

Introductory Remarks

By
Neil Thomas Proto*

With less than a month remaining before the scheduled execution of Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco, Michael Angelo Musmanno a 29 year old lawyer from Pittsburgh, the son of an immigrant coal miner - joined the lawyers seeking diligently to delay their sentence of death. Musmanno, who later became a Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice and a Trial Judge at Nuremberg, recalled these fruitless moments, with special pain, in 1939. He wrote this:

A few minutes after midnight of August 22, 1927, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were executed. The long legal battle preceding their death, the peculiar nature of the evidence used against them, and the demonstrated prejudice of the trial judge, all combined to make of the execution a heart-rending spectacle which shocked the entire civilized world....

But ... [t]he circumstances did not combine without design. They were brought together with a purpose, and deliberately fashioned into a spear of accusation; and the spear was sharpened by the stones of perjury, prejudice, and merciless ambition.

[N]o dereliction in duty [can be] more inexcusable than to seek the death of one free from guilt.... [S]top his heart, and all the evidence of innocence and remorse of conscience will never start it again.... Only infallible evidence should support [such] an immutable sentence....

The prejudice was imbedded deeply.

In 1891, nine Italian immigrants – having been acquitted by a jury for the alleged murder of the local police chief – were taken from their cells by respected citizens of New Orleans, and lynched. Theodore Roosevelt said it was “rather a good thing.” The Mayor of New Orleans: “[T]here must be no place for [Italians] on the American continent.”

Italian immigrants found themselves in an uneasy relationship with America. It was the year my grandparents came to this country.

In 1894, several hundred Italian immigrants were driven out of Altoona, Pennsylvania by an armed mob. Italian labor organizers were lynched in Colorado and Louisiana in 1895.

* These comments were presented to the forum, “The Death Penalty: Sacco & Vanzetti's Legacy.” Southern Connecticut State University, New Haven, Connecticut (October 6, 2002).

In 1899 in Tullulah, Louisiana, a mob lynched five Italian shopkeepers. Their offense: they had treated African-Americans equally in their stores. Italians were attacked and killed in Mississippi in 1901; in West Virginia in 1906; and in Tampa in 1910. Women especially, who had led strikes in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912 and in Patterson, New Jersey in 1913, were the subject of derision and physical beatings.

Anna LoPizzo, a mill worker and striker walking the picket line in Lawrence, was shot to death by police in their rush to restore order.

On January 2, 1920, five hundred federal agents in 33 cities, often without warrants, and without knowledge of a crime, invaded the homes, shops, meeting halls and borrowed school rooms of Italian, Russian and Polish immigrants.

“Out of the sly and crafty eyes of many of them,” the Attorney General of the United States, A. Mitchell Palmer, said, “leap cupidity, cruelty, insanity and crime: from their lopsided faces, sloping brows, and misshapen features may be recognized the unmistakable criminal type.”

J. Edgar Hoover led the raids. His view was plain: “[C]ivilization faces its most terrible menace of danger...” Palmer told Congress: They are “... transplanted here by the agents and propagandists of revolution...” They had to be deported. The *Washington Post* agreed: “There is no time to waste on hair-splitting over [the] infringement of liberty.”

Of the 1,000 arrested in New England, 440 were herded publicly – in chains – into the filth and stench of prison cells and toilets at Deer Island in Boston Harbor. There was no heat or food or medical attention. Children roamed unattended.

Many were held in secret for months. Some were beaten. Most could not speak English. One federal judge in Massachusetts, after extensive hearings, deplored such conduct: “A mob is a mob,” he wrote, including when it is “made up of government officials acting under instructions of the Justice Department...” His decision to grant a writ of habeas corpus – giving hope to many – was later reversed by the Court of Appeals.

Finally, in 1920 – the year of Palmer's raids and the year Sacco and Vanzetti were arrested for murder and robbery in South Braintree, Massachusetts – nativist vigilante mobs invaded the Italian community of West Frankfort, Illinois. People were beaten, dragged from their homes. The neighborhood was burned. Italians fought back, but hundreds were left homeless.

To historian John Higham, author of *Stranger in the Land* (1967), a standard work in American nativism, “[no] pogrom has ever stained American soil ... [to] ... match the violence of the anti-Italian riot in southern Illinois.”

In the end, whole communities were stigmatized; parents made apprehensive about their children's lives and future because of their dark complexion or their last name or the presumption – among the police or judges or those in business or the universities – that the stereotype should dominate over facts and due process and law.

It did for Sacco and Vanzetti.

We are here today at Southern Connecticut State University to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the execution of Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco. I am Neil Proto; an attorney, a teacher and chair of the City of New Haven's Commemoration Committee. I also am a graduate of this University when it held itself out as a haven for the children of immigrants who felt the consequences of Palmer's ideas and the prejudice that resulted in the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti.

For the liberality of spirit of the University's President, Michael Adanti, and those who organized today's program - especially Patrick Dilger, the Director of Public Relations, Betsy Beacom, the Assistant Director, and Kika Matos, a lawyer and Director of the JUNTA for Progressive Action in New Haven – we are particularly grateful for the timeliness of our subject matter: The death penalty.

Ethnic and religious and racial stereotyping and the purpose and meaning of law and civil liberties have re-emerged in this country with a disquieting vengeance. It warrants continued vigilance by those who understand the insidious harm it causes. Our speakers and panelists are among them.

KLIENDIENST INTRODUCTION

I am pleased to introduce our first speaker, Dr. Patricia Kliendienst, to provide an introduction and a personal tone to today's program. A freelance writer and editor, Dr. Kliendienst is a visiting faculty member at both Yale and Wesleyan University. We are pleased to welcome her.

DUKAKIS INTRODUCTION

Governor Michael Dukakis is, in the history of these two men and in the values of individual dignity and fairness, a person of enduring stature and heroic importance. For reasons that reflect his own moral and ethical sense of justice, and based on a thorough and thoughtful understanding of the facts and the law, on August 23, 1977, he stepped to the podium in the State House and formally proclaimed that: “any stigma and disgrace should be forever removed from the names of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, from the names of their families and descendants, and so, from the name of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.”

It was not a popular act; to acknowledge, as he did, prejudice against foreigners and the intolerance of unorthodox ideas. And he will be the first to acknowledge that others, in public and private ways, had sought in vain to vindicate the dignity of these men and give solace to their families. But here he was, a Governor. And he acted with directness and courage and compassion and, as he stated, with “respect for truth and an enduring commitment to our nation's highest ideals.”

His words in that Proclamation touched the lives and values of many. None, perhaps, as strong as Spencer Sacco, Nicola's grandson, who stood by as the Proclamation was read. He told his grandmother, Rosina Sacco, and then flew to Italy to show the

Proclamation to Vanzetti's only remaining sister, Vincenzina.

And it is there, in Italy, in the Town of Torremaggiore, actually in the cemetery where Sacco's ashes are buried, that Michael Dukakis' courage is enshrined. I saw it only last year. In a distinct and quiet setting at the cemetery's gateway, atop a gracefully shaped stone monument to the life of Nicola Sacco, is engraved the words that the Governor proclaimed in 1977: that “any stigma and disgrace should be forever removed from the names of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti ...”

I am especially pleased to introduce the Honorable Michael Dukakis.