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Gino Lucetti and the attempt on Mussolini's life

Pietro de Piero

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Anybody who maintains that wherever in Italy there are anarchists there are republicans as well (on account of their common individualist, libertarian roots) has a telling example in Avenza. Although very different from Menconi, his countryman, contemporary and friend, the anarchist Gino Lucetti, with his very individualistic outlook is the other outstanding figure of local antifascism, and not just local.

Many of those who knew him remember him continually in thought, with a book under his arm, strolling along the riverbank. Of working-class background, he was virtually self-taught and on the basis of this self-procured education he took part in the political struggles of the 1920's, confronting the fascists on many occasions.

In one skirmish, rougher than the usual, in the popular 'Napoleon Cafe' he was wounded in the neck by a shot from a pistol following an exchange of shots with a fascist (one Perfetti) who was shot in the ear. He went to ground near Montignoso, unable to find a doctor prepared to remove the

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bullet. After a few days he was smuggled aboard ship for France where he was finally given treatment.

There he schemed the attempt on Mussolini's life that was to make him famous: albeit hard up (an unsuspecting countryman of his, Lina Squassoni, who lived in Aubagne near Marseilles, lent him the money for the trip) he returned to Italy and Rome there to make his attempt on the Duce's life on 11 September 1926.

He loitered near the Porta Pia waiting for the Duce to pass by: when the famous Lancia carrying Benito Mussolini drew near, Lucetti hurled a bomb of the SIDE type which smashed against the windscreen. But it failed to explode, bounced onto the running board and only exploded when it was some metres away on the pavement.

In the ensuing confusion, Lucetti sheltered in the doorway at No. 13, Via Nomentana, but the Duce's police bodyguards soon caught up with him, kicking and punching him: they found him in possession of a second bomb of the same make, a handgun with six dumdum bullets poisoned with muriatic acid, and a dagger.

At police headquarters, under ferocious questioning, he let it be known that his name was Ermete Giovanni, from Castelnuovo Garfagnana. On account of this phoney story, he led the regime a merry dance, as a result of which their enquiries focused solely upon uncovering the leaders of the conspiracy of which he was allegedly part, in Garfagnana and nowhere else! Road blocks were thrown up and dozens of people arrested: when Lucetti at last gave his true particulars the whole investigation was shown up as ridiculous.

At the end of his trial in 1927, he was sentenced to 30 years' imprisonment. Two others, held to have been his accomplices, Leandro Sorio and his countryman Stefano Vatteroni were sentenced to 20 years and 19 years 9 months respectively.

Lucetti was lodged in the Santo Stefano prison where he spent nearly 17 years before being moved to Ischia where he

died on 15 September 1943, according to some sources in a US air raid. Others claim (and among them was Mauro Cacurna who went to recover the body and picked up information on the spot) that the shells that killed him had been fired by the Germans who were still in occupation of Procida, nearby.

Let it be noted for the record that some years ago L'Unita carried a piece in which it was claimed on the basis of testimony by one of Lucetti's fellow inmates that Gino Lucetti had become a communist in his later years. But Carrara anarchists adamantly deny this and are supported by the testimony of Lucetti's brother and his fiancée who visited him right up to the end.

So much for the overall story, drawn from a variety of writings and evidence. But on the basis of statements made to this writer by Ugo Mazzuchelli of Carrara, on the basis of statements made to him in turn by Stefano Vatteroni interesting details can be added.

Let us say first of all that the assassination plan was hatched in the climate of antifascist Italian exile circles in the south of France... not just anarchists but also members of the '*Giustizia e Libertà*' groups of the Action Party and others, of differing persuasions but all convinced of the need to eliminate the fascist leader physically.

This helps give the plan hatched by Lucetti connotations different from other anarchist actions, such as the attempt by Gaetano Bresci on the life of King Umberto; in this instance the urge to kill Mussolini was the expression of a convergence of opinion among other popularly representative political groupings regarding what was commonly perceived as a necessity at that point in time: thus the method also differs in some respects from the individualist spirit in which other anarchist assassinations had been carried out before that.

In fact, though in exile, Lucetti never lost contact with his comrades in Carrara and twice returned for clandestine meetings with them. Another meeting, at which the assassination

was decided upon, was held in Livorno, obviously in maximum secrecy, aboard a ship at sea. Mazzuchelli escorted Lucetti as far as Genoa before Lucetti went back to France to tidy up the loose ends with the comrades in exile. There he organised as best he could and upon arrival in Rome called upon the back-up of comrade Stefano Vatteroni who was working in the capital as a tinsmith.

In point of fact Vatteroni's role in the organising of the attack was crucial; indeed Vatteroni, capitalising upon his friendship with the secretary of Mussolini's library, a former colleague of his, supplied all the essential details right down to the route that the Duce's car would be following on 11 September. Errico Malatesta, briefed about the plan, gave it his endorsement.

Vatteroni made considerable sacrifices, albeit telling nobody on account of his typical modesty, and he went so far as to sell a plot of land belonging to his mother in Avenza to finance what was being organised.

He also saw to the question of logistical support and came to an arrangement with the Reggio anarchist Leandro Sorio, a waiter at an inn where the owner was also in cahoots with the group, so much so that he even offered to put up the money to get them out of the country following the attack. Vatteroni, however, declined the offer, because the organisers had agreed among themselves that everyone was to let himself be arrested so as to stand trial.. extreme proof of the anarchists' solidarity and determination. Gino Bibbi, another Avenza antifascist whose house the fascists wrecked and whose motorcycle they set on fire was supposedly to have been part of the team also.

Following the sentencing at the end of the trial, Vatteroni served the first three years of his time in complete isolation and the only company allowed him was that of a sparrow which visited his cell.

Out of this testimony emerges the portrait of a fighter for freedom whom official historians have slighted and whom Car-

rara anarchists sought to honour alongside the great anarchists from the area... Lucetti, Meschi, and the Milanese Giuseppe Pinelli in whom the comrades saw one who carried on the fight for freedom and truth, as is clear from the verses by Edgar Lee Masters placed on his monument.