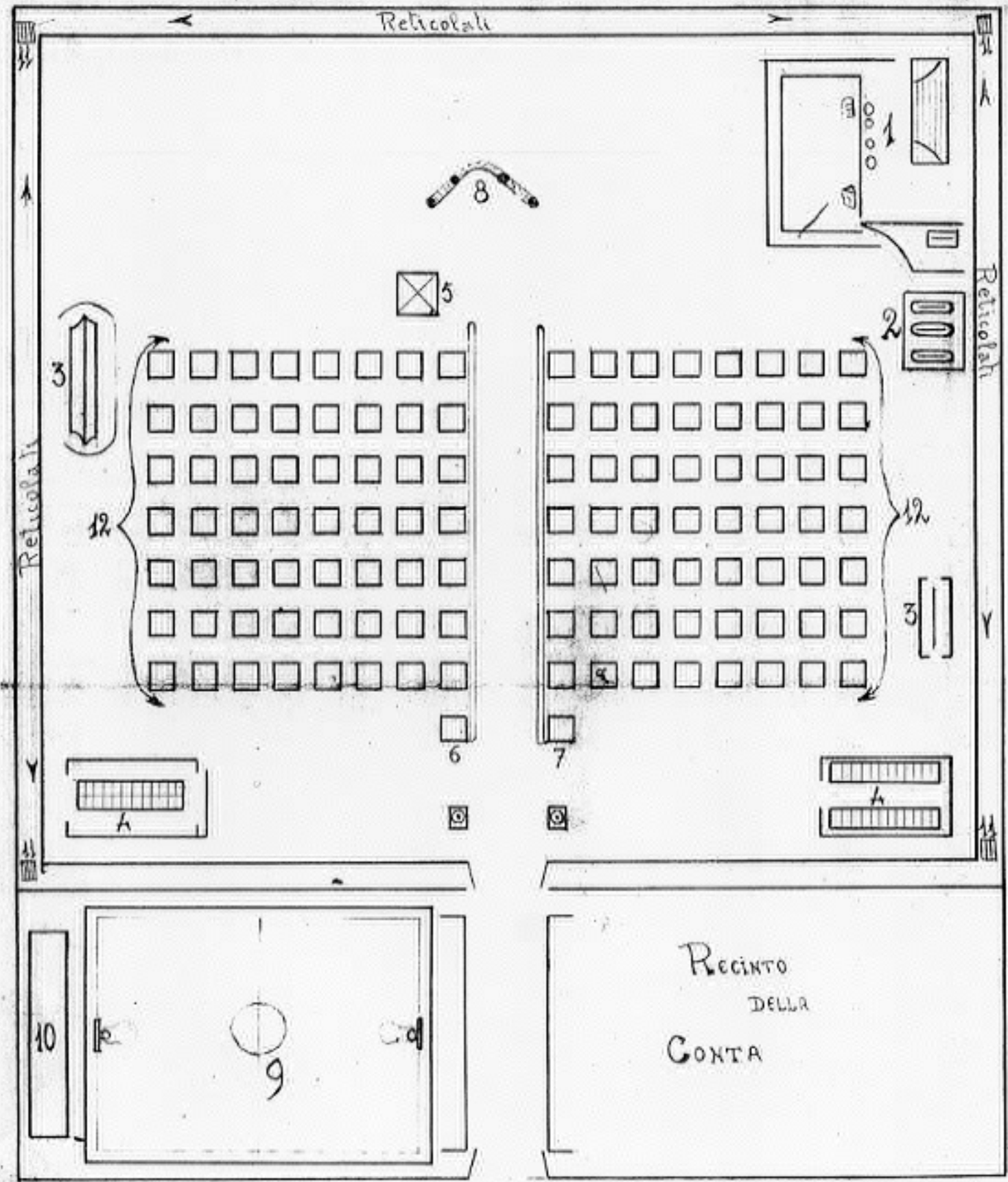
- 7 - Tende
- 8 - Orinatori
- 9 - Gabinetti
- 10 - Sentinelle

A circa Km. 100



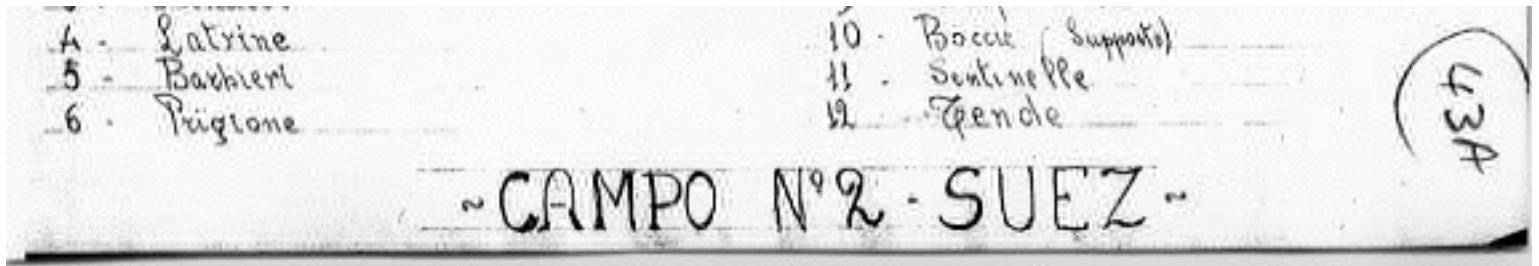
Plan of POW camp, Ismailia (Bortolotti diary). Courtesy Peter Bortolotti

Reticolati

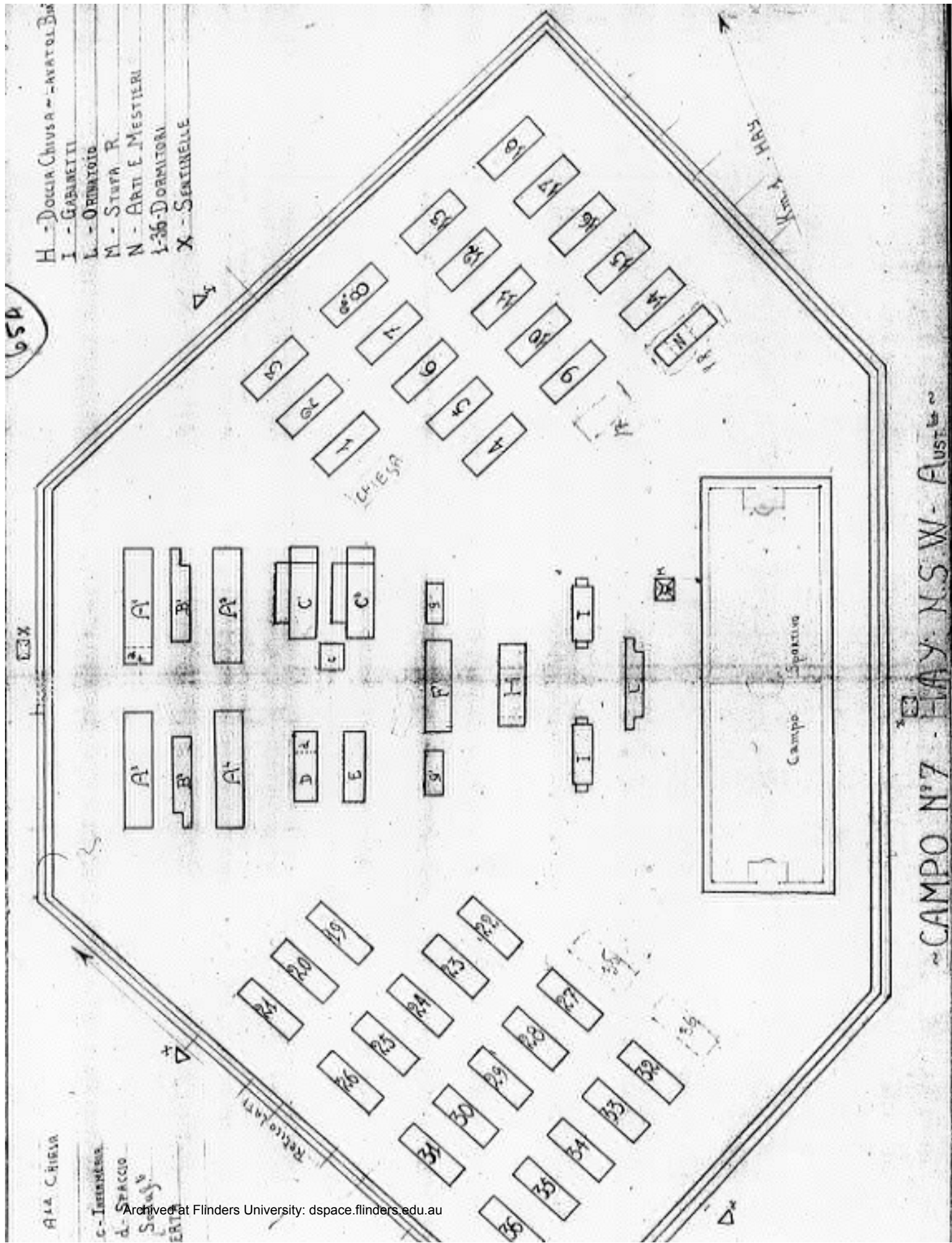


- 1 - Cucina
- 2 - Lavatoi (Acque Riscald.)
- 3 - Orinatoi
- 4 - Latrine

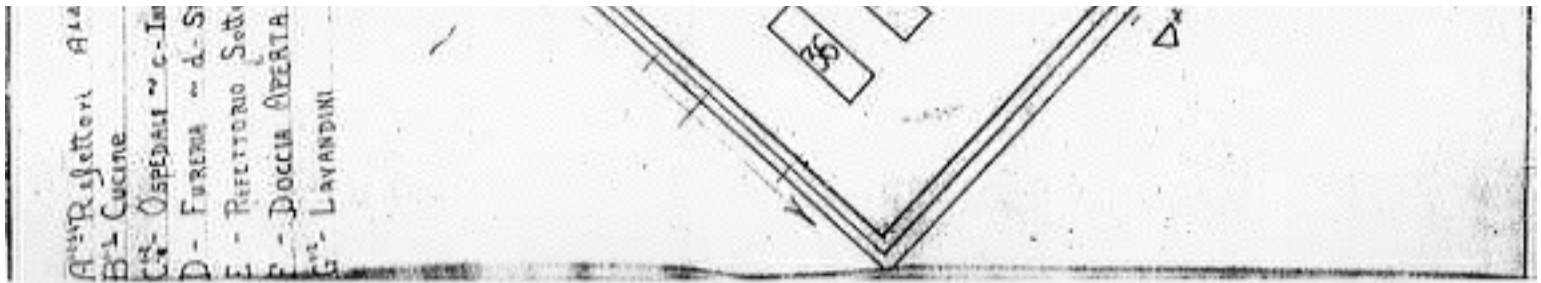
- 7 - Infermeria
- 8 - Monumento
- 9 - Campo di P.C.
- 10 - Bocce (Supporti)



Plan of POW camp, Suez (Bortolotti diary). Courtesy Peter Bortolotti







Plan of POW camp, Hay NSW(Bortolotti diary). Courtesy Peter Bortolotti



Group of Italian prisoners of war, POW camp, Hay NSW, 1944.  
(bottom left: Luigi Bortolotti). Courtesy of Peter Bortolotti.