

THE MEMOIRS OF CARDINAL PACCA

Probably the most illustrious prisoner ever to grace the grim cells of the fortress was **Cardinal Bartolomeo Pacca**.

Born into a noble Neapolitan family, from whom he inherited the title of Marquis, he studied in Naples and Rome. Pope Pio VI called him to become one of his secret chamberlains (1785) and nominated him Bishop in partibus of Damietta and Nunzio in Cologne. Later, the Pope entrusted him with the Apostolic Nunziature at the court of Louis XVI, but the tide of events and the deposition of Louis XVI prevented him from reaching Paris. He moved to Lisbon (1794-1801), and fought against the heretics of the University of Coimbra before receiving the holy Purple (promotion to Cardinal). He resolutely fought the Napoleonic regime, and was nominated Pro-secretary of State (18th June 1809) following the entry of the French into Rome.

In 1809, with the contrast between Napoleon and Pope Pio VII becoming more acute, the Pope excommunicated Napoleon who then ordered the Pope's arrest, along with that of Pacca on the 6th July 1809. Crossing Tuscany and Piedmont, they were brought to Grenoble. The Pope was imprisoned in Savona and his Minister in Fenestrelle. Pacca's detention lasted until 1813, date in which the agreement signed between the Pope and the Emperor (25th Jan 1813) permitted him to rejoin the Pope

at Fontainebleau; here he immediately united himself with the so-called "black" Cardinals who counseled the Pope to denounce the recent agreement. This the Pope did, cutting off the Napoleonic regime's last hopes of gaining the support of the Catholics.

Returning to Rome after the departure of Napoleon for Elba, he created a State junta which took up government in the name of the absent Pope. Obligated to flee due to the advancement of Murat, he quickly returned to the service of Pope Pio VII (7th June 1815). He was initially spokesman at the Congress of Vienna, but was substituted by Cardinal Consalvi, a more able diplomat and less of a reactionary. Pacca, nominated Governor of Rome, was strongly in favour, in agreement with the "zealot" movement who exercised great influence on the mind of Pio VII, of suppressing the entire set of Napoleonic changes, from the civil law code to street lighting, and retiring to the former situation. As preceptor of the Academy of Archeology, he issued the famous edict (the Pacca edict) aimed at impeding the exodus from Rome of the artistic treasures conserved in private galleries (1820). In 1830 he became the Bishop of Ostia and Velletri. He left a number of written memorials concerning the main facts of his life.

He affirmed that for an Italian, being condemned to Fenestrelle was considered as dreadful as a condemnation to Siberia would be in the eyes of someone from the northern part of Europe, and went on to say "I know

not how painful might it be for a Pole or a Russian to depart their country, or how terrible might banishment to Tobolsk or Kamchatska seem to them: I know only that for those who are born in the gentle clime of southern Italy, in the villages surrounding that pleasant province of Earthly works, close to Vesuvius, the mere thought of any permanence in those cold and inhospitable Alps is most unpleasant. As you know, the fortress of Fenestrelle is built on an Alp, one which is part of a chain of mountains separating Piedmont from the Dauphinate. The village of Fenestrelle, which lies at the foot of this Alp belongs to the Valley of the Prato Gelato (frozen field), one of these valleys which due to the Treaty of the year 1713 (Utrecht) was detached from the Dauphinate and ceded to the Royal House of Savoy. They are most noted in the geography books as being the only parts of Italy where the Protestant religion is tolerated for public worship, and are populated by thousands of heretics known as “Barbetti”, from the beards which their preachers used to wear long ago. (...)

Fenestrelle is a small village of about 800 souls, and probably would not have the honour of being reported on any map were it not for this famous fortress. For most months of the year there reigns the most rigid of winters, and in some parts of the surrounding hills the snow never melts completely, but . . . Ubi deliquit nondum prior, altera venit . . . , and here and there can be found unmelted areas even in the months of July and August. In autumn, just a few days after the snow has fallen and covered almost everything in sight, frequently even the walls of the houses, driven by an impetuous wind, it hardens and becomes

similar to a sheet of vitreous material, making it seem like living in a village of crystal. Furthermore, on some days, from the nearby mountains there falls a thick mist which not only blots out the sky but makes it impossible to see anything that is not close by. (...)

There, the winter nights are terrible for their length, sometimes lasting 16 hours of deepest darkness; and the sombre silence which reigns in this vast solitude is interrupted only by the whistle of these impetuous winds, or from time to time by the frightening roar caused by the fall of enormous masses of snow, called “avalanches” and by the cries of ferocious beasts, which driven by hunger, come close to the walls of the fortress in their search for food. In the winter it is rare for any bird to enter that dour valley. Only the eagles which nest among the rocks of the mountain tops are lords of the skies and traverse these hills on distended wings to fly regally over the fortress. (...) This great edifice consists of two main parts united by a vast covered staircase diverse thousands of steps in extent. At the top of the mountain there is the fort called “Delle Valli”, and lower down, close to the village, there lies Fort San Carlo, where the prisoners and the garrison live. Between the lower slopes of the mountain and another high Alp called “Albergian” there lies a small valley through which runs the stream called Clusone. At the foot of the Albergian, immediately in front of Fort San Carlo, there lies another fort called “Mutin” or Tumultuante, built on the orders of Louis XIV to the design, so I was told, of the famous Marshall Vauban, to keep the riotous Barbetti under control.

The Fortress of Fenestrelle was built on the orders of King Vittorio Amedeo II, great grandfather of the present King, to close off any access to Italy on that side of Piedmont by the French. Nature and human cunning have contributed to rendering it extremely strong, in fact I would go so far as to say that it is very likely impregnable. It is mainly built on solid rock and is well defended by bulwarks and by smaller forts which are ably situated and arranged. The French government, before dreaming up their vast project of extending the southern borders of the republic beyond the Alps, had already decreed its demolition, as was carried out for the “Brunetta” and other fortresses in Piedmont, and preparations for its demolition had already been made: but thanks to the intervention of a French general, this was suspended, and the fortress was destined, some time later, to become one of the many state prisons for that “liberal and tolerant” government! Whoever counseled this new destination either had no knowledge of the place or paid no heed to human sentiment.

It did not seem surely the place (in which, some years earlier the government of Turin had transported from the seaports those condemned to the galleys), it did not seem, I was saying, suitable for the imprisonment of those not of a vulgar condition. The inclemency and bitterness of the climate, the poverty of the nearby village, which was unable to furnish those things necessary to alleviate the discomfort even of those able to pay, the lack of both a doctor and a decent herbalist for cases of illness made this imprisonment extremely depressing and woeful to those who were unfortunate enough to have it befall them. (. . .)

Having crossed the drawbridge we entered the fort, the entrance to which seemed more like a cave or a dark grotto. On the small square which lay before the habitation and place of detention for the prisoners there stood Major Jamas with a few soldiers of the garrison. No sign of the prisoners could be seen, as they had been given orders to be in their cells by the time when it was supposed that I would arrive at the fort. On entering the building on my right, I found myself in a dimly lit corridor, as the ceiling was very low with only one window at the far end. To my right along the corridor I saw the cells, well locked and secured with great bolts, with the last one, destined for me, standing open. I had scarcely entered the room when the Governor, with a serious but respectful air, informed me that he had been given instructions and orders of the highest rigour regarding my person; that it was not permitted for me to communicate with anyone, not merely with those outside the fortress, but even with the other prisoners; thus he could not allow me to walk freely on the small square of the fort, where the other prisoners were permitted; that I was absolutely forbidden to put pen to paper, and so far as letters addressed to me were concerned, they would be given to me only after they had been first seen and examined, either in Turin or Fenestrelle; and having then remarked to him that it would be sufficient for me to write a few lines to someone of my family in his presence, offering to give him the letter to read before it was sealed, he replied that he regretted he could not permit me to do so. (. . .)

The Governor concluded his discourse by saying that provided they were not contrary to the orders he had received from the

government, he would seek to do what was possible to alleviate my unpleasant condition and that he had chosen this cell for me as it was immediately in front of the chapel. I thanked him for his kind intentions, and he retired with the Major. As soon as I was alone in the room I ran immediately to one of the two windows to see if I would have had at least the fortune of a good view, assuming that were possible among those horrid mountains, but found that it gave onto an internal stairway of the fortress and had a high wall right in front of it which cut off any view at all. The other window gave onto a high alpine mountain, the "Albergian" of which only the summit was in view, and in several places despite the summer season, snow could be seen, and which after three and a half years of imprisonment I left it still ruling the roost in exactly the same place." (As can be seen from a visit to Pacca's cell, these windows were fairly large, and at that time had no glass, but merely a curtain to keep out the elements. As his room had two windows on adjacent walls, a vigorous ventilation was assured!.)

He continues: "The chamber where I spent most of that time was at ground level; the ceiling could be seen to be damaged and cracked in a number of places due to the shocks of the earthquake the previous year; the black and smoky walls looked like those of a kitchen or of a blacksmith's shop, and from the floor up to the height where normally the low painted frieze or "zoccolo" would be, were mired and dirty with filthy leftovers of fetid and sickening things, those which monsignor Giovanni

della Casa in his Book of Etiquette teaches us that even to name them is best avoided. The floor itself was of half-rotten wooden boards covered in grease, and as for being nests for mice, they were indeed! I found no furniture in the room other than that I had rented earlier at my own expense, consisting of a bed, four old and torn chairs with rope slings and an ordinary wooden table, roughly made and little better than a shoemaker's workbench. (: . .)

With somewhat less tranquility I passed the second day, in which I began to better appreciate the grave difficulties which afflict those suffering from this imprisonment, both physical and of morale.

During the night there rose up a violent wind, as often happens here, coming from the mountain passes, which apart from the noise it made, was extremely frightening. It was deafening in its violence, causing great damage to the buildings, sometimes ripping out the very roof-stones of the fort, even though they are nailed down to their beds, not without great danger to those who pass by, and once during my time there, a similar wind carried away the sentry box itself some no small distance from the fort. The wind which rose that night brought with it an atmosphere of immense cold, intense for that season, and made a tremendous impression on me, not being well furnished with winter clothing. I tried to light a fire in the hearth, but was forced to extinguish it immediately due to the great clouds of smoke which immediately filled the room and took my breath away. I found it best to also block up the chimney place as the wind blew so strongly as to rattle the few pieces of furniture and throw things round the room. In

that moment, the two lines of the *Enriade*, Chap. IV on that famous castle of Paris known as the Bastille could be equally applied to Fort San Carlo:

“Dans cet affreux château, palais de la vengeance,

Qui renferme le crime et l’innocence”

(In this horrible castle, palace of vengeance,

Here are imprisoned both crime and innocence).

There was always someone among the prisoners who merited their punishment, and perhaps even more, in the three and a half years I spent there, but the greater part of those detained consisted of pious and exemplary Ecclesiastics, of noble lords faithful to their legitimate sovereigns, and other honest persons suspected of harbouring little affection for the government. There were at that time imprisoned for three years, if I remember correctly, nine or ten Neapolitans of those who had allied themselves on the side of Ferdinand against the French, persons for the most part ignoble, and some of turbid nature, restless and lawless, who perhaps with their imprudence and with illegal means, even serving a worthy cause, had brought their misfortunes upon themselves. I found equally a number of Piedmontese, transported there a short time earlier being suspected of adherence and providing intelligence to the Austrians at the beginning of the war in the year 1809, who were freed the year after the Peace Treaty of Vienna.

At that time the number of detained Ecclesiastics were few, and not for affairs of the Church, but subsequently, with the increase of persecution against the clergy, their numbers rose until they formed more than half of the prisoners. On the 16th of the month of August, Monsignor Tiberio Pacca, my nephew, was brought to the fort, he also as a prisoner of the State. The Commandant brought him to my cell so that I could see him and embrace him, then informed me that to respect the orders that I could not speak with other prisoners, he would have to assign my nephew to a separate cell, and that I could have no further communication with him. This all seemed very strange to me and it was a bitter separation, but I bent my head, recommending my nephew to the Commandant, exhorting that he would allow him to live with sensible and well-to-do prisoners, which he did, since with the permission of the Commandant, he was placed with that fine gentleman, Count Bacili.

From the 8th day of the month, the Commandant, keeping to the promise he had made me, would send one of the Majors around 5 o’clock of the evening, whose job it was to walk with me round the perimeter of the fort then accompany me, near sunset, back to my cell; but this innocent alleviation of the ills of imprisonment was not to last long. Before the end of the month, there arrived in Fenestrelle from Turin Mr. Delmas, Aide-de-Camp to the Borghese prince, and the following day, after having visited the fort and interrogated some of the prisoners, left, leaving an order for the Commandant to no longer permit me to take

walks outside the fort and to move Monsignor Tiberio, my nephew, from Fort San Carlo to Fort Mutin (on the other side of the valley). Whatever was the reason for these new rigours has never come to my notice. (. . .)

During the summer I walked in the lower fort for movement's sake: during the winter I continued my reading until the evening; at sunset I read the gazettes and the occasional newspaper, then went to the Governor's quarters to pass a few hours in the company of him and his wife, so as not to tire my sight with continuous reading. (. . .)

On Sundays and on the other holidays, towards sunset, benediction was given in the small room given over to being the chapel, where I, taking advantage of my privilege as Cardinal, always held the Holy Sacrament. To this holy function, apart from all the prisoners, there came the Governor and his wife and a few other soldiers of the garrison. We used to celebrate with greater pomp and ceremony the days of St. Charles Borromeo, to whom the fort was dedicated, and of the liberation of St. Peter, under whose powerful patronage we hoped, as later happened, to be ourselves liberated from imprisonment. (. . .)

At the two of France of the 21st day of March 1811, that is at 2 hours after midnight, Italian time, a gendarme arrived from Turin with the notice that the Empress had given birth. The Governor immediately carried out the orders he had received with the following emphatic words to his men: "With one hundred and one cannon shots you are announcing to Italy the birth of the King of Rome"; but he did not have any

dispatch conceding grace, therefore as with the smoke of the cannons, the hopes of the prisoners also disappeared. (. . .)

The news of that prodigious catastrophe (the retreat from Moscow) penetrated immediately through our prison, and, between the end of the year 1812 and the beginning of 1813, a ray of light began to shine forth for the prisoners of Fenestrelle, and also for those of us, to whom it seemed that over the door of the fort was inscribed that terrible verse of Dante "Abandon hope all ye who enter here". (. . .)

The following day, with a missive sent by a friend from Turin, we found out that an agreement had been reached between the Emperor and the Pope, and that the Cardinals who had been deported to various cities in France and those who were held in the State prisons would be set free, with permission to go to meet the Holy Father in Fontainebleau; and in fact, that same evening, by means of a gendarme, the Governor received a folder from the Director-general of the police in Turin, in which, amongst other things, ordered him to set me free immediately and to consign me a letter, addressed to me by the Minister of Religious Affairs in Paris. (. . .)

I tarried a further five days in the fortress to make the necessary preparations for such a long journey in the heart of winter, and on the 5th day of February, after three years and a half of imprisonment, I set off on my journey to Fontainebleau.