

A Visit to Campo PG 53

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This prisoner of war camp, set up to accommodate Allied prisoners captured in North Africa in 1941-2, is situated in the valley of the River Chienti at Sforzacosta in what Wikipedia describes as a 'hamlet of the Italian municipality of Macerata, in the Marche region'. Given the amount of confusion reigning in official documents – British, the International Red Cross and Italian – in which it is referred to as Urbisaglia, Macerata, Sforzacosta, or a combination of two of the three, what you elect to call it comes down to personal choice. Even the ex-prisoners couldn't agree among themselves, and a lively debate on the topic has been continuing for some considerable time on the online discussion forum WW2 Talk. The compilers of the 'The Allies in Italy' website have plumped for Sforzacosta, but I have seen this name in only two out of the eighty two Liberation Reports I have read of men sent from PG 53 to PG 112 Turin in the late spring and early summer of 1943. One of them referred to it as Sforzacosta Macerata and thirteen, not trusting themselves to write the name correctly, only referred to it by number. My choice coincides with theirs, for the at least everyone agrees on that.



Left to right: [Giovanni](#), [Janet](#), [Charlotte](#), [Linda](#), [Ian](#), [Hazel](#), [Jane](#), [Dennis](#), [Jenny](#)

However, it needs to be said that there was a second prisoner of war camp in the locality, registered as PG 56 by the Italian War Ministry, and named Sforzacosta. A tented camp, flooded out following a cloudburst in September 1942 due to its proximity to the River Chienti, it was abandoned never to be re-opened. The tents were hastily folded up for the winter and it sank into oblivion, but not before its name had been transferred by some authorities, though not by the Italians, to its overcrowded and infamous neighbour.

These niceties didn't trouble the two families who accompanied me and my husband Enzo Gilini to the 'hamlet of Sforzacosta' on 17 September 2025. This was the second visit for the two of us, as in September 2023, following the 80th anniversary event at PG 59 Servigliano, we had travelled to the camp to meet former local councillor Giovanni Cartechini, whom I had contacted through Facebook.

After having met Giovanni at the imposing camp gateway, perhaps the most photographed of all entrances to Italian prisoner of war camps, we were taken on a guided tour of what remains of the camp externally, which is actually most of it, and what is accessible to the general public which is virtually none of it. The entrance, a testimony to fascist industrial architecture, dates back to the 1930s when the buildings housed a linen mill. A replica of this gateway can be seen at another former linen mill in Le Marche which was converted into a prisoner of war camp, that is, at PG 70 Monte Urano, near Fermo.

At the start of our earlier visit Enzo and I walked along the two sides of the perimeter which are flanked by the main roads that split the settlement of Sforzacosta in two and where the boundary wall of the camp is clearly visible, complete with several strands of barbed wire, one above the other. We were also taken to see the site of PG 56 Sforzacosta. Returning to PG 53, we admired the ornate plaster lintels of the former red-brick infirmary which, located astride the camp boundary, had a street entrance for civilians and an internal entrance for the prisoners. We entered the terrain through a side gate as trespassers. We didn't have permission to be there, Giovanni explained, for although the site had been passed to the Commune after the war it had subsequently been sold off, and the buildings of the linen mill, which had been hastily and badly converted into quarters for the prisoners, had been turned into workshops. This situation persists to the present day, though the three unaltered barracks furthest away from the main entrance have now fallen into disuse. Giovanni's greatest preoccupation is that the owners will soon decide to sell the entire site, and what is one of the best preserved prisoner of war camps in Italy could be razed to the ground by ill-informed, disinterested or unsympathetic purchasers.

This time Giovanni obtained permission for us to gain access. After a thought-provoking tour, very emotional indeed for the families of artillerymen Gunner Kenneth H. Bailey, 67th Medium Regiment and Sergeant Fred Wright, 169/57 LA A Regiment, we retraced the prisoners' steps along to road leading to the Urbisaglia-Sforzacosta railway station, from where they had covered the short distance to the camp on foot. The families consisted of Kenneth's daughter Jane Bradburn and six members of Fred's family. Fred's daughter Hazel was accompanied by her husband Dennis and her nephew Ian Ardis (Fred's grandson). With Ian were his wife Linda and their daughters Jenny and Charlotte (Fred's great granddaughters). On arriving at the former station building, recently restored and now headquarters of the Civil Defence, we were ushered into a conference room created out of the stationmaster's quarters, where we were to put on a presentation for the general public.



Left to right: Jenny, Janet, Giovanni



Left to right: Jane, Jenny, Janet

I opened the proceedings by explaining that the men held in this camp who were sent to Germany, Austria or Poland after the armistice of 8 September – a fate which awaited most of the internees – were not destined for the gas chambers, and unlike the Italian soldiers rounded up by their former allies and transported to camps such as Stalag XB Sandbostel, they were protected by the Geneva Convention. My experience over the years in talking to Italians of all walks of life is the commonly-held belief that any prisoner of war deported to Germany was unlikely to make it back home. Many teenage schoolchildren in Italy are taken to visit Auschwitz, but it would seem that they know little or nothing of other camps present in Axis-held territory, let alone of those in their own country. The only former prisoner of war camps in Italy that remain in the 'collective memory' are those subsequently used to intern Jews and political prisoners of both persuasions. Camp 53 held Jews, draft dodgers and anti-fascist activists until the arrival of the Allied forces on 30 June 1944 and it is remembered for this alone.

Jane and Ian described the circumstances in which Gunner Bailey and Sergeant Wright were captured and the events which later befell them. Whilst Gunner Bailey was sent north to Piedmont to work camp PG 112/2 on the farm estate at La Mandria, Venaria, the royal residence on the outskirts of Turin, after a period in Camp 53 Sergeant Wright was admitted to Macerata hospital

suffering from water on the lung, where he was subjected to an excruciating operation without anaesthetic. Ironically, this favoured his escape from the hospital as he was aided in this risky undertaking by his nurse, Maria Sandroni, and in this way he avoided being packed off to Germany.

Escaper Gunner Bailey crossed the Alps to reach France in November 1944 after having been given year-long assistance by the villagers of Varisella, to the west of Turin, whilst Sergeant Wright, who had been sheltered by the Moretti family at Santa Maria del Monte to the north of Macerata and also by the D'Ambrosi family at Cascinare, Sant'Elpidio a Mare, was one of the 127 ex-prisoners taken to safety by 'A' Force in what was known as Operation Darlington II, He left the beach at Porto San Giorgio for the allied lines at dawn on the 26th of May 1944.

Giovanni Cartechini was relieved to see the enthusiastic response of the public to our initiative, as he feared there would be no one to listen to us, given that to date little interest has been shown in the prisoner-of-war occupants of the camp. What visible information there is contains an error. In 2003 the Commune of Macerata placed a plaque on the boundary wall asserting that the camp was opened in 1940 whereas the Italian War Ministry indicates the opening date as being 1942. The plaque also omits to specify the nature of the detainees. The small conference centre was full, and people came forward to show us their Alexander Certificates and tell us how their families had helped the escapers. He and I hope that this will be the first of many future visits to PG 53. Only if an interested and informed public takes up its cause will the camp have a guaranteed future.

N.B. Jane Bradburn has been gathering information about her father's regiment for over twenty years and last November held a very successful event in the new Suffolk County Archive in Ipswich which is to be followed by another later this year.

See <https://www.suffolkarchives.co.uk/whats-on/>