

SACCO & VANZETTI'S



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REVENGE

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di vendetta—Awaiting the hour of vengeance. Vengeance came on the night of May 17, 1928, when a bomb exploded at the Richmond Hill, Queens, home of Robert G. Elliott, the executioner of Sacco and Vanzetti. No one was hurt, but the house was badly damaged. Elliott was the country's most active and famous executioner. Twelve years later, in 1939, he executed the Lindbergh baby's kidnapper, Bruno Hauptmann. At the time of Sacco and Vanzetti's execution, he was 56 years old and had been executing prisoners for thirty years.

In conclusion, let me mention something that occurred during my research on the case a number of years ago. It involves Judge Thayer, one of the principal figures in the drama. I needed more information about him and wrote to the address where he had lived in 1927, which I had found in a Boston newspaper. I addressed my letter to "Occupant, 180 Institute Road, Worcester, Massachusetts," hoping that some relative might live there, or someone who knew something about the case. As it happened, I had no luck. My letter came back stamped "No Such Address." No "Addressee Unknown," mind you, but "No Such Address." What could this mean? The bomb had demolished the house. A new house was later built on the site, a corner lot, but with its entrance on the street around the corner. The address had become 2 Beachmont Street, and the residents there knew nothing.

It was September 27, 1932, that the bomb wrecked Thayer's home. The judge escaped serious injury. Shaken by the experience, however, he moved to his club in Boston. There he remained until his death seven months later. There were no further explosions, and none of the bombers were caught. My old friend Valerio Isca offered further information about Thayer. Valerio, the last of the Italian anarchists in New York, died in 1997 at the age of 95. He had struggled throughout the 1920s to save Sacco and Vanzetti, unfortunately, to no avail. But the two men, he told me, received a posthumous measure of revenge. For Thayer, he said, died on the toilet seat, "and his soul went down the drain."

THE GOOD SHOEMAKER AND THE POOR FISH PEDDLER." THIS IS ONE of the most often quoted descriptions of Sacco and Vanzetti. It was made by Vanzetti himself shortly before he and Sacco were executed. The description, as far as it goes, is no an inaccurate one. Yet, it obscures the true character of the two men. For they were not merely "philosophical" anarchists or Tolstoyan pacifists, as some of their friends described them. Both, on the contrary, were social militants, advocates of relentless warfare against government and capitalism. Far from being the innocent dreamers so often depicted by their supporters, they belonged to a branch of the anarchist movement that preached insurrectionary violence and armed retaliation, including the use of dynamite. Such activities, they believed, were replies to the monstrous violence of the state. The greatest bomb throwers and murderers were not the isolated rebels driven to desperation but the military resources of every government—the army, militia, police, firing squad, hangman.

Such was the position of Sacco and Vanzetti, as it was of their mentor Luigi Galleani, who showered praise on every rebellious deed and glorified the perpetrators as heroes and martyrs, sacrificing themselves for the oppressed. "Both Nick and I are anarchists," Vanzetti himself declared, "the radical of the radical, the black cats, the terrors of many, of all the bigots, exploiters, charlatans, fakes, and oppressors."

Their code of honor taught that revolutionaries should retaliate against the repressive use of force, that submission to the government was cowardly and unworthy of a true anarchist. To be a rebel, they insisted, was to refuse to cringe before the authorities.

Starting in 1917, they began to put these ideas into practice. It was in April of that year that the United States entered World War I, to which Galleani and his followers were uncompromisingly opposed. This brought down upon them the full panoply of government repression. Throughout the country their clubhouses were raided, men and women beaten, equipment smashed, libraries and files seized and destroyed. Their lectures and recitals were disrupted, and their newspapers and journals suppressed, among them Galleani's *Cronaca Sovversiva* (the Subversive Chronicle), in which he denounced conscription and the war.

The Galleanists viewed these developments with mounting indignation. Men of energy and determination, they could not stand idly by while their comrades were being imprisoned, their presses silenced, their meetings disrupted and dispersed. An overwhelming desire to retaliate, to strike back at the state that was stifling and causing their movement, took possession of them. So it was that between 1917 and 1919, the height of the Red Scare, a group of anarchists came into being whose function was to carry out bombings. Sacco and Vanzetti were among them. They refused to turn the other cheek. Uncompromising militants, they rejected docile submission to the state. They were determined, on the contrary, to answer force with force, not only as a matter of self-defense but of principle and honor.

The climax was reached in 1919, following a rash of anarchist deportations. Among those evicted from the country was Galleani himself. This proved the last straw. The Galleanists issued a leaflet threatening retaliation. "You have shown no pity to us," it declared. "We will do likewise. And deport us! *We will dynamite you!*" An enemies' list was drawn up, to whom package bombs were sent in the mail. This occurred on the First of May, the premier working class and anarchist holiday. The list consisted of thirty names, including Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, Postmaster General Albert S. Burleson, Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson, Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Commissioner General of Immigration Anthony Caminetti, and US District Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, as well

Paolino Pallas and Gaetano Bresci, Bresci being the assassin of King Umberto. "We are proud for death," Sacco wrote after Governor Fuller refused clemency, "and fall as the anarchists can fall. It is up to you now, brothers, comrades!"

Their comrades did not disappoint them. On June 1, 1926, a bomb exploded at the home of Samuel Johnson in West Bridgewater, Massachusetts. Whoever planted it apparently mistook Johnson's house for that of his brother Simon, whose call to the police had led to the arrest of Sacco and Vanzetti. On May 10, 1927, a package bomb addressed to Governor Fuller was intercepted in the Boston post office. No one was injured and there was no arrest. Three months later, on August 6, bombs exploded in the New York subway, in a Philadelphia church, and at the home of the mayor of Baltimore. On August 15, an explosion occurred in the East Milton, Massachusetts home of Lewis McHardy, a juror in the Dedham trial. A bomb placed on the porch of his two-story house exploded at 3:30 in the morning. More than half the house was demolished. McHardy, his wife, and three children were thrown from their beds but escaped serious injury. Apparently, McHardy was chosen as a target because he had opposed the governor's appointment of an advisory committee to review the case. The day after the bombing, McHardy hung a huge American flag above his front door—or at least what was left of it.

On August 22, 1927, William Thompson met with Vanzetti in the death house just a few hours before the executions. He told Vanzetti that he hoped he would advise his friends against reprisal. Vanzetti, however, refused. He replied that "as he read history, every great cause for the benefit of humanity had had to fight for its existence against entrenched power and wrong." He reminded Thompson of the cruelty of seven years of imprisonment, with alternating hopes and fears, that he and Sacco had been made to suffer. He reminded Thompson of the remarks attributed to Judge Thayer by Professor Richardson and others and asked him what state of mind he thought such remarks indicated. He asked him how any candid man could believe that a judge capable of referring to men accused before him as "anarchistic bastards" could be impartial, and whether he thought that such cruelty as had been practiced upon him and Sacco ought to go unpunished. Thompson was at a loss to reply.

The bombings did not cease with the execution of the two men. At the funeral parlor in Boston a floral piece proclaimed *Aspettando l'ora*

Already in 1924, when Judge Thayer was about to reject their motions for a new trial, Vanzetti wrote a letter to Alice Blackwell. "I will ask for revenge," he said. "I will tell that I will die gladly by the hands of the hanger, after having known to have been vindicated. I mean 'eye for an eye, ear for an ear,' and even more, since to win it is necessary that a hundred enemies fall to each of us."

In October of that year, as previously stated, Thayer denied the defendants' motions. After announcing his decision, he rewarded himself by attending the Dartmouth-McGill football game in Hanover, New Hampshire (Thayer was a Dartmouth alumnus). While there, he ran into James Richardson, Dartmouth's professor of law. "Did you see what I did with those anarchistic bastards the other day?" he said. "I guess that will hold them for a while." Vanzetti exploded with rage when he learned of this remark. "Death for death," he wrote. "I think that the times require to bring with us some enemies, some blackguards—I should say the more that is possible." In the meantime William Thompson, attorney for Sacco and Vanzetti, appealed Thayer's decision to the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts. On May 12, 1926, however, the court rejected the appeal and upheld the guilty verdict against the defendants.

A few weeks later there appeared an article in *Protesta Umana*, the Italian-language organ of the Defense Committee. The front-page headline proclaimed: "As the Day of Execution Approaches, the Prisoners Warn: *LA SALUTE È IN VOI!*" *La Salute è in Voi*—which means Salvation is up to You—was the title of Galleani's bomb manual. The article that followed, signed by Sacco and Vanzetti, carried an appeal for retaliation. "Remember," it concluded, "*LA SALUTE È IN VOI!*" What this meant, as their comrades understood, was a resumption of bomb attacks against the authorities, such as those they had carried out in 1919. Until their death on August 23, 1927, the prisoners returned repeatedly to this theme. "If we have to die for a crime of which we are innocent," declared Vanzetti, "we ask for revenge, revenge in our names and in the names of our living and dead. I will make a list of honor of the perjurers who murdered us. I will try to see Thayer dead. I will put fire in the human breaths."

Sacco was equally vehement. In the spring of 1927, when his comrade Armando Borghi visited him in jail, his eyes glittered with hate as he echoed the protests of Emile Henri and Michele Angiolillo, of

as John D. Rockefeller, and J. P. Morgan, among others. Each of the intended victims had antagonized the Galleanists in some unforgivable way: arrested their comrades, closed down their newspapers, deported them to Italy, and the like. Additional bombs were delivered by hand to the doors of intended recipients. None of them was hurt, although the housemaid of one had her hands blown off and an elderly security guard was killed.

To men of the bombers' stamp, the use of violence was not a crime; it was a justifiable response to persecution. They considered themselves at war with the forces of government, and if they resorted to bombs it was as the government used bombs, for the purpose of war. Violence, in any event, was one of the few weapons at their disposal, a necessary means of self-defense. How else were they to retaliate against their tormentors? As Vanzetti expressed it: "I would give my blood to prevent the shedding of blood, but neither the abyss nor the earth nor the heavens have a law which condemns self-defense. Death for death," he declared. "We fight for the triumph of a cause—not to be crushed by the keepers—we will never win without vanquishing them. They are mercenary, we idealist; should a free man or a rebel allow them to do what they please to him?"

Sacco and Vanzetti continued to feel this way after their arrest, charged with robbing a shoe factory in South Braintree, Massachusetts, and killing the paymaster and his guard. Aware that their chances of acquittal were not great, they began to prepare measures of retaliation. These measures took two forms. The first was to attempt to escape from prison and thus deprive the authorities of their prey. The second, should this fail and the worst come, was to exact retribution against those responsible for their death, above all the judge in the case, Webster Thayer.

The authorities were cognizant of such possibilities. They had long suspected that Galleanists were responsible for the 1919 bombings, not to mention the Wall Street explosion of 1920, in which thirty-three people were killed. So they were not going to take any chances. At the 1921 trial in Dedham, Massachusetts, every precaution was taken. The courthouse was an armed camp. To prevent escape or a dynamite attack, a metal plate was placed over the window of the holding cell adjacent to the courtroom. The cage in the courtroom in which the defendants sat was kept under heavy guard. Every spectator

was searched for concealed weapons and bombs. For the first time in their career, newspapermen were frisked for guns. A troop of state police on horseback paraded about the town, while other troopers on motorcycles swept up and down the main street. Each day, Sacco and Vanzetti, manacled, were taken from the jail to the courthouse surrounded by heavy guard, who took them back to the jail at night.

Throughout the length of the trial, rumors abounded of plans for a forcible rescue of the defendants. And such plans, in actual fact, were being considered. Sacco and Vanzetti and their comrades were aware that in 1861 the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin had made a dramatic escape from Siberia, and that in 1876, Peter Kropotkin had escaped from a prison hospital in St. Petersburg. Closer to home, moreover, in 1900, Alexander Berkman, the anarchist who shot Henry Clay Frick during the Homestead Strike of 1892, had made a nearly successful attempt to tunnel his way out of a Pennsylvania prison with the help of Italian anarchist miners. In his cell at Dedham, it might be noted, Vanzetti was reading Berkman's *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*, with its detailed account of the attempt.

The 1921 escape, however, was never actually attempted, due in all probability to the heavy presence of police. But in 1923 rescue plans were again afoot. That year, a meeting of Galleanists was held in Springfield, Massachusetts, to discuss the possibility. The idea was to free the men when they would be at the Dedham courthouse, where motions for a new trial were to be argued before Judge Thayer. The key figure at the Springfield meeting was Cesare Stami, an ultramilitant and participant in illegal activities. He published an underground paper called *La Rivolta degli Angeli* (*The Revolt of the Angels*, the title of a book by Anatole France). The subtitle of Stami's paper was *Giornale degli Anormali—A Journal of the Abnormal*. Apart from publishing this paper, Stami and his gang of expropriators carried out holdups in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia, as well as of a bank in Detroit. He now demanded \$5,000 to liberate Sacco and Vanzetti (information given to the author by an anarchist who attended the meeting). But the Springfield group did not have the cash, and the deal fell through. Stami, the following year, held up a train in Pennsylvania that was carrying a shipment of gold. But one of his henchmen turned out to be a stool pigeon and tipped off the police. The train was surrounded by policemen, and Stami was killed in a shoot-out, along with several of his men.

Later that year, in October 1924, Judge Thayer denied appeals for a new trial, and in May 1926, his ruling was affirmed by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. Thus the time had come again to consider an escape. In January 1927, Vanzetti hinted at this in a letter to Alice Stone Blackwell. "I may get out within this year," he wrote, "no matter if alive or dead. And I hope with all my force that it will come true. By it, I do not mean suicide."

But events were moving against the two men. On April 9, in the Dedham court, Judge Thayer imposed the death sentence. On July 1 both men were removed from the Dedham jail to the Charlestown state prison in Boston. On August 4, Governor Alvan Fuller refused the men clemency. The time had come to act. There could be no further delay.

A plan was hastily concocted. The idea was to get anarchist miners from Pennsylvania to come and blow up the prison in order to effect the escape. In the meantime, Aldino Felicani, treasurer of the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee, attempted through an ex-con named Jack Grey, a safecracker who had spent twenty years in prison, to bribe an electrician at Charlestown so that the execution would not take place at the appointed time. The electrician agreed, and the bribe was passed. He was figuring things out two days before the execution, but after monkeying with the electrical system it broke down. All the lights in the prison went out, "and all hell broke loose," said Gardner Jackson of the Defense Committee. So the plan did not materialize. This same fellow, Grey, according to Jackson, had tried in the final weeks to connive with some of the guards to assist in the men's escape but to no avail.

Vanzetti, it might be noted, had drawn a design of the interior of the prison. It outlined an escape route, indicating the positions of the guards. Once, when Roger Baldwin, head of the American Civil Liberties Union, and Elizabeth Glendower Evans, a member of the New England Civil Liberties Committee who had become interested in the men during the trial, were visiting Vanzetti in his cell, he told them about the planned escape. Mrs. Evans, according to Baldwin, scolded Vanzetti about the folly of the idea, and he desisted. That he actually desisted, however, seems to me doubtful. More likely, the plan had to be abandoned only when the electrician caused the lights prematurely to fail.

Both Vanzetti and Sacco, of course, knew that escape plans might prove defective. Thus, forever in their minds was the alternative—retribution.