

"ONLY SILENCE IS SHAME"

The 70th Anniversary of the Deaths of Sacco and Vanzetti

BY NEIL THOMAS PROTO

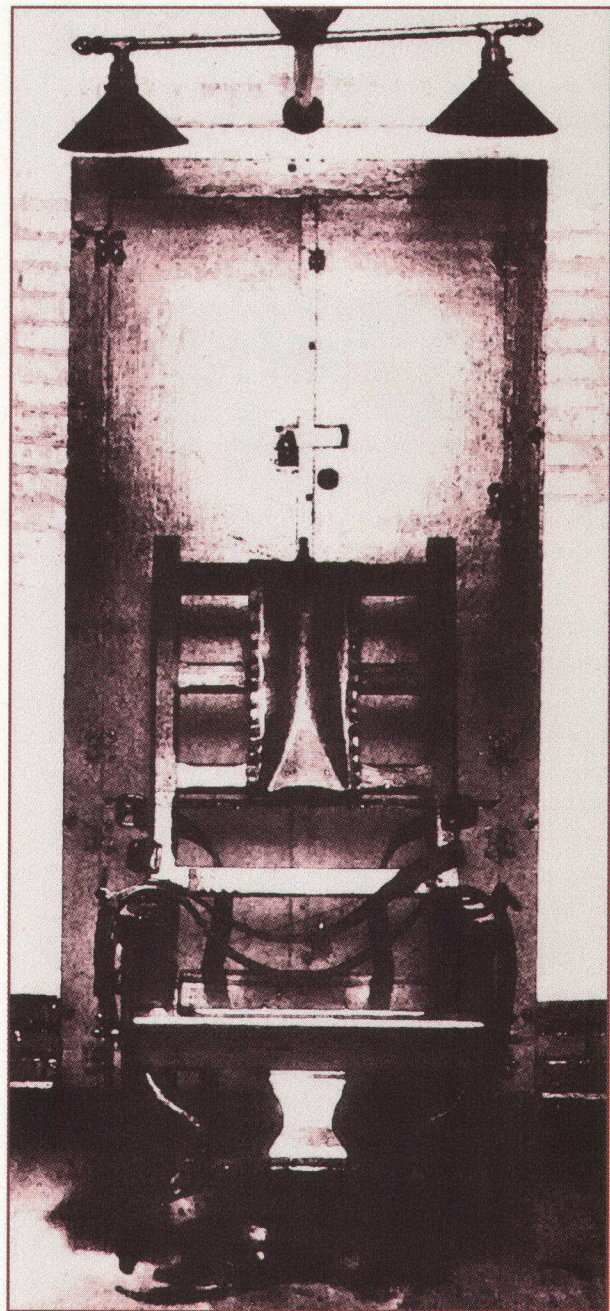
It is August 1927. Bartolomeo Vanzetti is sitting quietly in the Charlestown State Prison. His friend, Nicola Sacco, is nearby. They are being visited by friends and a reporter, invited into this sanctum to listen and record. Judge Webster Thayer has sentenced both to death. Everyone in the room now knows it:

"These men are to die in a straight wooden chair, just as the world begins its summer holidays."¹ Vanzetti, resolved, dignified, "the stamp of thought is in every feature,"² says gravely:³

"If it had not been for these thing, I might have live out my life, talking at street corners to scorning men. I might have die, unmarked, unknown, a failure. Now we are not a failure. This is our career and our triumph. Never in our full life can we hope to do such work for tolerance, for justice, for man's understanding of man, as now we do by an accident.

"Our words - our lives - our pains - nothing. The taking of our lives - lives of a good shoemaker and a poor fish peddler - all. That last moment belong to us - that agony is our triumph."

Upton Sinclair, already a nationally recognized writer and social activist, renowned for his vivid revelation of the horrors of the meat packing industry in *The Jungle*, read and later recorded these words in *Boston*. They also were reprinted in journals and newspapers and circulated widely. They were what Sinclair characterized as "the everyday stuff of Vanzetti's mind."⁴ From Sinclair's work, we have his judgment, written this way, in 1928:⁵



CORBIS-BETMANN

"History records that those who heard the Gettysburg address of Abraham Lincoln were ill pleased by it[.] But the future seldom chooses words which are flowery; it chooses those which have been wrung from the human heart in moments of great suffering. . . . Pass on, Bartolomeo Vanzetti, your work is done! . . . Fear not the executioner, not yet the raging slanderer — they are powerless to harm you[.] You have spoken the noblest words heard in America in two generations since Abraham Lincoln died!"

Sinclair's judgment stands on its merits. It was confirmed repeatedly.⁶ Its poignancy for Italian Americans should have reverberated throughout the nation and into the homes of all those tempered by the immigrant experience and seeking a tranquil future in a new land. It did not.

The "raging slanderer[s]" sought immediately to denigrate the words and the values that underlie them. In powerful ways and for almost a generation they largely succeeded. The Italian-American models easily within reach, those who spoke directly to the harsh plight and deep hopes of an entire generation, those that reflected the humanitarian values of social responsibility and community participation — from Carlo Tresca to A.P. Giannini — were denigrated in the public media, jailed, or deported to the hostility of Mussolini.

Two powerful forces remained. First, "so indelible was the impression [of their deaths]," wrote famed historian Arthur Schlesinger in 1948, "that it is common testimony that only two other occurrences in recent years have made a comparable impact on the public mind: the assault on Pearl Harbor and the sudden death of President Roosevelt."⁷ Second, the basic beliefs of Italian-Americans held strong, however carefully expressed: "the values actually lived by the large majority of Americans are on the whole not superior to those of . . . Americans of Italian origin. The immigrant Italians perceived this and held their own ideals without apology."⁸

During the 50 years following the deaths of Sacco and Vanzetti, through 1977, men and women throughout the nation sought to vindicate — through poetry, plays, novels and investigations — the intellectual and moral integrity and the innocence of both men. Sacco's letters to his son Dante were transformed into song and music; Vanzetti's "mastery of the English sentence which unquestionably establishes his right to a place among the creators of our literature,"⁹ also led to the reproduction and analysis of his words.¹⁰ In 1952, *Nation* magazine commemorated the 25th anniversary of the execution by placing Vanzetti's words on its front cover.

Despite these efforts at vindication, two impediments remained unmovable: the governments of the state of Massachusetts and the United States of America. During the trial, and through the appeals, the conduct of both was deceitful and unprincipled.

Harvard Law Professor Felix Frankfurter, who defended both men and was appointed later to the Supreme Court by President Franklin Roosevelt, was wiretapped without a court order.¹¹ A U.S. Department of Justice agent, who deceptively befriended Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee members, used his position to raise funds among Italian Americans contributing precious pennies and dollars. It was later disclosed he kept the money for his own use.¹²

At no time did the Justice Department believe either Sacco or Vanzetti committed the robbery and murders at South Braintree. In two affidavits filed with requests for a new trial in 1926, two former department agents, Fred J. Weyand and Lawrence Letherman, involved actively in the case, stated:

"I am also thoroughly convinced, and always have been, and I believe that it is and always has been the opinion of such Boston agents of the Department of Justice as had any knowledge on the subject, that these men had nothing whatever to do with the South Braintree murders, and that their conviction was the result of cooperation between the Boston agents of the Department of Justice and the district attorney."¹³

When J. William Thompson, Sacco and Vanzetti's lawyer, requested U.S. Attorney General John G. Sargent to open the department's files for judicial review, Sargent refused. At the close of his argument to Thayer for a new trial, Thompson said, "Is there anything so exalted in the office of the attorney general of the United States that the inference drawn against any other men who hold back documentary evidence should not be drawn in this case? . . . Are you going to say because Sacco and Vanzetti are Italians, because they are poor folks . . . we will let Mr. Sargent hold back what might set them free?"¹⁴

After both men were denied a pardon by Massachusetts Gov. Alvin Fuller, attorney Michael Angelo Musmanno rushed to Washington, D.C., to seek Supreme Court review. He again requested the attorney general to disclose the department's files. He would not.¹⁵

The Justice Department's integrity and constitutional duty to due process — already sullied by the terror and illegality of the Palmer raids — now were stained indelibly.

Those seeking vindication also were not deterred. They turned to Massachusetts. In 1937, a bust relief plaque of Sacco and Vanzetti, created by Gutzan Borglum, who had designed and sculpted Mount Rushmore, was presented to Massachusetts Gov. Farley. He refused to accept it.¹⁶ In 1947, the same plaque was again presented by Eleanor Roosevelt, Albert Einstein, and Herbert Lehman. It met the same fate.¹⁷

A young, Italian-American state senator, Alexander Cella, took up the mantle. In 1958 he introduced a bill in the Massachusetts legislature to grant a pardon to Sacco and Vanzetti. Although the opposition and prejudice was fierce and ultimately successful, Cella had garnered considerable support and, in the process, had educated his law clerk, a student at Harvard, Michael Dukakis.

"[S]ometimes, just sometimes, you can do what you really want to do," Gov. Dukakis said in 1977, as he stood alone in an anteroom to the legislature with Nicola Sacco's unseen grandson, Spencer, moments before reading his proclamation.¹⁸ Dukakis had decided against a pardon, which would have been an acknowledgement both men were guilty of a crime they denied committing.¹⁹ Instead, Dukakis recognized the "prejudice against foreigners" that permeated the trial and appeals, and that the "conduct of many of the officials involved . . . shed serious doubt on their willingness and ability to conduct the prosecution and trial . . . fairly and impartially."

He proclaimed Aug. 23, 1977, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti Memorial Day. The proclamation concluded "that any stigma and dis-

grace should be forever removed from Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, from their families and descendants, and so, from the name of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts." And, that the people of Massachusetts "resolve to prevent the forces of intolerance, fear and hatred from ever uniting to overcome the rationality, wisdom and fairness to which our legal system aspires."²⁰

Sacco, "brushing away tears," accepted on behalf of his family "and all those who have witnessed or been victims of similar injustices." He returned to his grandmother's home with the proclamation. "[S]he got intense, more than intense, just listening," he said. "At the end she smiled and nodded." Spencer took the proclamation to Italy and gave it to Vanzetti's only surviving sister, Vincenzina. He returned with a letter from Vincenzina to Gov. Dukakis. "I thank you not only for myself and my family but also on behalf of all who in Italy and throughout the world who have worked and are still working for this cause."²¹

This year will mark the 70th since the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. It is a moment that should be recognized in thoughtful ways.

First, revival of the story. Numerous possibilities exist. One is the reenactment of the trial in a law school setting. Harvard and Yale offer singular possibilities. The presentation of Maxwell Anderson's play *Winterset* (1935), and his less well-known predecessor, *Gods of The Lightning* (1927), as well as the five other plays that were written about these two men, also should occur.²²

There also exists more than 140 poems about Sacco and Vanzetti, including three by Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Justice Denied in Massachusetts," "Far" and "Two Sonnets in Memory." One survey of these works found that "not one poem has been discovered which supports the authorities and condemns the men."²³ This poetry warrants compilation and revival.


When the Sons of Italy Foundation next convenes for its annual National Education and Leadership Awards Gala or when its member lodges hold their own community meetings, let some moments be devoted to the story and to the grandeur attributed to Vanzetti's beliefs and words by Upton Sinclair and others. Those beliefs and words have

relevance today. Let us, too, revive the words and deep warmth in Sacco's letters to his son, Dante.

The heart of the challenge today — to understand the depth of the Italian-American unease during and long after these events — requires more original research through the numerous Italian language newspapers that circulated within the immigrant communities during the trial and *after* the execution, through a review of memoirs and letters, and through oral histories.²⁴

There is a powerful story here, of hope and repression and lingering effects, not yet told and understood fully. Many of those who could tell it are still with us. It came at the end of a history of violence and bigotry, from the lynchings in New Orleans in 1891 through the invasion of the Italian-American neighborhood in Frankfort, Ill., in 1920, that confronted that first generation of Italians to this country.²⁵

Finally, the 70th anniversary is an opportunity, with a moral underpinning, for President Clinton to recognize in a proclamation what Gov. Dukakis recognized on the 50th anniversary of the execution: Sacco and Vanzetti were treated with complete disregard for fairness, due process, justice and civility.

Government in Washington, D.C., set a shameful example to follow. The grotesquely intensive and painful aftermath of raids into Italian-American neighborhoods, to the deceptive, deceitful and, at times, malicious conduct of the Department of Justice agents during and after the trial, to the willful, uncaring withholding of information by Attorney General Sargent, warrants deep reflection about what kind of nation we want to be. It also warrants more: Are those now in power prepared to acknowledge publicly the harm caused by the United States in the name of the law? 

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Sinclair, Upton, *Boston*, (Albert and Charles Boni: New York, 1928), 615.

² Sinclair, *Boston*, 615; see Joughin, Louis G., Morgan, Edmund M., *The Legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti* (Harcourt Brace and Company, 1948), 448.

³ Id.

⁴ Sinclair, *Boston*, 616.

⁵ Sinclair, *Boston*, 616; Avrich, Paul, *Sacco and Vanzetti* (Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 1986), 15.

⁶ In *The Never-Ending Wrong* (Little Brown and Company: Boston, 1977), 8-9, Katherine Anne Porter said of Vanzetti: "He knew English very well not so much in grammar and syntax but for the music, the true meaning of the words." William G. Thompson said: "If Vanzetti had an education he would have been a Professor in Harvard College. He is one of the most gifted men I know of." *Nation*, (Dec. 27, 1958), 495.

⁷ Joughin and Morgan, *The Legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti*, Introduction by Arthur M. Schlesinger, xv.

⁸ Gambino, Richard, *Blood of My Blood*, (Anchor Press: New York, 1974), 304.

⁹ Joughin and Morgan, *The Legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti*, 500.

¹⁰ See *Nation*, "Last Letters Home", (August 24, 1963), 86. Two of Vanzetti's speeches were placed in *The Anthology of American Poetry*, *Nation* (December 27, 1958), 497.

¹¹ Jackson, Brian, *The Black Flag*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul: Boston, 1981), 117-119.

¹² Sacco-Vanzetti Case, Vol. V, Trans. 4502 (Aff'd of Frederick J. Weyand).

¹³ Sacco-Vanzetti Case, Vol. V, Trans. 4502, et seq. (aff'd of Frederick J. Weyand and Lawrence Letherman).

¹⁴ Sacco-Vanzetti Case, Vol. V, Trans. 4381; and Fraenkel, Osmond K., *The Sacco-Vanzetti Case*, (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1931), 130.

¹⁵ Fraenkel, *The Sacco-Vanzetti Case*, 182.

¹⁶ *Life Magazine*, September 6, 1937, 24.

¹⁷ Joughin and Morgan, *The Legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti*, xvi.

¹⁸ Jackson, *The Black Flag*, 102.

¹⁹ Id., 94-95.

²⁰ Id., The Proclamation is reproduced in full at 90; see also 98.

²¹ Id., 95, 102.

²² See Joughin and Morgan, *The Legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti*, 393-420; Felix, David, *Protest: Sacco-Vanzetti and the Intellectuals* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1985), 245.

²³ Joughin and Morgan, *The Legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti*, 384, 375-392.

²⁴ Recently I asked my aunt, Rose Sansone, now 80: "Do you remember, when you were young, the two Italians who were tried for -?" "Sacco and Vanzetti. They were innocent, you know. It was not right." She then hesitated, searching, "There was a song. I heard it. It was about them . . . It was not right." Gambino, *Blood of My Blood*, 122 (discussions with his grandfather).

²⁵ Gambino, Richard, *Vendetta*, (Doubleday and Company: Garden City, New York, 1977); *Blood of My Blood*, 119.