



In Enemy Hands: South Africa's POWs in World War II

Karen Horn

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'To all intents and purposes I am as sexless as a block of wood. To eat is the extreme fundamental of living.' - South African POW, 1942

Books on World War II abound, yet there are remarkably few publications on South Africa's role in this war, which had such an influence on how we live today. There is even less written about those who participated on the margins of the war, especially those who were physically removed from the battlefields through capture by enemy forces. South Africa's prisoners of war during World War II, their experiences and recollections, are largely forgotten. That is until now. Historian Karen Horn painstakingly tracked down a number of former POWs. Together with written memoirs and archival documents, their interviews reveal rich narratives of hardship, endurance, humour, longing and self-discovery. Instead of fighting, these men adapted to another war, one which was fought on the inside of many prison camps. It was a war against hunger and deprivation, at times against ever-encroaching despondency and low morale amongst their companions in captivity.

In their interviews, all the POWs expressed surprise at being asked to share their experiences of almost 70 years earlier. The author found it astonishing that almost all of them claimed not to be heroes of any kind. Perhaps this is not surprising when one considers that they returned home in 1945 to a country which soon afterwards tried its utmost to promote national amnesia with regard to its participation in the war. With great insight and empathy, Karen Horn shines a light on a neglected corner of South African history.

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