

From metropolis to village

Our Notes and Queries section (page 95) records the interment of the remains of Italian soldiers and civilians who had died during World War 2 within the grounds of the Pietermaritzburg Italian Prisoner of War church in what is now the suburb of Epworth. In 1944 the prisoners published a booklet titled *In Attesa* (Waiting) which describes the life of the camp with all its activities, including the building and finally the consecration of the little church. One section headed “From metropolis to village”, written by Renato Resasco, records his experience of the train journey from the huge prison camp at Zonderwater near Pretoria to the Pietermaritzburg camp, where the church was already a landmark, and where his impression was very positive, even though it was another prisoner-of-war camp. The following translation captures something of the poetic quality of the original Italian.

When the train moves away leaving behind the trail of smoke at Zonderwater, one has the feeling of detaching oneself from a big city. A confusion of memories, recent and remote, gallop in one’s mind, and circulate incoherently. From the train window one’s eyes catch sight once more of the last row of the immense city of tents, with here and there barracks, separated by sportsfields, graced by the pointed spire of the little church and extending along the gentle slope of the hill.

The train gathers speed, everything diminishes and then disappears. That piece of land at Zonderwater, that knew tears and sorrow, gives place to a sterile countryside dotted here and there with small primitive huts, followed by flimsy houses, streets and gardens, which suggest the proximity of a large town. Pretoria! The active life we feel at the railway station gives us a heady sensation. A thousand sensations swirl in the mind, and a thousand other railway

stations add themselves to the memory, but it's only a minute, and here we are again, insignificant beings cast on the shiny parallel iron rails, heading towards the unknown, which by now, one must say, no longer causes fear.

The darkness of the night hides from us the view of this unknown land. At last, one more stop. The scents of flowers, of tea, of coffee, of smoke. Mist bathes and covers everything, but all the same, we can guess at, if not see, the life of Pietermaritzburg. A short stop here, and we leave.

A powerful and mysterious wind has dispersed the humid vapour of the earth, and so, like the opening of a curtain, a sweet, undulating and peaceful valley welcomes us, smiling and colourful in the sunshine. In the middle of this, on a hump of green velvet, a small encampment seems to breathe healthily, and at the centre (as in a dream) emerges a humble and modest church tower. It is our destination, and the train leaves us.

A small, short street separates us from the camp, which we find full of different coloured flowers, as though for a celebration. The pointed tops of the tents emerge almost shyly from the green, seem to smile a welcome to our tired limbs. Next to the church, which we never tire of admiring, and looking almost like a toy put down at whim, there emerges, small and gracious, the little building housing the post office. More in the centre are clean and spotless tennis and volleyball courts and an athletics track, whose boundaries are marked

with lines of blond sunflower heads, graciously inclined into a welcoming gesture. One breathes a tranquil and serene air, while the stomach is made happy seeing the word "Refectory", which looks beautiful in itself, on the façade of the large building used for this purpose. The people in this small square village attack us with questions: one is searching for a friend, another for a fellow-villager (the eternal villager!), for relatives – in a confusion of dialects and names. It is always like this, and it always will be so, but we like this, it's part of our programme, and serves to characterise the ambience and make it typically Italian.

And when we have finished all the necessary preliminaries, we can walk at ease along the pathways, fresh, cool, if not shady. It makes us believe we have arrived at a peaceful Zonderwater, transported in a twenty-hour rail journey – but not exactly like Zonderwater. There's something else that doesn't escape us, something which is there ... which has no name, but it is ... One could call it a restful atmosphere.

It is a sensation which, not exaggerating, can be compared to that which the city dweller experiences when he leaves the city and finally, tired and breathless, arrives at the little village where his eyes, his spirit and his body find, far away from the noises, from the crowds and from conventions, the quiet and tranquil nest of an ideal homecoming.