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Villafalletto: Vanzetti's Singular Journey Home

The Piedmont home of Bartolomeo Vanzetti beckons the author to discover what this symbol of prejudice and fear left behind as he journeyed to America in search of dreams only to find a nightmare.

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BY NEIL THOMAS PROTO

PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

The July sun reflected golden hues off the hay, sowed neatly in rows and baled like spooled thread, carefully and thoughtfully. The rows flowed toward the north and the gold changed to green, the soil rich in texture and purpose, corn, olives and beans mostly, still maturing and covering the plains and hillside. The flow of water, released by an unseen farmer to moisten the soil, was audible; and the wind gentle, slightly moving the grasses, wild flowers and fruit trees, pears, figs, and cherries, until they all melded and then disappeared into the light gray and snow-covered foothills of the Alps. It is the Piedmont. We are north of Cuneo and south of Turin, yet years and distances apart from both.

We entered Villafalletto from the west. The two-lane road curved simply, as we drove slowly past the beige and white stucco homes of farmers; red, violet and yellow flowers were arranged in boxes along their windowsills and walkways. Tall, angular trees were arranged deliberately, it seemed, to define further the setting's beauty and serve the practical value of protecting the soil from the corrosive power of the wind. It was easy to see, feel and hear why, in a different moment in time, this town was said to possess "unspeakable beauty," that required "a poet of the first magnitude" to capture its meaning for those who called it home.¹

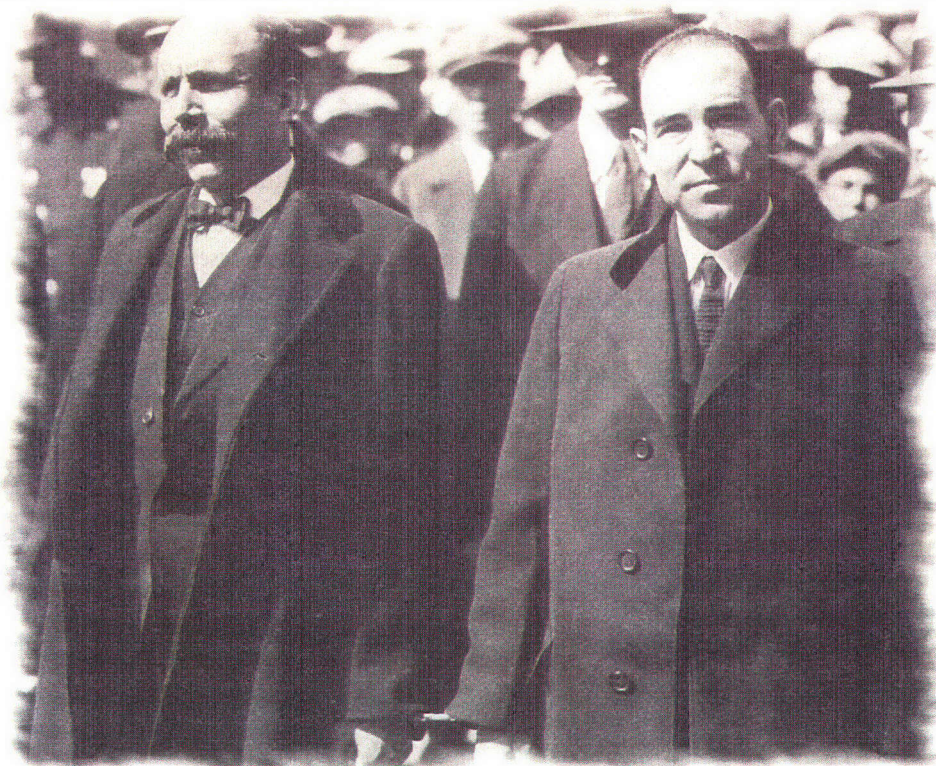
We reached the town proper. My brother, Richard, saw an old sign: *Via Stazione*. "The railroad station," I said and hoped it was still there. We turned west down a long, tree-lined road, narrow

and unkept, the Alps still visible before us, until, with some anxiety and then gratification, we came to a clearing and the road's end. We stood at the now-abandoned railroad station. It was small, gray and unadorned from neglect, its once-red stucco exterior scarred by time and weather, its tracks now used only for freight passing through. Visible for the passengers that once approached the station or for those who sought to look back was the still undisturbed sign on the station's southern wall: Villafalletto.

Inside, the station's walls were crumbling. Its floor was littered with old and tattered train schedules. But with unmistakable clarity was painted the word *bigliatteca*, where tickets once were purchased, and above a doorway leading into a musty, small area still lined with benches, *Sala D'Aspetto*, that once welcomed those who awaited a journey.

I stood alone in the quietude. It was here in June 1908 that Bartolomeo Vanzetti left his home and family to journey to America. He





Bartolomeo Vanzetti (left) and Nicola Sacco arrive at the Massachusetts state courthouse four days before their death sentence was carried out April 23, 1927.

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was 19 years old. In the moment, the soft tones of whispered words, the tender touch and subtle unease of his father and two sisters—the apprehension and longing of departure by a loved one—seemed palpable. The terror that this 19-year-old and his family would confront could not have been suspected.



The Massachusetts State House was “a fortress surrounded by armed men, the search lights which usually illuminated the golden dome now turned upon the crowds in the streets.”² The night air was humid, stagnant, and no comfort to those who were shoved into place by the flank of a policeman’s horse or who, with children in tow, wanted this moment of shame to endure; to hold its place in a longer memory. It was August 22, 1927. The scheduled execution of Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco was less than two hours away.

Luigia Vanzetti, Bartolomeo’s oldest sister, did not speak English. Her plea, the intention in her heart could not have been plainer. She entered the governor’s office slowly, her face aged well beyond her 36 years, her body frail.

The voyage from Villafalletto by train, steamer, and guarded automobile had been long. The rallies, chanting, anger, and marches in Paris, New York, and Boston were painful and alien to her experience and temperament and larger than her purpose. What Gov. Alvin Fuller saw was a slender woman, dressed in a black sheath with long sleeves, her hair pushed back and up; a dignity and quiet strength in her stature. At Fuller’s request, she sat; erect, focused, rosary beads in her folded hands. She was the matriarch; and with her mother’s death, the heart of her family. She also was now the advocate, not for a cause but for her brother’s life.

“Do not take it so hard...after all they were just a couple of wops,” the governor’s secretary told those still in the anteroom. Fuller already had denied a request for clemency written by Vanzetti with logic and law and eloquence. His politeness when Luigia Vanzetti entered aside, Alvin Fuller was now the apologist; the defender not of right but of expediency and a cultural and racial arrogance that deeply pervaded America. Vanzetti knew it.³

Luigia was not alone. Michael Angelo Musmanno, 29, a trial lawyer from Pennsylvania, diminutive in stature, resolute in determination and uncannily skilled in his use of words, served as her translator. Rosina Sacco, already tempered by the harsh disappointment and the shallow pretense of Massachusetts’ jurisprudence, was there to make her own plea, yet again. These two women, who met only recently and could not have known much of each other’s past or character or hopes for a private life, were bound inextricably at this moment and visible to the world.

Luigia made her plea, softly, deliberately. Musmanno translated “sentence by sentence.” Fuller listened. She finished. With a smoothness that piqued Musmanno and Luigia recognized immediately, Fuller began his rejection, his charade at helplessness.

She fell to her knees, rosary beads held tightly, her heart laid bare, the words touched by her tears. “But governor,” she said, “I understand you can do something. They tell me you have the supreme power to help my brother...You are a governor.” She would not countenance his charade. “The last words of my father before I came here”—the whispered tones, at the railroad station, at the end of the long, tree-lined street: “Bring back Barto with you.”

The governor remained still. Luigia, her face quivering, her strength dissipated, said slowly: “Let me take my Barto back to Italy.”⁴



We drove into town slowly, through its narrow, sloping streets. The stucco facades, still “adorned with pastel colors and red tile roofs,”⁵ formed connected dwellings, with potted flowers and solid wood doorways providing distinctive character to each home. We stopped in the central square; the Piazza Falletti.

It was almost one in the afternoon. Saturday. The streets were largely silent. Before us was a wide thoroughfare, the Via Vittori Veneto that led to the base of the town; and a large church, its campanile distinctive, in the Piazza Giuseppe Mazzini, exactly as Vanzetti and others had described it.

Nearby, a young man, fair-complected, dressed neatly in grayish-blue work clothes, was loading small, new engines onto his truck with a mechanical lift. My brother approached him. “Scusi,” he said. As if seeking to put us at ease, he responded quickly: “Prego, prego.” Richard explained who we were. “Ah, si, si.” And then he asked: “Dovè ... la casa Bartolomeo Vanzetti?”

Mario Fruttero, as we later learned, owned a small agricultural machine business in town. His brow furrowed at first; intent, as if thinking, “lost, they must be looking for a resident, perhaps someone I know,” and then, in a moment, his face lit, his smile broadened, his hand touched his forehead gently; “ah, Vanzetti!” His animated pride was frontal.

He walked us to the piazza’s center and described with deliberate care two locations. The nearby home where the Vanzetti family lived when Bartolomeo was executed and the home of his birth, on Via Umberto, at the base of the town. Both were visible from where we

stood. We shook his hand. “Mille grazie,” we repeated. “No, no, prego, prego.”

We walked in front of Vanzetti’s birthplace. He was born in 1888, when Italy, as a nation, was less than a generation old and the grand but contentious ideals of democracy and liberty advocated passionately by Giuseppe Garibaldi and Giuseppe Mazzini still resonated in literature, newspapers, and town councils. The *farmacia* was down to my left, prominent among the other interconnected buildings. The pharmacist, I knew, at an earlier time, had been an intellectual guide for Vanzetti’s self-education, when he was a young man, “the principles of human-

ism and equality of rights begin to make a breach in [his] heart.”⁶ A few blocks to my right was the Maira River, flowing down from the Alps, where Vanzetti, as he described it, had fished, walked, and sought refuge and contemplation at hard moments, especially after the death of his mother to cancer. “Many times,” he had written, “going to the [river’s] 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.”⁷

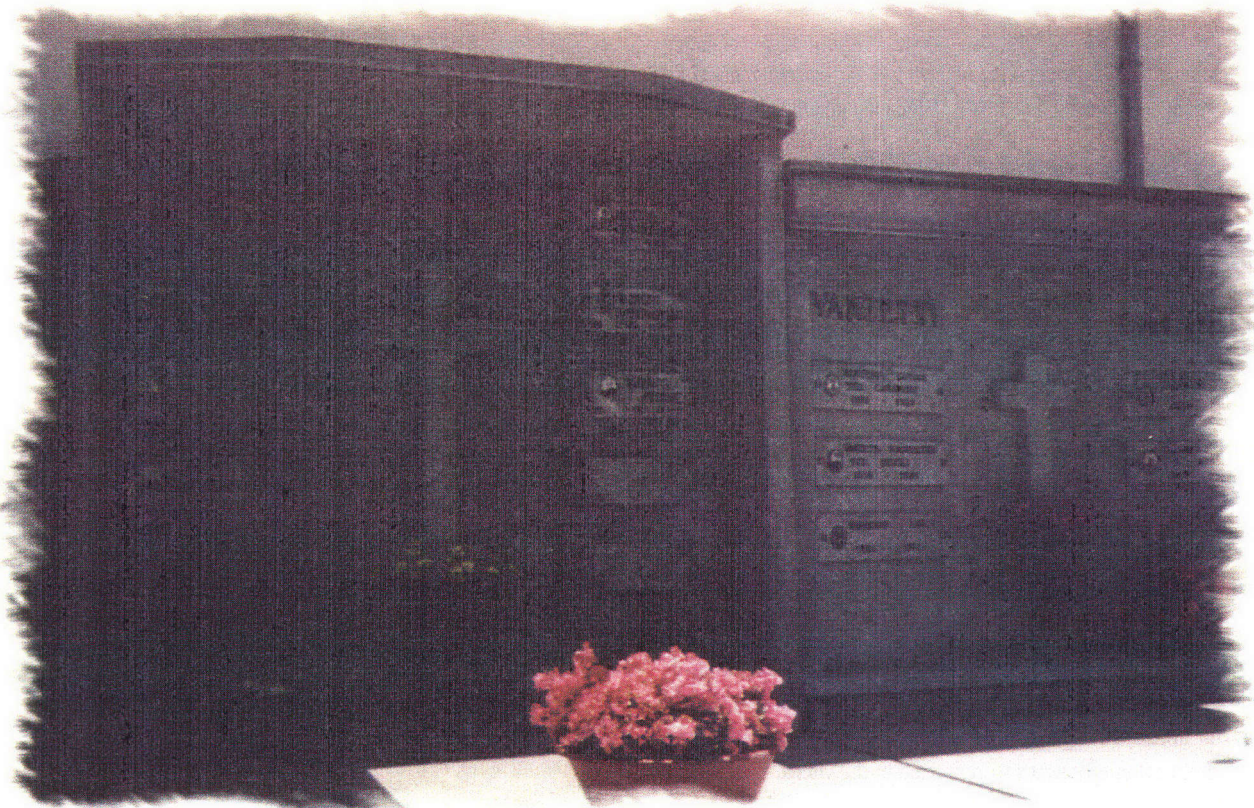
Behind me, on the wall of the house, was a plaque. It read:

In this house was born Bartolomeo Vanzetti A faithful apostle who paid with his life For the love of the humble 1888-1927



The Vanzetti family home at the time of Bartolomeo’s death in 1927.

The humble, *umile* in Italian, its meaning actually stronger, deeper: the downtrodden, the lowly worker, those without a voice or food. It was the way he lived his life, the way friends, neighbors, the policeman who walked the streets of North Plymouth spoke of him, and later testified on his behalf, before his life as a free man was ended.

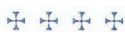


The Vanzetti family vault at the Villafalletto cemetery

The street and sidewalk around us remained silent, as if, in that moment, life was still. "Close your eyes," my brother said. "Think of what it was like. Here. For him."

But I couldn't form an image, not of him walking to school, or waving to a friend or going to church with his sister. I knew too much. It was here, in this neighborhood, that armed fascists in brown shirts, with boots and pistols and arrogance, invaded the Vanzetti household—an elderly widower, inconsolable; his children, frightened, vulnerable. Mussolini's goons searched for evidence to prove his son's guilt. They took letters without permission or scruples. In the end, they inflicted only pain and humiliation.⁸

I could form these images. But I could not appreciate fully the terror.



Bartolomeo Vanzetti had entered America through Ellis Island. Like many other Italian immigrants, he boarded with others in vermin-infested tenements; worked 12- and 14-hour days in dank, unhealthy conditions and sought refuge in the cool nights and open vistas of the still fledgling Central Park. He was single. With his freedom he decided to move east to Connecticut and then to Massachusetts, looking for geography and people that felt like home. He found it in Meriden and Middletown, Conn., and then North Plymouth. But from the moment he arrived in New York, he confronted the fundamental reality many others already knew: "No other whites in America suffered the brutality inflicted upon the Italian."⁹

With all his flaws and contrary to his characterization by others as a "militant anarchist," there is no documented, conclusive or even probative, evidence that prior to his arrest in May 1920 and his indictment for the murders and robbery in South Braintree, Mass., Vanzetti had ever engaged or collaborated in a violent act.¹⁰ "He was an idealist," Upton Sinclair wrote, "if ever I knew one, a gentle, quiet, simple man, with a wonderful dream of justice for the working class and peace on earth, a dreamer and a religious man in the true sense of that word."¹¹

In America, who he was and what he believed in cost Vanzetti his life.



Two hundred thousand mourners filled the north end of Boston and followed the funeral procession as the hearses made their way amidst heavy rain and vicious attacks by Boston's police to the cemetery at Forest Hills.

At the far end of Forest Hills, surrounded by the simple grandeur of the landscape's brown and green hues, rich from the still falling rain, the motorcade stopped. A brief ceremony, touched by reverence and unconstrainable bitterness, occurred in the small, white chapel. The bodies were cremated and the ashes intermingled. Rosina, her two children, and Luigia Vanzetti remained in their hearse throughout; tearful, disquieted, uneasy at the enormity of the emotional outpouring and the political forces the execution had unleashed.

In the public mind, since their arrest and throughout the literature, Sacco and Vanzetti have been inexorably linked. There is no question that to Italian immigrants, Italian-Americans, and in the dark chapter

they hold in this nation's history, that linkage is immutable and appropriate. There also is no reason to believe Luigia Vanzetti wanted her brother cremated or that she or Rosina Sacco wanted the ashes of both men mixed together.

Two urns were created. Luigia Vanzetti divided her own with Alphonsina Brini. The Brini home on Suosso's Lane in North Plymouth is where Vanzetti had rented a room for years. Alphonsina's son, Beltrando, had befriended and was mentored by Vanzetti. The young boy testified with a special grace on his friend's behalf. "[He] creat[ed] in me an image so I could lift up my head and not feel the burden of this prejudice against the Italians."¹²

Luigia took an urn back to Italy. She was defeated, empty; there, near her, were the ashes of her brother, who, deep in her heart she knew, did not commit this crime. She arrived at "the Villafalletto railway station in a lead-lined railway car, a funerary car...[T]he ashes were divided by an employee of the town." The second urn remained at the railway station, awaiting its journey to Sacco's home in Torremaggiore.¹³

Bartolomeo's youngest sister, Vincenzina, then 24 years old, described what happened. "While the bells were ringing one urn was carried by our house, through the village, where every shop was closed in mourning. Bartolomeo's ashes were buried in the village cemetery. All the people were there; it was like a funeral."¹⁴


In his last letter home, Vanzetti had written: "I swear to you that I am completely innocent of this...crime. Do not be ashamed of me.... If I must die through the injustice of men and circumstances, you may be sure that none of my enemies will be mourned as I am." The physical ordeal was over only for him. It weighed fatally on Luigia. She "became permanently old. She suffered and cried so much that something went out in her brain. She became more and more depressed. She could not move her legs, her back. She had a total nervous breakdown, but she was conscious to the end."¹⁵

Luigia Vanzetti died in 1950. She was 59 years old.

Mario Fruttero gave us directions to the cemetery on the town's periphery, only a few minutes from Vanzetti's home. Like others in Italy, it is enclosed by a wall, its location deliberately set amidst beautiful terrain and gentle views of open fields, blue sky and the snow-covered peaks of the Alps, as if there can be no higher meaning in life than the reverence, care, and afterlife of family. Below every name is an encased photograph, perhaps the last one taken or the one the family believes captures the character or the best likeness in this singular journey for others to know.

We walked through the cemetery's gated entranceway. To the right, set back beyond a small neatly hedged piazza is the Famiglia Vanzetti. Its large, pale-gray flat stone, shielded with a canopy, now lists the entire family. Bartolomeo is below his father, Giovanni. To their right is Luigia, whose photograph is below her mother, Giovanna. Vincenzina, who died in 1994, rests below Luigia. A large crucifix separates the genders. A garland of fresh flowers, red carnations and yellow mums, rested neatly at the stones' base.

I walked closer. The photograph was familiar. It is Vanzetti; not near death or even during the trial. It is earlier, in 1918, when, as a young man, the meaning of life's promise was his alone to fulfill.

It is difficult to tell, but as we left Villafalletto, I believed the Vanzettis sought, perhaps with only modest success, to have Bartolomeo's life entwined only with their own. It was not to ignore or belittle his words of courage, his friendship with Sacco or the larger drama that unfolded. In the end, it was to have him settle in peace, as he was known by those he loved, at home in Italy in the "unspeakable beauty" of Villafalletto. 

Neil Thomas Proto practices law in Washington, D.C., and is an adjunct professor of public policy at The George Washington University. In July 2000 he visited Villafalletto with his brother.

Footnotes

1. *The Letters of Sacco and Vanzetti*. New York: Viking Press (1928), p. 207-208.
2. Sinclair, Upton. *Boston*. New York: Albert Boni (1928), p. 709.
3. Feuerlicht, Roberta. *Justice Crucified*. New York: McGraw Hill (1977), p. 402-404 and 69-72; 368, 372-373.
4. Musmanno, Michael Angelo. *After Twelve Years*. New York: Knopf (1939), p. 382-387.
5. Avrich, Paul. *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press (1991), p. 13.
6. Vanzetti, Bartolomeo. *The Story of a Proletarian Life*. (1923), p. 17; See also Pugliese, Stanislao. *Carlo Rosselli, Socialist, Heretic and Antifascist Exile*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (1999), p. 36.
7. *The Story of a Proletarian Life*. p. 7.
8. *Justice Crucified*. p. 184, 429-430.
9. *Justice Crucified*. p. 70.
10. *Sacco and Vanzetti, The Anarchist Background*. p. 15. Avrich and his followers sought to bolster their specialty in "anarchism" by co-opting and distorting the complex lives and celebrated deaths of Sacco and Vanzetti into one dimension that neither describes these men nor bears on their guilt. cf. *Justice Crucified*. ("I cannot agree...that the specifics of Italian-American anarchy have much to do with the case."), p. xi-xii.
11. *Anarchist Background*. p. 37. Avrich posits a legal burden of proof nowhere used in America to judge guilt; ("nor...can their innocence be established beyond any shadow of a doubt" at p. x) in a book that does not analyze any evidence related to the trial.
12. *Sacco-Vanzetti Case, Transcript of the Record* (Supplemental Volume, Including Bridgewater Case). Appel Publishing (1969); p. 257 et seq. *Justice Crucified*. id., p. 170-177.
13. Kaiser, David and William Young. *Postmortem, New Evidence in the Case of Sacco and Vanzetti*. Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press (1985), p. 159-164.
14. *Justice Crucified*. p. 414.
15. *Justice Crucified*. p. 429.