

GEO. FÜRST

AN ARTIST TO REMEMBER

Giovanni Bonello

Editor's Note : The following is an article published in the Sunday Times of Malta and provides most interesting background information to the Study Paper No. 51 on the artist George Fürst. With kind permission by the author.

On May 10, 1964, a minute obituary informed readers of *The Sunday Times of Malta* that Geo Fürst had died in Munich on the first day of that month. The news must not have left any forceful ripples behind. The results of the Independence Constitution referendum had just been announced, with both pro- and anti-independence supporters claiming victory. Debate on the fate of Malta peaked to white-hot levels, and everything else appeared less than secondary.

Too little is today known about Fürst, an artist whose photographs of Malta rank among the finest ever, and whose paintings of the island reach consistently high standards.¹ Discovering more about his life and work turned into a challenge I could hardly refuse. His affinity with Malta, his splendid photography and his competent painting surely deserved better than a steady slide into oblivion.

Known to his friends as “Geo”, the shortened form of George he preferred to use, his real name was nonetheless not George at all, but Johan. He probably opted for George, his father’s name, as a form of filial homage. His mother was Carolina, known as Lina, Randal.

Fürst saw the light in Nuremberg in 1888, apparently one of ten siblings. His lifelong connection however, always remained with Munich and Malta.

I have been unable to establish why and when he came to our island. Before World War I the German consulate in Valletta employed him as secretary to Baron Maximilian von Tucher, the German consul married to Victoria Maempel, daughter of the previous German consul, Karl Maempel. Von Tucher commissioned the architect Francesco Zammit to build the striking Villa Luginsland, in Boschetto Road,

Rabat. No evidence at all survives that, at this stage, Fürst showed any interest in photography or painting.

Prisoner of war in Malta

A turning point in the young secretary’s life must have been falling in love and marrying a Maltese lady, Helen “Lily” Debono in 1912, in St Dominic’s parish church of Porto Salvo.² Helen’s father, the very successful architect Gian Dominico Debono, built, amongst others, the Marsa parish church, and various apartment blocks in Valletta.³ The couple never had children, but their union seemed steady and fulfilling. She died on May 18th, 1938, only 51 years old. Fürst’s second wife, Rosl, survived him and remained in close contact with the Debono descendants.

The outbreak of the Great War in August 1914 found the Fürsts in Malta. They then lived at 15, South Street, Valletta.⁴ Together with most other Germans and Austrians caught by the war on the island, the British imperial authorities interned Fürst. On October 5, 1914, the Governor of Malta, Sir Leslie Rundle, received a signal in code from the secretary of state in London: “re German Consul...you should continue to detain Fürst as prisoner of war”.⁵ The records do not explain why the imperial authorities singled him out.

During the hostilities, the military confined Fürst to Verdala Barracks – reserved for military officers – with identification number 26. Life in Verdala camp for German prisoners of war has been described in some – highly critical – detail by Prince Franz Joseph Hohenzollern, one of the survivors of the legendary *SMS Emden*, whose crew were interned in that camp when the Australian cruiser *HMS Sydney* sank her on November 9, 1914, after she had wreaked incalculable havoc on Allied shipping and supplies.⁶

Fürst must have come to know the Emden officers, including her renowned captain, Karl von Muller; he must equally have become acquainted with the officers of another mythical German warship, the *Breslau*, also interned in Verdala camp. The *Breslau* sank on

January 20, 1918, after hitting a mine. The surviving officers were kept at Verdala, and the other ranks, in poorer conditions, in Fort St Salvatore and St Clement's camp.

Learns painting

Fürst would almost certainly have met and possibly befriended, the submarine captain Karl Donitz, later Grand Admiral and Hitler's successor at the end of World War II, and Rudolph Hess, Hitler's deputy, both prisoners of war at Verdala.

During his five years detention in the internment camp, Fürst had plenty of time on his hands; I do not know how he kept himself occupied, other than his determination to master Italian properly.

At least three prisoners of war were active in Verdala, engaged in "commercial" photography, which probably helped them to earn a living. Their names are recorded on their output: Schutz, Kofler and D. Heisinger. Not a single photograph dating to the Verdala period, signed or attributed to Geo. Fürst, has, so far, turned up, so one can safely assume that the photographic bug had not infected him yet.

As for Fürst's lessons in painting, we know a little more. I have come across a postcard, hand painted by him, sent on Christmas Day in 1915. The quality of this water colour, showing tents in St Clement's camp, was then well below that of an average amateur. On oral tradition, the family holds that Fürst started learning art at Verdala. In a letter written in 1922 to his mother-in-law Katarin Debono, he boasts: "In my art I have made wonderful progress, the finest gallery here (Munich) being my steady buyer of my paintings."

He then adds, endearingly, that as a result of his good sales: "I am pleased to be able now also to make Helen nice joys (Italian *gioie*, jewellery) and presents, which I formerly never could do. Of course Helen deserves it well, after all she has done for me."

Another insight into Fürst's art training comes from a letter dated April 23, 1939. He asks for the return from Malta of "a seascape by Zeno Diemos, my teacher and famous painter".

That Fürst started learning painting during his internment would not appear at all far-fetched. A number of artistically inclined German and Austrian prisoners of war spent time at Verdala. This results from the substantial crop

of art work they produced: postcards, stationery and souvenirs, printed or executed by hand.

Artist-prisoners

And, on the occasion of the 85th birthday of Franz Joseph, Emperor of Austria, on August 18, 1915, the prisoners of war in Verdala put up a large exhibition of paintings, sculptures, models and handicrafts in his honour – which confirms that many there indulged their artistic bent. I have a dozen photos recording that "seditious" exhibition to glorify the enemy – inside a British camp in times of war.

That artistic talent was not lacking at Verdala is confirmed by the light-hearted magazine – news, views and satire – printed and published in the camp by prisoners of war, the camp 'Nachrichten', lavishly illustrated and with competent line drawings, caricatures and cartoons.⁷ I have not had the opportunity to check whether Fürst contributed to its text or illustrations, or whether these broadsheets reproduced his portrait.

Writing to Charles Beck on April 27, 1919 (more than five months after the armistice with Germany), Fürst, still interned in Verdala, recalls that the Baron (von Tucher) still owed him £17.16s. Was the money available? "Yes, Mr Beck, 3 years without earnings, have put me in a position of financial embarrassment." Charles Beck was married to one of Victoria Maempel's sisters.

By 1922, but probably before, Fürst had been released and he returned with his wife to live in Munich, from where he kept a consistent correspondence with the Debonos. On March 25, writing from Theresien Str. 4/1, he laments the death of his father-in-law architect Gian Domenico. Three months later he moved to Addlent Str. 55/0.

His obsessive concern, in his letters, always remained the prospect of settling in Malta: "I care very much to return to the island... In case the lawyer gets for me the permission, we pack the same day and leave as soon as possible."

The Fürst couple did eventually manage to obtain the coveted permit to establish themselves here, though what they did for a living in the 1920's remains vague. The real flowering of his artistic talent only manifested itself in the 1930's.

Fürst the painter

Fürst the artist specialised in seascapes, mostly in oils, though some watercolours and gouaches are recorded too. In painting he mostly followed in the “romantic” trail, letting nature take centre stage.

His vast expanses of waves, uninterrupted by anything, and painted with meticulous, almost virtuoso precision, can be impressive indeed. He reproduced one on the last page of his book *The Mediterranean Fleet in Malta*, and I have seen several in Maltese homes; they occasionally turn up in international auctions.⁸

Often he broke the extents of flat or turbulent seas by including towering schooners, clippers or other mountains of sail. He strove for pictorial realism, but occasionally experimented with bolder compositions, including cropping part of the vessel depicted.

The “Maltese” paintings by Fürst that I have seen are few indeed (there are also some showing the coast of Calabria). In them he resorts to more impressionistic brushwork, proving that his concern for light outweighed that for volume. It is a pity, indeed, that he did not produce more in this vein.

Though Fürst derived all his known Malta pictures from his own photographs (a perfectly acceptable practice) his re-elaboration of the static lens image into flat build-ups of colour achieves, more often than not, quite masterly results. In the Thirties, the craze for Maltese art had not yet taken over. Fürst missed the commercial foresight to paint more of it and less of the dazzling sheen of waves. With *ghonnellas*, *dghajsas* and *karrozzini*, his paintings would today fetch four or five figure prices at auction

Geo Fürst’s Maltese relatives remember him as a happy, kind-hearted person often “broke” but in a happy and dignified manner. The pianist Cynthia Caruanna, closely related to Fürst’s first wife (her mother was half sister to Fürst’s wife), described him as “a wonderful personality ... with a jolly character”. Despite the financial pressure on him “he lived like a gentleman and was proud of us all”.⁹

From the staid secretary of an insular consulate, he exited to a bohemian train of mind. A (self?) portrait taken in 1920 shows him in the flamboyant attire better associated with Italian opera singers than with ledgers and carbon papers.

Fürst’s most enduring claim on memory was undoubtedly his photographic mastery. I do not believe any pre-war photographer ever captured Malta on film with his flair, impeccable eye for composition and such uncanny ability to coax out of each frame the inner essence of this Mediterranean splinter.

As a photographer, too, Fürst confirmed a traditionalist inclination, little interested, if at all, in the stunning experimental work current in the Twenties and Thirties. For a living he targeted the British armed forces and the emergent tourist market; these would have turned their back on him had he tried fiddling with anything too cerebral, narcissistic or anarchic.

This does not mean at all that in his photographs Fürst courted dullness. On the contrary; the technique is overwhelmingly excellent, the quality of his material and workmanship outstanding. He manages to conjure colour even when printed in black and white. Anyone who has been exposed to his work can tell a Fürst photograph from any distance.

I detect in Fürst an inverse snobbery. While one expects a photographer to underscore his sophisticated equipment, Fürst makes it a point to stress, repeatedly, that he only uses a “standard Agfa camera”. Others would have gloried in the state-of-the-art professional Leicas, Rolleiflex, the Zeiss products and the Exactas, showpieces at the cutting edge of German technology of the Thirties. He describes himself as “artist painter” rather than photographer.

The highest standards

In the early 1930’s Fürst entered the postcard business with a top quality product. He issued set after set of Maltese (11 have been counted), some in sepia, in green, some black and white and one in colour. The Malta Study Circle, based in Great Britain, in 2002 put together and published a more or less complete listing of all Fürst’s postcards – well over 200 – with a reduced illustration of each.¹⁰

Most sets are produced photographically (known as “real photos”) though it is unclear if he did the mass printing himself, or left it to large professional studios, perhaps abroad. The great sepia set has this imprint on the back “Guaranteed Real Photos and British Manufacture”. These cards all reproducing

Fürst's photographs, are invariably of a higher technical and artistic standard than anything then available on the market – including the excellent ones produced by my grandfather. Very few of them are found postally used; obviously, people bought them more to treasure as souvenirs than to dispose of them in the mail. Another reason could be that, given their superior quality, they must have cost more than the competition. Collectors of antique Malta cards give pride of place to Fürst specimens.

What struck Fürst he photographed differently, concerned to keep away from the easy pitfalls of abused cliché. Instead of deadening the interior of St John's with a full frontal symmetry, he shifted his camera to the right. Instead of a posed, often unappealing woman in faldetta, Fürst caught bevvies of them in motion.

Instead of the inevitable Republic Street corner of the Opera House, he recorded the building from St Catherine of Italy. Instead of a stolid Kingsgate, he has nuns almost in close up, billowing out of it. The litany could be endless.

Books by Fürst

After the end of World War II, Weichman-Verlag, a Munich house, published colour postcards which included Fürst's marine paintings. He also marketed "souvenirs of Malta" in the shape of bookmarks or narrow rectangular cards, illustrated with a small photograph, and dark paper albums with a number of colour cards pasted on them.

I was quite pleased to learn that recently a local collector has acquired a substantial hoard of unpublished Fürst photographs. This collection confirms the superb standards the artist imposed on himself.

In parallel with his painting and postcard business, Fürst tried his hand – quite successfully- at book publishing. In 1932 he printed in Germany *Beautiful Malta*, with text in English, Italian and German written by himself and illustrated with his photographs. He dedicated it "to every Maltese who loves his little island" and to the British community. The Maltese, he says, "are proud to be citizens of the greatest empire the world has ever seen". Many of the illustrations repeat those marketed separately as postcards.

Later, Fürst published a second work, *Malta the Island of the Knights*, printed separately in

English, Italian and German. He used the same text as that of the previous book, but illustrated it with mostly new photographs. The Society of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce awarded the first book a silver medal and diploma in 1932.

Fifteen thousand copies were printed of the 1934 edition – a huge run by any standard. This results from an autograph on the cover of the first copy delivered to Fürst by the printers inside the Munich railway station when he was on the point of boarding a train. He dedicated this "first copy of 15,000" to his "dear wife Helen, From Geo, 26 Sept. 1934" one edition boasts "Published 20,000 copies"

His third book *The Mediterranean Fleet in Malta* is altogether much scarcer. The volume gives no date or printers' indication, but it would be safe to place it in the middle of the 1930's and to assume that German press did the (excellent) job.

Graphically it keeps the highest Fürst standards; I am uncomfortable with the facetious text and captions by "Hugh Laking", whoever that was. Sapienza's Library, in today's Republic Street, Valletta, took good care of the marketing of Fürst's books and cards, though they were postcard publishers themselves.

Fürst and the British Navy

Fürst dedicated this pictorial tour-de-force to Admiral Sir William W. Fisher, Commander in Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet "and the officers and men of the British Navy". The whole text aims at being nothing other than a paean of praise for the mighty British fleet and its gallant officers – then already on the alert for the inevitable war against the Führer.

It is difficult to reconcile how this German artist who shared the political allegiance of almost all his compatriots before World War II could feel such empathy with the British Empire. In the Nazi years Fürst even grew the funny Hitler moustache, which he shaved after the war.

The photographs in the book maintain the same superb standards common to all his work. If anything, his "romantic" rapport with the sea could here find a truer expression. Although firmly anchored in a traditional mind-set, he gives himself some leeway to experiment, as in the close-ups of mighty warships truncated out of the picture's frame.

Inexplicably, the bright artwork on the packet is not by him, but by the Maltese marine painter Joseph Galea. Even the decorated envelopes for the cards he sold in packets have artwork signed “J.G.” – Joseph Galea, presumably.

In the inter-war years, Fürst’s German address was at 45 Titianstrasse, München 19, a house possibly purchased with his wife’s share in her father’s estate. After the war, Cynthia Turner stayed there with him and his second wife. In Valletta he moved from South Street to Flat 20K in St Paul’s Buildings (end of Old Theatre Street overlooking Marsamuscetto harbour). In March 1933 he and his wife rented the stores at No. 20, Strada S. Andrea, Valletta, probably to use as his laboratory, studio and workshop.

Mountbatten’s friend

With the approach of war, two events clouded Fürst’s life: the death of his beloved wife Helen, and his forced departure from Malta. A poignant photograph shows him next to his life’s companion on her deathbed.

Fürst encountered difficulties in returning to Malta, when the Second World War started looming menacingly. On January 4, 1939, he wrote from Germany to his Maltese lawyer, Dr Filippo Nicolò Buttigieg: “I was just at the British consulate in München. They have not received any telegram from the Malta police and so they cannot give me a visa to return.” His affairs in Malta required his presence “because I must settle my succession duty” obviously referring to the recent death of his wife the previous year.

Some, relying on memory, state the authorities deported Fürst at the outbreak of war, or unofficially called on him to leave. But he may not have returned at all in 1939, given the imminence of the hostilities.

During the Second World War, Fürst and his Maltese relatives maintained a meagre correspondence through the Geneva Red Cross – brief, self-censored messages to keep hope alive.

A close friendship developed between Fürst and Lord Louis Mountbatten. Family lore has it that the Earl spent long hours with Geo Fürst practising (or learning) German. And when, after the end of World War II, Fürst encountered difficulties in returning to Malta, Lord Louis intervened firmly in favour with an

“order” to the imperial authorities to refrain from any further obstruction at once. Fürst took good advantage of such powerful protection by visiting Malta on more than one occasion after the war.

Following a stomach operation in Munich, Geo Fürst, 75 years old, never really recovered. A message from his second wife, Rosl, to his relatives in Malta almost four months after surgery, paints a sad image of his state: he has lost 15 kilos in weight, his hands tremble so much he cannot write. He received their large bunch of pink carnations in hospital with joy. He stared at them for an hour and then sent the bouquet to the altar of the Virgin Mary. It was the end.

Acknowledgements

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Notes and references

1. The only notes on Fürst I have found are in Peter Apap Bologna (1989). “*German Painters in Malta*” in Forty Years Federal Republic of Germany, Malta, p 43, and Margaret Harker (2000). *Photographers of Malta*, Malta, 2000, pp. 136, 218.
2. Act of Marriage, 517/1912, July 29.
3. Information kindly supplied by architect Gino Refalo: Debono was the architect of St Paul’s Modern Buildings, in West Street, corner with Old Theatre Street; the West End building in South Street from Strait Street to Old Bakery Street; a block also in South Street corner with St Andrew Street; another block bordering on Archbishop, Old Mint and Christopher Streets, and the development of Sliema from the Strand right up to Annunciation Square. He also built from the parish church of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart in Sliema.
4. *Guida Generale di Malta c Gozo*, Malta 1914.
5. Santu Spiritu National Archives, Rabat, Telegram S.of S.
6. Franz Joseph Prince of Hohenzollern, Emden, New York, 1928, pp. 267-293.
7. National Library, B.M.5.18
8. e.g. Jackson Auctions, April 28, 2000, lot no. 548
9. Personal communication to the author.
10. “The Maltese Picture Postcards of George Fürst”, ed. Derek Mann, Malta Study Circle Paper No. 51. London, 2002.