

The Story of a Proletarian Life

Bartolomeo Vanzetti

1924

Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Foreward | 3 |
| Note | 4 |
| An Appreciation | 5 |
| To Land of Promise | 5 |
| Country Folk Friendly | 6 |
| | |
| The Story of a Proletarian Life | 7 |
| | |
| I. | 8 |
| | |
| II. In the Promised Land | 10 |
| | |
| III. Work! Work! Work! | 13 |
| | |
| IV. My Intellectual Life and Creed | 16 |

Foreward

The case of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti has attracted world-wide attention. Yet very few of our people, except those immediately associated with the case, are at all familiar with the personalities of the two men whose fate has aroused this strong international interest.

It has been my privilege to know Vanzetti personally, and I have been struck by his simple-heartedness and sincerity. The belief in his innocence, widely held among those who followed the trials, is strengthened upon personal acquaintance. Though he has been living for more than three years under the shadow of a death sentence, he has maintained an equable temper and keen interest in world affairs, and his thirst for knowledge is unabated. Each inmate of the Massachusetts State prison at Charlestown has to do daily an amount of piece-work that is supposed to take eight hours; but Vanzetti, by extra diligence, gets through his task ahead of time, and uses the extra leisure to study English literature.

Vanzetti's autobiography is here presented in pamphlet form for the first time. It is a remarkable human document. Let the reader consider it with an open mind, and judge for himself whether it indicates a character of the criminal type.

Alice Stone Blackwell
August, 1924.

Note

On April 15th, 1920, at 3 p.m., a group of four or five men shot down Alexander Berardelli and Frederick A. Parmenter who were carrying the payroll of Slater and Morrill, at a point in front of the Rice & Hutchins factory. The attacking party then escaped by automobile.

On May 5th, 1920, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were arrested at Brockton, Mass. They were convicted of first degree murder on July 14th, 1921. Five motions for a new trial have been filed and were argued in October of 1923. None of these motions have been passed on up to the date of this printing. All of these motions involve alleged newly discovered evidence.

August, 15, 1924

An Appreciation

The *Boston Advertiser* of Sept. 16th, 1913, carried an article by Upton Sinclair which may well serve as an introduction to "The Story of a Proletarian Life." Sinclair said in part:

"You will find the life of Henry D. Thoreau an anecdote of the time when he refused to pay taxes to a State government which captured negroes and returned them to slavery.

"In due process of law he was confined in jail for this offense, and Ralph Waldo Emerson came to visit him and said, 'Henry, what are you doing here?'

The answer was, "Waldo, what are you doing not here?"

"In line with this high precedent, I went about a year ago to call upon one of the world's gentlest spirits, now confined in the Massachusetts State Prison at Charlestown. He did not rebuke me for my failure to join him; nevertheless, by his beauty and sweetness of spirit, he made me so ashamed of myself that shortly afterwards I also was moved to get myself into jail. So spreads the spirit of martyrdom!

"Who is this great man of Massachusetts? I have before me his autobiography, fresh from the press; it is entitled 'The Story of a Proletarian Life,' by Bartolomeo Vanzetti.

"In this book I learn that he was born in the town of Villafalletto, in Piedmont, Italy. He was the child of peasants, and was eager for Knowledge and was promised an education; but when his father read in the newspaper that forty-two lawyers had applied for a position in Turin which paid only seven dollars a month, he decided that an education was not what it was cracked up to be.

"So, at the age of thirteen, the boy was turned over to the mercies of a baker, who worked him from 7 o'clock in the morning until 10 o'clock at night, seven days a week, except for three hours off every other Sunday.

To Land of Promise

"After six years the boy went home ruined in health, and, after watching his mother die in great agony, he decided to come to our land of promise. He landed forlorn and friendless at the Battery and was permitted to work as a dishwasher in a "rich club." Apparently the club was not rich enough to be generous to its dishwashers, because the hours were long, the barret in which the workers slept was suffocatingly hot and the vermin did not permit them to sleep.

"So Vanzetti went to work in one of the most famous restaurants of New York's Bohemian life. Many times, no doubt, you have dined in this restaurant, perhaps with celebrities. If so, you were busy with celebrities and never thought about the dishwashers. Listen!

Country Folk Friendly

“The pantry was horrible. There was not a single window in it. When the electric light for some reason was out it was totally dark, so that one couldn’t move without running into things. The vapor of the boiling water where the plates, pans and silver were washed formed great drops of water on the ceiling, took up all the dust and grime there, then fell slowly one by one upon my head as I worked below.

During the working hours the heat was terrific. The table leavings amassed in barrels near the pantry gave out nauseating exhalations. The sinks had no direct sewerage connection. Instead the water was permitted to overrun to the floor. In the centre of the room there was a drain. Every night the pipe was clogged and the greasy water rose higher and higher and we trudged in the slime.”

The Young Italian was afraid to stay here on account of the possibility of consumption, so he went out into the country, and the farmers and the wives of the poor were kind to him, and he got work with a pick and shovel. When he could stand this no longer he went to being a cook, then he went back to the pick and shovel, and finally became a peddler of fish, traveling through a number of little towns in Massachusetts.

In the last of his days before he went to jail he cut a little ice, he shoveled coal for an electric house, he did a little ditch digging until the snow came; then he cleaned the snow from the streets; then he dug a ditch for a water main; then he dug some clams, and then he got arrested.

So far I have told this man’s external life. It is much like other lives, you see, “the short and simple annals of the poor.” But man consists of two parts, body and soul; and the soul of the poor is less simple than it used to be.

Nowadays there are printing presses, and even men who work thirteen and fifteen hours a day in bakeshops and restaurant kitchens find a few minutes’ leisure in which to think and to read the great works of all ages.

I wish I could give you the full list of what Vanzetti read. It would amaze you. If you are the average American Tired Business Man it might shock you a little, because the names would be foreign sounding and strange: De Amicis and St. Augustine and Dante and Kropotkin and Gorki and Labriols and Renan and Hugo.

Now he has written the story of his life, and having studied it carefully, I am ready to give my testimony as an expert in social idealism, that there is a thousand times more likelihood that I committed that payroll murder than that Vanzetti did.

But alas, this kind of expert testimony is not accepted in American courts! So all that I can do is to recommend you “The Story of a Proletarian Life.”

The Story of a Proletarian Life

I.

My life cannot claim the dignity of an autobiography. Nameless, in the crowd of nameless ones, I have merely caught and reflected a little of the light from that dynamic thought or ideal which is drawing humanity towards better destinies.

I was born on June 11, 1888, of G. Battista Vanzetti and Giovanna Vanzetti, in Villafalletto, province of Cuneo, in Piedmont. The town, which arises on the right bank of the Magra, in the shadows of a beautiful chain of hills in primarily an agricultural community. Here I lived until the age of thirteen in the bosom of my family.

I attended the local schools, and loved study. My earliest memories are of prizes won in school examinations, including second prize in the religious catechism. My father was undecided whether to let me prosecute studies or to appropriate me to some artisan. One day he read in the *Gazetta del Popolo* that in Turin forty-two lawyers had applied for a position paying 35 lire monthly. The news item proved decisive in my boyhood, for it left my father determined that I should learn a trade and become a shop-keeper.

And so in the year 1901 he conducted me to Signor Conino, who ran a pastry shop in the city of Cuneo, and left me there to taste, for the first time, the flavor of hard, relentless labor. I worked for about twenty months there — from seven o'clock each morning until ten at night, every day, except for a three-hour vacation twice a month. From Cuneo I went to Cavour and found myself installed in the bakery of Signor Coitre, a place that I kept for three years. Conditions were no better than in Cuneo, except that the fortnightly free period was of five hours duration.

I did not like the trade, but I stuck to it to please my father and because I did not know what else to choose. In 1905 I abandoned the Cavour for Turin in hope of locating work in the big city. Failing in this hope, I went on further to Courgne where I remained working six months. Then back to Turin, on a job as caramel-maker.

In Turin, in February of 1907, I fell seriously ill. I was in great pain, confined indoors, deprived of air and sun and joy, like a "sad twilight flower." But news of my plight reached the family and my father came from Villafalletto to take me back to my birthplace. At home, he told me, I would be cared for by my mother, my good, my best-beloved mother.

And so I returned, after six years spent in the fetid atmosphere of bakeries and restaurant kitchens, with rarely a breath of God's air or a glimpse of His glorious world. Six years that might have been beautiful to a boy avid of learning and thirsty for a refreshing draught of the simple country life of his native village. Years of the great miracle which transforms the child into the man. Ah, that I might have had leisure to watch the wonderful unfoldment!

The three hours on the train I leave to the imagination of those who have suffered pleurisy. But even through the mist of pain I saw the majestic country through which we passed and became part of it in imagination. The deep green of north Italian valleys which not even winter can dull, is a living thing in my mind even today.

My mother received me tenderly, weeping from the fullness of her happiness and her sorrow. She put me in bed — I had almost forgotten that hands could caress so tenderly. There I remained

for a month, and for two months more I went about with the aid of a heavy walking stick. At last I recovered my health. From then until the day I parted for America I remained in the house of my father. That was one of the happiest periods of my life. I was twenty years old; the magic age of hopes and dreams, even to those who, like myself, turn the pages of life's book precariously. I made many friends and gave freely of the love that was in my heart. I helped to cultivate the garden at home with an ardor that I had never felt in the cities.

But that serenity was soon disturbed, and by the most painful misfortune that can strike man.

One sad day my mother fell sick. What she, the family and I suffered no pen can describe. The slightest noise caused her atrocious spasms. Many times I rushed towards the group of young men approaching along the road of an evening and singing gayly to the new-born stars, imploring them for love of God and their own mothers to be quiet. Many times I begged the men on the street corner to go elsewhere for their conversation. In the last few weeks of her life her suffering became so agonizing that neither my father, nor her relatives, nor her dearest friends had the courage to approach her bedside. I remained with her, tortured by the sight of her suffering. For two months I did not undress.

Science did not avail, nor love. After three months of brutal illness she breathed her last in my arms. She died without hearing me weep. It was I who laid her in her coffin; I who accompanied her to the final resting place; I who threw the first handful of earth over her bier. And it was right that I should do so, for I was burying part of myself... The void left has never been filled.

But it was too much. Time, far from softening my loss, made the pain more cruel. I watched my father get gray in a short time. I became more retiring, more silent; for days at a time I uttered not a syllable and passed the days wandering through the forests which border the Magra. Many times, going to the bridge, I stopped long and looked down at the white stones far below in a bed of sand, and thought of them as a bed where there would be no more nightmare.

This desperate state of mind decided me to abandon Italy for America. On June 9, 1908, I left my dear ones. My sorrow was so great at the parting that I kissed my relatives and strained them to my bosom without being able to speak. My father, too, was speechless in his profound sorrow, and my sisters wept as they did when my mother died. My going had excited interest in the village and the neighbors crowded the house, each with a word of hope, a blessing, a tear. In a crowd they followed me far out on the road, as if a townsman were being exiled forever.

An incident of the parting is vivid in my memory; several hours before leaving I went to say farewell to an old woman who had for me a maternal feeling since the death of my mother. I found her on the threshold of her home, together with the young wife of her son.

"Ah, thou hast come," she said, "I expected to see thee. Go, and may the love of God follow thee. Never have I seen a son for a mother what thou hast done; blessing upon thee, my son."

We kissed. Then the young daughter-in-law spoke.

"Kiss me, too. I like you so much, you are so good," she said swallowing her tears.

I kissed her and fled, and could hear them weeping behind me.

Two days later I left Turin for the frontier-town Modena. While the train carried me towards the border, some tears fell from my eyes, so little used to crying. Thus I left my native land, a wanderer without a country! Thus have blossomed the benedictions of those simple souls, those noble hearts.

II. In the Promised Land

After a two-day railway ride across France and more than seven days on the ocean, I arrived in the Promised Land. New York loomed on the horizon in all its grandness and illusion of happiness. I strained my eyes from the steerage deck, trying to see through this mass of masonry that was at once inviting and threatening the huddled men and women in the third class.

In the immigration station I had my first great surprise. I saw the steerage passengers handled by the officials like so many animals. Not a word of kindness, of encouragement, to lighten the burden of fears that rests heavily upon the newly arrived on American shores. Hope, which lured these immigrants to the new land, withers under the tough of harsh officials. Little children who should be alert with expectancy, cling instead to their mothers' skirts, weeping with fright. Such is the unfriendly spirit that exists in the immigration barracks.

How well I remember standing at the Battery, in lower New York, upon my arrival, alone, with a few poor belongings in the way of clothes, and very little money. Until yesterday I was among folks who understood me. This morning I seemed to have awakened in a land where my language meant little more to the native (so far as meaning is concerned) than the pitiful noises of a dumb animal. Where was I to go? What was I to do? Here was the promised land. The elevated rattled by and did not answer. The automobiles and the trolleys sped by, heedless of me.

I had note of one address, and thither a fellow-passenger conducted me. It was the house of a countryman of mine, on — street near Seventh Avenue. I remained there a while, but it became all too evident that there was no room for me in this house, which was overstocked with human beings, like all workingmen's houses. In deep melancholy I left the place towards eight in the evening to look for a place to sleep. I retraced my steps to the Battery, where I took a bed for the night in a suspicious-looking establishment, the best I could afford. Three days after my arrival, the compatriot already mentioned, who was head cook in a rich club on West — street overlooking the Hudson River, found me a post in his kitchen as a dishwasher. I worked there three months. The hours were long; the garret where we slept was suffocatingly hot; and the vermin did not permit me to close an eye. Almost every night I sought escape in the park.

Leaving this place, I found the same kind of employment in the Mouquin Restaurant. What the conditions there are at present I do not know. But at that time, thirteen years ago, the pantry was horrible. There was not a single window in it. When the electric light for some reason was out, it was totally dark, so that one couldn't move without running into things. The vapor of the boiling water where the plates, pans and silver were washed formed great drops of water on the ceiling, took up all the dust and grime, there, then fell slowly one by one upon my head, as I worked below. During working hours the heat was terrific. The table leavings amassed in barrels near the pantry sewerage connection. Instead, the water sinks had no direct sewerage connection. Instead the water was permitted to overrun to the floor. In the center of the room there was a drain. Every night the pipe was clogged and the greasy water rose higher and higher and we trudged in the slime.

We worked twelve hours one day and fourteen the next, with five hours off every other Sunday. Damp food hardly fit for dogs and five or six dollars a week was the pay. After eight months I left the place for fear of contracting consumption.

That was a sad year. What toiler does not remember it? The poor slept outdoors and rummaged the garbage barrels to find a cabbage leaf or a rotten potato. For three months I searched New York, its length and its breadth, without finding work. One morning, in an employment agency, I met a young man more forlorn and unfortunate than I. He had gone without food the day before and was still fasting. I took him to a restaurant, investing almost all that remained to me of my savings in a meal which he ate with wolfish voracity. His hunger stilled, my new friend declared that it was stupid to remain in New York. If he had money, he said, he would go to the country, where there was more chance of work, without counting the pure air and the sun which could be had for nothing. With the money remaining in my possession we took the steamboat for Hartford, Connecticut, the same day.

From Hartford we struck out for a small town where my companion had been once before, the name of which I forget. We tramped along the road, and finally for up courage enough to knock at a cottage door. An American farmer opened to our knock. We asked for work. He had none to give us, but he was touched by our poverty and our all too evident hunger. He gave us food, then went through the whole town with us, inquiring whether there was work. Not a stroke was to be found. Then, out of pity for us, he took us on his farm, although he had no need of our assistance. He kept us there two weeks. I shall always treasure the memory of that American family — the first Americans who treated us as human despite the fact that we came from the land of Dante and Garibaldi.

Space limitations do not permit me to trace in detail our subsequent wanderings in search of some one who would give us bread and water in return for our labor. From town to town, village to village, farm to farm we went. We knocked at factory doors and were sent away... “Nothing doing... Nothing doing.” We were literally without a penny between the two of us, with hunger gnawing at our insides. We were lucky when we found an abandoned stable where we could pass the night in an effort to sleep. One morning we were fortunate. In South Glastonbury a countryman from Piedmont treated us to breakfast. Need I tell how grateful we were to him? But then we had to keep going in the disheartening search. About three in the afternoon we arrived in Middletown, Connecticut, tired, bruised, hungry, and dripping from three hours’ walk in a rain.

Of the first person that we met we inquired for some North-Italian (my illustrious companion was excessively partial to his own section of Italy) and were directed to a nearby house. We knocked and were received by two Sicilian women, mother and daughter. We asked to be permitted to dry our clothes at the stove, and this they did most readily, despite the fact that they were Southerners. And while we sat there getting dried we asked about the chances for obtaining work in that vicinity. They told us there was not a stitch to be had, and advised trying in Springfield, where there are three brick furnaces.

Observing the pallor of our faces and the visible trembling of our bodies, the good women inquired whether we were hungry. We confessed that we had not eaten since six in the morning. Whereupon the younger of them handed us a short loaf of bread and a long knife.

“I can give you nothing else,” she said, and her eyes filled with honest tears. “I have five children and my old mother to feed. My husband works on the railroad and earns no more than \$1.35 a day, and to make things worse, I have been sick for a long time.”

While I cut the bread, she rummaged round the house in a desperate search and finally discovered several apples, which she insisted upon our eating. Refreshed, we set out in the direction of the furnaces.

“What can that be over there where the chimney is?” asked my companion.

“It is the brick factory, no doubt. Let us go and ask for a job.”

Oh, it is much too late now,” he demurred.

“Well, then, let us go to the home of the owner,” was my suggestion.

“No, no, let us go on elsewhere. Work of that kind would kill you. You’re not built that way,” he countered.

It became evident enough that in the long period of fruitless searching for work, the fellow had lost his taste for labor. It is a state of mind that is not at all unusual. In the repeated impact of disappointment and insult, hunger and deprivation, the unemployed victim develops a certain indifference to his own fate. A terrible state of mind it is and one that makes vagabonds forever of the weaker individuals among the unfortunates.

As I stood there trying to swing him back to a healthy view of our predicament, I thought of the house we had left a little while ago. I thought with a pang of their slim evening meal, made slimmer because of the bread we had devoured. The thought of my own troubles blotted them out for a while. The memory of the last night, the cold sleepless night, made me tremble. I took a look at myself; I was almost in rags.

Another night coming on...

III. Work! Work! Work!

Almost by force I took my fellow-wanderer into town, where both of us secured work at the furnaces, one of the most exacting jobs I know. He did not stand the test. In two weeks he gave up the work. I remained there ten months. The work was indeed above my strength, but there were many joys after the day's labor. We had quite a colony of natives from Piedmont, Tuscany, and Venice, and the little colony became almost a family. In the evenings, the sordidness of the day was forgotten. Someone would strike up a tune on the violin, the accordion of some other instrument. Some of us would dance — I, unfortunately, was never inclined towards this art and sat aside watching. I have always watched and enjoyed in other folks' happiness.

There was considerable sickness in the little colony, I recall, with fevers attacking one after the other. Scarcely a day passed without someone's teeth beginning to chatter.

From now on I was a little more fortunate. I went to Meriden, Connecticut, where I worked in the stone pits. Two years in the stone pits, doing the hardest unskilled labor; but I was living with an aged couple, both Tuscans, and took a great deal of joy in learning the beautiful Tuscan language.

During the years in Springfield and in Meriden I learned a great deal besides the dialect of Tuscany. I learned to love and sympathize with those others who, like myself, were ready to accept any miserable wage in order to keep body and soul together. I learned that class-consciousness was not a phrase invented by propagandists, but was a real, vital force, and that those who felt its significance were no longer beasts of burden, but human beings.

I made friends everywhere, never by throwing myself at them, never consciously. Perhaps they worked beside me in the pits and at the furnaces saw in my eyes the great pity I had for their lot, and the great dreams that were already in my imagination for a world where all of us would live a cleaner, less animal existence.

My friends counseled me to get back to my profession as pastry cook. The unskilled worker, they insisted, was the lowest animal there was in the social system; I would have neither respect nor food if I remained such. A countryman in New York added his plea to theirs. So I went back to New York and quickly found employment as assistant pastry chef in Sovarin's Restaurant on Broadway. In six or eight months I was discharged. At the time I did not know why. I immediately got relocated in a hotel on Seventh Avenue, in the theater district. In five months I was discharged from here, too. Then I learned the reason for these strange discharges. The chefs were at that time in league with the employment agencies and got a divvy on every man they placed. The more often they sacked men, the more often they could get new ones and they commission.

The countrymen with whom I was boarding begged me not to despair. "Stick to your trade," they urged, "and so long as we have a house and bed and food to offer you, don't worry. And when you need cash, don't hesitate to tell us."

Great hearts among masses, O ye Pharisees!

For five months I now trod the sidewalks of New York, unable to get work at my trade, or even as a dishwasher. Finally I fell into an agency on Mulberry Street, which looked for men to

work with a pick and shovel. I offered myself and was accepted. I was conducted together with a herd of other ragged men to a barracks in the woods near Springfield, Massachusetts where a railroad was in construction. Here I worked until I had repaid the debt of one hundred dollars I had contracted during the idle months, and had saved a little bit besides. Then with a comrade I went to other barracks near Worcester. In this vicinity I stayed more than a year, working in several of the factories. Here I made many friends, whom I remember with the strongest emotion, with a love unaltered and unalterable. A few American workers were among these.

From Worcester I transferred to Plymouth (that was about seven years ago), which remained my home until the time I was arrested. I learned to look upon the place with real affection, because as time went on it held more and more of the people dear to my heart, the folks I boarded with, the men who worked by my side, the women who later bought the wares I had to offer as a peddler.

In passing, let me say how gratifying it is to realize that my compatriots in Plymouth reciprocate the love I feel for them. Not only have they supported my defense — money is a slight thing after all — but they have expressed to me directly and indirectly their faith in my innocence. Those who rallied around my good friends of the defense committee, were not only workers, but businessmen who knew me; not only Italians, but Jews, Poles, Greeks and Americans.

Well, I worked in the Stone establishment for more than a year, and then for the Cordage Company for about eighteen months. My active participation in the Plymouth cordage strike made it certain that I could never get a job there... As a matter of fact, because of my more frequent appearance on the speaker's platform in working class groups of every kind, it became increasingly difficult to get work anywhere. So far as certain factories were concerned I was definitely "black-listed." Yet, every one of my many employers could testify that I was an industrious, dependable workman, that my chief fault was in trying so hard to bring a little light to understanding into the dark lives of my fellow-workers. For some time I did manual work of the hardest kind in the construction undertakings of Sampson & Douland, for the city. I can almost say that I have participated in all the principle public works in Plymouth. Almost any Italian in the town or any of my foremen of my various jobs can attest my industry and modesty of life during this period. I was deeply interested by this time in the things of the intellect, in the great hope that animates me even here in the dark cell of a prison while I await death for a crime I did not commit.

My health was not good. The years of toil and the more terrible periods of unemployment had robbed me of much of my original vitality. I was casting about for some salutary means of eking out my livelihood. About eight months before my arrest a friend of mine who was planning to return to the home country said to me: "Why don't you buy my cart, my knives, my scales, and go to selling fish instead of remaining under the yoke of the bosses?" I grasped the opportunity, and so became a fish-vender, largely out of love for independence.

At that time, 1919, the desire to see once more my dear ones at home, the nostalgia for my native land had entered my heart. My father, who never wrote a letter without inviting me home, insisted more than ever and my good sister Luigia joined in his pleas. Business was none too fat, but I worked like a beast of burden, without halt or stay, day after day.

December 24, the day before Christmas, was the last day I sold fish that year. A brisk day of business I had, since all Italians buy eels that day for the Christmas Eve feasts. Readers may recall that it was a bitter-cold Christmas, and the harsh weather did not let up after the holidays; and pushing a cart along is not warming work. I went for a short period to more vigorous, even if no less freezing work. I got a job a few days after Christmas cutting ice for Mr. Peterseni. One

day, when he hadn't work enough to go around, I shoveled coal for the Electric House. When the ice job was finished I got employment with Mr. Howland, ditch-digging, until a snow storm made me a man of leisure again. Not for longer than a few hours. I hired myself out to the town, cleaning the streets of the snow, and this work done, I helped clean the snow from the railroad tracks. Then I was taken on again by the Sampson Construction people who were laying a water main for the Puritan Woolen Company. I stayed on the job until it was finished.

Again I found no job. The railroad strike difficulties had cut off the cement supply, so that there was no more construction going on. I went back to my fish-selling, when I could get fish, because the supply of that also was limited. When I could get none, I dug for clams, but the profit on these lilliputian, the expenses being so high that they left no margin. In April I reached an agreement with a fisherman for a partnership. It never materialized, because on May 5, while I was preparing a mass meeting to protest against the death of Salsedo at the hands of the Department of Justice, I was arrested. My good friend and comrade Nicola Sacco was with me.

"Another deportation case," we said to one another.

But it wasn't. The horrible charges of which the whole world now knows were brought against us. I was accused of a crime in Bridgewater, convicted after eleven days of the most farcical trial I have ever witnessed, and sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment. Judge Webster Thayer, the same man who later presided at the murder trial imposed the sentence.

There was not a vibration of sympathy in his tone when he did so. I wondered as I listened to him, why he hated me so. Is not a judge supposed to be impartial? But now I think I know — I must have looked like a strange animal to him, being a plain worker, an alien, and a radical to boot. And why was it that all my witnesses, simple people who were anxious to tell the simple truth, were laughed at and disregarded? No credence was given their words because they, too, were merely aliens... The testimony of human beings is acceptable, but aliens... pooh!

IV. My Intellectual Life and Creed

I want to retrace my steps in memory for a while. I have given the physical facts of my story. The deeper, truer story is not in the outward circumstances of a man's life, but in his inner growth, in mind and soul, and universal consciousness.

I went to school from the age of six to the age of thirteen. I loved study with a real passion. During the three years passed in Cavour I had the good luck to be near a certain learned person. With his help I read all the publication that came in my hands. My superior was a subscriber to a Catholic periodical in Genoa. I thought that lucky, because I was then a fervent Catholic.

In Turin I had no companions except fellow workers, young store clerks and laborers. My fellow workers declared themselves socialists and made fun of my religious streak, calling me a hypocrite and bigot. One day it led to a fist fight with one of them.

Now that I am more or less familiar with all the schools of socialism, I realize that they did not know even the meaning of the word. They called themselves socialists out of sympathy for DeAmicis (then in the flush of his career as a writer) and for the spirit of the place and the time. So real was the effect of the environment that I, too, soon commenced to love socialism without knowing it, or believing myself a socialist.

All things considered, the stage of evolution of those people was beneficent for me and improved me greatly. The principles of humanism and equality of rights began to make a breach in my heart. I read the *Cuore* of DeAmicis, and later his *Voyages and Friends*.

In the house there was a book of St. Augustine. From that, this sentence remains indelibly in my mind: "The blood of martyrs is the seed of liberty." I also found the *Promessi Sposi* and read it twice. Finally I laid my hands on a dusty *Divine Comedy*. Ah, me! my teeth were not made for such a bone; nevertheless I proceeded to gnaw it desperately, and believe not uselessly.

In the last days of my stay in the land of my birth I learned much from Dr. Francis, the chemist Scrimaglio and the Veterinarian Bo. Already I began to understand that the plague which besets humanity most cruelly is ignorance and the degeneracy of natural sentiments. My religion soon needed no temples, altars and formal prayers. God became for me a perfect spiritual Being, devoid of any human attributes. Although my father told me often that religion was necessary in order to hold in check human passions, and to console the human being in tribulation, I felt in my own heart the yea and nay of things. In this state of mind I crossed the ocean.

Arrived in America, I underwent all the sufferings, the delusions and the privations that come inevitably to one who lands at the age of twenty, ignorant of life, and something of a dreamer. Here I saw all the brutalities of life, all the injustice, the corruption in which humanity struggles tragically.

But despite everything I succeeded in fortifying myself physically and intellectually. Here I studied the works of Peter Kropotkin, Gorki, Merlino, Malatesta, Reclus. I read Marx's *Testament of Carlo Pisacane*, Mazzini's *Duties of Man*, and many other writing of social import. Here I read the journals of every socialist, patriotic and religious faction. Here I studied the Bible, *The Life of Jesus* (Renan), and *Jesus Christ Has Never Existed* by Miselbo. Here I read Greek and Roman

history, the story of the United States, of the French Revolution and of the Italian Revolution. I studied Darwin and Spencer, Laplace and Flammarion. I returned to the *Divine Comedy* and to *Jerusalem Liberated*. I re-read Leopardi and wept with him. I read the works of Hugo, of Leo Tolstoi, of Zola, of Cantu, the poetry of Giusti, Guerrini, Rapisardi and Carducci.

Do not believe me, my dear reader, a prodigy of science; that would be a mistake. My fundamental instruction was too incomplete, my mental powers insufficient, to assimilate all this vast material. Then it must be remembered that I studied while doing hard work all day, and without any congenial accommodations. Ah, how many nights I sat over some volume by a flickering gas jet, far into the morning hours!

Barely had I laid my head on the pillow when the whistle sounded and back I went to the factory of the stone pits.

But I brought to the studies a cruel, continuous and inexorable observation of men, animals and plants — of everything, in a word, that surrounds man. The Book of Life: that is the Book of Books! All the others merely teach how to read this one. The honest books, I mean; the dishonest ones have an opposite purpose.

Meditation over this great book determined my actions and my principles. I denied that “Every man for himself and God for all!” I championed the weak, the poor, the oppressed, the simple and the persecuted. I admired heroism, strength and sacrifice when directed towards the triumph of justice. I understood that in the name of God, of Law, of the Patria, of Liberty, of the purest mental abstractions, of the highest human ideals, are perpetrated and will continue to be perpetrated, the most ferocious crimes; until the day when by the acquisition of light it will no longer be possible for the few, in the name of God, to do wrong to the many.

I understood that man cannot trample with immunity upon the unwritten laws that govern his life, he cannot violate the ties that bind him to the universe. I understood that the mountains, the seas, the rivers called “natural boundaries” were formed before man, by a complexity of physical and chemical processes, and not for the purpose of dividing peoples.

I grasped the concept of fraternity, of universal love. I maintained that whosoever benefits or hurts a man, benefits or hurts the whole species. I sought my liberty in the liberty of all; my happiness in the happiness of all. I realized that the equity of deeds, of rights and of duties, is the only moral basis upon which could be erected a just human society. I earned my bread by the honest sweat on my brow. I have not a drop of blood on my hands, nor on my conscience.

I understood that the supreme goal of life is happiness. That the eternal and immutable bases of human happiness are health, peace of conscience, the satisfaction of animal needs, and a sincere faith. I understood that every individual had two I's, the real and the ideal, that the second is the source of all progress, and that whatever wants to make the first seem equal to the second is in bad faith. The difference in any one person between his two egos is always the same, because whether in perfection or in degeneration, they keep the same distance between them.

I understood that man is never sufficiently modest towards himself and that true wisdom is in tolerance.

I wanted a roof for every family, bread for every mouth, education for every heart, the light for every intellect.

I am convinced that human history has not yet begun; that we find ourselves in the last period of the prehistoric. I see with the eyes of my soul how the sky is suffused with the rays of the new millennium.

I maintain that liberty of conscience is as inalienable as life. I sought with all my power to direct the human spirit to the good of all. I know from experience that rights and privileges are still won and maintained by force, until humanity shall have perfected itself.

In the real history of future humanity – classes and privileges, the antagonisms of interest between man and man abolished – progress and change will be determined by intelligence and the common convenience.

If we and the generation which our women carry under their bosoms do not arrive nearer to that goal, we shall not have obtained anything real, and humanity will continue to be more miserable and unhappy.

I am and shall be until the last instant (unless I should discover that I am in error) an anarchist-communist, because I believe that communism is the most humane form of social contract, because I know that only with liberty can man rise, become noble, and complete.

Now? At the age of thirty-three – age of Christ and according to certain learned alienists, the age of offenders generally – I am scheduled for prison and for death. Yet, were I to recommence the “Journey of Life,” I should tread the same road, seeking, however, to lessen the sum of my sins and errors and to multiply that of my good deeds.

I send to my comrades, to my friends, to all good men my fraternal embrace, love and fervent greetings!

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Bartolomeo Vanzetti
The Story of a Proletarian Life
1924

Retrieved on 9 September 2011 from dwardmac.pitzer.edu
Translated from the Italian by Eugene Lyons
Forward by Alice Stone Blackwell
With an Introduction by Upton Sinclair
Sacco Vanzetti Defense Committee

theanarchistlibrary.org