My Prisons:
a Written Account

Silvio Pellico

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A WRITTEN ACCOUNT

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Silvio Pellico's Biography before the Jail

Pellico was born in Saluzzo in 1789. He was educated in Turin, where his father owned a grocery-store, and then in Lyon by a wealthy relative, De Rubod. In France he was stimulated by the ideas of Enlightenment and Rationalism, what caused him the loss of faith in his religious beliefs. He intensified his literary interests, studying both classical and modern languages, in particular French, German and English.

In 1809 he moved back to Milan, where he enjoyed a lively cultural background, making acquaintance of illustrious important writers like Monti and Foscolo. His first job was as a teacher of the French language and literature at the boarding school of the military orphans in Milan.

After the fall of the Kingdom of Italy and the return of the Austrians in Lombardy, Pellico lost his job. He became preceptor at Count Briche's house.

In 1815 his work *Francesca da Rimini* was successfully acted in Milan (Lord Byron translated it into English).

In 1816 he was preceptor at Count Luigi Porro Lambertenghi's house for his two children Giacomo and Giulio. The count's palace was the meeting point of the Milanese cultural aristocracy. Here was founded by F. Confalonieri and L.P. Lambertenghi the review '*Il*

Conciliatore', whose editor-in-chief was Pellico. It was published from September 1818 until October 1819 publishing 118 numbers. It was the ideal follower of the progressive review *'Il Cafè'* of P. Verri, dealing with arts, politics, law, economy, science. Among the associates were L. di Breme, E. Visconti, G. Berchet, G. Pecchio, G. Romagnosi, P. Borsieri. It was censored and suppressed by the Austrian authority for its daring ideas of freedom and national arousing.

1820 was a crucial year for Pellico. He fell in love with Teresa Bartolozzi, whom he wanted to marry. In that same year he knew Pietro Maroncelli, a twenty-four-year-old from Forlì, who was setting up a unit associated to Carbonarism in Milan. On the twentieth of August 1820 Pellico joint it. A letter of Maroncelli to his brother in Bologna was intercepted by the Austrian police. That was the beginning of the trials against the Lombard Carbonari. The sixth of October Maroncelli was arrested; on the thirteenth of that same month Pellico followed that same fate.

I – The Prison of St Margherita in Milan

On Friday the thirteenth of October 1820 I was arrested and imprisoned in the Austrian prison of St Margherita in Milan. I was accused of treason[1] towards Austria being an active member of the Carbonarism.

[1] Treason: the crime of doing something that could cause danger to your country.

My cell was on the ground floor with a window that looked onto a yard. I could hear the frantic[2] chants[3] associated with the coming and going of other prisoners. A century ago the building was a monastery: saints, penitent virgins praised the Lord with devoted hymns and prayers. Now curses, shameless songs of felons[4] resounded. 'And what about in another century?' I was meditating, 'who will breath in these cells? … Time will only tell!'

Yesterday I was one of the happiest man in the world, today I have lost my freedom. From here I will not come out, if not to be delivered to the executioner! Well, the day after my death, for me will be as if I had expired in a palace and buried with the best honours.

Thinking over the passing of time strengthened my spirit, but the thought of my family – father, mother, two brothers and two sisters – broke my heart. Three months earlier I had gone to visit my parents, one of my brothers and two sisters, in Turin, after being separated from them for a few years. We were a close knit family, and this visit proved to be an emotional one. So therefore departure from them had broken my heart once again. Due to the intensity of this reflection I shut the window feeling drained by this thought and fell asleep.

Waking up the first night in prison was indescribable! When I saw the prison walls staring back at me, my soul seemed to be barren[5] and

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[2] Frantic: very busy, hectic.
[3] Chant: words or phrases that a group of people shout or sing again and again.
[4] Felon: a person who has committed a crime.
[5] Barren: empty.

cheerless. I thought almost in a frenzy: 'Am I here? How is it possible? Is this not a dream? So yesterday I was arrested, they interrogated me.' My attention turned to my parents: 'Who will give them the strength to stand such a blow[6]?' Such a shock was followed by my inner voice that seemed to say: 'He whom all the afflicted invoke and love! He who gave the mother the strength to follow her son on the Golgota, and to stay at the feet of his cross.' That was the first time religion triumphed in my heart. Before my faith was half-hearted[7], doubts thronged[8] my mind. If God exists, as a consequence of his justice, in a so unjust world there will be a second life for man: so the soundness to aspire to it by loving God and his neighbour, that is the climax of Christianity. In prison I resolved to accept this conclusion and from now on I declared myself Christian.

At midnight two warders paid me a visit only to find that I was not of the best of company due to my imprisonment. The following morning they returned and found me a little more cordial. Tirola, one of the two warders, told me that scoundrels[9] were usually more annoyed the second day of prison than the first one, unlike me. It was sign, according to him, that I was not a scoundrel. After having offered me some tobacco, a brief conversation got under way. At length I asked him: 'How can you look so cheerful living among wretched people?' His answer was: 'You'll believe it's a sort of indifference before people's pains; exactly I

[6] Blow: a hard hit with the hand or a weapon.
[7] Half-hearted: without enthusiasm.
[8] To throng: to crowd.
[9] Scoundrel: a rogue, a dishonest,, immoral person.

don't know why I look so, but I must admit that sometimes seeing people cry hurts me.' For the first time in my life the thought that a jailer could be a good person occurred to me. Later he brought me some coffee. Availing myself of his confidence, I politely requested him to take a note to my friend Pietro Maroncelli, arrested a week before me. Tirola was within an inch of smiling but bethought himself and managed to suppress it; on further reflection he narrowed his eyes and surveyed me once more from head to foot, and said: 'No, sir. And if a warder will accept it, take care that he will betray you!'

The interrogation went on for several days: it was an endless answering to many questions before the Austrian police, suspended only for lunch and in the evening. It was only then that I could rethink of what I had said and of what I had answered to them. Then, as soon as the interrogations finished, I began to feel the weight of solitude, as I had now nothing to keep me occupied: I was allowed to have a Bible, a book about Dante, and to visit the small library in the prison. To ease my captivity, I began to memorise one of Dante song a day, and to read attentively the Bible. This last one gave me a new lease[10] of life, teaching me the importance of praying, which means to dedicate time to God, to adore God heartily. By praying to God the weight of solitude little by little began to vanish and I felt ease with my inner tension. Needless to say, being free is better than being in prison, but also in the misery of a prison you can be in peace, if you perceive the presence of God. You must realize that the joys of

[10] Lease: chance.

the world are fleeting[11], that the real good is inside your conscience and not in exterior things. This was the conviction that I worked out in the first month of prison, that rather gladdened[12] my heart. With this, instead of being a man with a life ahead of him, my destiny was either the scaffold[13], or a long prison; therein I had to adapt myself to the situation: 'I will breath until they let me breath, and when they take it away, I'll do like all terminal patients: I'll die.'

During that time I had made acquaintance with a deaf and dumb[14] child, of about five or six. His parents were convicts because of robbery, and the child was maintained by the police with other children under the same condition. The child came under my window, laughed at me and communicated with gesture. Sometimes I threw him a piece of bread and he was happy. Once a warder allowed him to enter into my cell: he ran to hug me, giving a cry of joy and caressing me. I never knew his name; he did not know it. He was always merry. Surely living in a prison is the limit of unluckiness, and yet that child looked as happy as a child playing in the sand.

In my ill luck I was lucky, because my cell was on the ground floor facing a courtyard, where I could talk with that dear child. We said to each other many things through the infinite expressions of physiognomy. By repeating our gesture we improved our understanding. I had been always fond of children's education. For a few years I had been preceptor of Giacomo and Giulio

[11] Fleeting: lasting only a short time.
[12] To gladden: to make someone feel pleased.
[13] Scaffold: a platform used to execute criminals.
[14] Deaf and dumb: unable to hear and speak.

Porro, sons of Count Luigi Porro Lambertenghi[15]. I loved them as much as if they were my sons. God knows how many times in prison I had thought of them, in the hope they could have a good teacher, who loved them like I did. Sometimes I said to myself: 'What bad luck for me! Once I taught two noble and talented children, now my pupil is a poor, deaf and dumb child, a son of robber.' That discouraged and confused me. But as soon as I heard the cry of that unlucky child, blood rushed to my head, like a father who heard his son's voice for the first time, and his sight took away from me every bad thought. 'What guilt does he have, if he is poor, disabled and son of a robber? An innocent soul is always to be respected.' So I thought, and day after day I saw to him more and more devoutly.

As I was concerned about him, one day two warders came and moved me into another cell, on the first floor, in the opposite side of the courtyard, from where I could not see that child. On crossing the courtyard I saw him astonished, sad, sitting on the ground: he understood that he had lost me.

My new lodging was uncomfortable. A little, dark, filthy[16] room, full of drawings and inscriptions on the walls. Many were names and countries of convicts; others were offences against false friends, against themselves, against judges, etc.; others were short

[15] L. P. Lambertenghi (1780-1860) was promoter of the economic and cultural progress of Milan after the Congress of Vienna. His house became the meeting point of Romantic intellectuals, where *Il Conciliatore* was thought out. He was Carbonaro and in 1821 went into exile to Turin, then Paris and London.

[16] Filthy: very dirty.