

Max Sartin

Michael Schirru

May-June 1933

M. Schirru was arrested on February 3rd, 1931 in a hotel room in Rome and taken to the police sub-station of Trevi. Here he was about to be searched for arms when, with flashing rapidity, he reached for his gun, fired at each of the three officers in the room and then at himself, in the head. Two of the officers were but slightly wounded, while the third and Schirru himself were found to be in a very serious condition. Schirru had to undergo an operation to be saved from immediate death.

Meanwhile, the police discovered that, in addition to the one in which he had been arrested, he was also renting another hotel room where two bombs loaded with powerful explosive were found and which, Schirru readily admitted, belonged to him. As soon as he was able to speak he declared that he had come to Rome purposely to kill Mussolini, and that the bombs were meant for this use. When his sudden arrest came to thwart his plan and deprive him of the liberty to execute it, he resolved to exact as great as possible a price for his life and liberty then ending his own life together with that of the police tools of Mussolini who were arresting him.

During his arrest, pending trial, he tried to communicate with his wife, who was living in New York with their two children, but failed. His wife on her side was trying to communicate with him, but to no avail. On March 27th, he wrote to his father, who was living in France: "This is my eighth letter to you, and no answer has come. I have written several times to Minnie also, and as I have had no reply from her I believe my letters are not forwarded. . . All I have received is the text of a telegram from Minnie saying she and the children are well and that she is doing her utmost to assist me."

In fact, Mrs. Schirru was trying to interest the U.S. Department of State on her husband's behalf. She is an American citizen by birth, while Schirru was one by naturalisation and had been travelling in Europe with an American passport. Mrs Schirru obviously thought that she was entitled to the protection of her Government. But the State Department has no interest whatever for Americans of Anarchist beliefs and didn't care about Schirru's treatment at the hands of the Fascist bandits. In fact the State Department of the United States was heeding more the information it received from the Fascist Embassy in Washington than to Mrs. Schirru's plea that her husband be assured at least of a "fair trial."

What passed in those days between the State Department and His Fascist Majesty's Ambassador in Washington is, of course, unknown to me, but I cannot help recalling that the same attitude of complacency which the Italian Government had assumed a few years before when two Anarchists of Italian origin were slowly being done to death in Boston, was being repaid by the same attitude of complacency by the American Government, while Mussolini's personal tribunal of assassins were preparing for Schirru's murder.

The trial took place on May 28th, late in the afternoon. Cristini — a young fascist cut-throat raised to the highest ranks in the hierarchy as a reward for his bloody propensities — presided. No jury. No defence. No lawyers and no witnesses are admitted before Mussolini's Special Tribunal — so called — unless approved by the Tribunal itself which is military in its formation and composed of the most trusted tools of the dictator.

Schirru conducted himself with great dignity during his trial — which, under the circumstances could hardly be called a trial. He repeated his former declaration of intention to kill Mussolini and gave his reasons. His lawyer — officially named by the Tribunal — gave a semblance of a defence, and in no time the Tribunal sentenced the “culprit” to be shot in the back.

Schirru received the sentence with fortitude and calmness: Not a word, not a movement.

At 2:30 o'clock, the next morning, he was awakened from his sleep and told that his execution would take place at sunrise. He asked permission to write his last words to his dear ones; declined the assistance of the priest and then was taken to the Braschi fortress, on the outskirts of Rome, where he was executed — only eight and a half hours after sentence had been passed — by a firing squad of twenty-four fascist militiamen.

Schirru's execution was plain murder, even according to the fascist law. He had not killed anybody. He had simply had the intention to kill Mussolini, but he had never been at firing distance from Mussolini. Furthermore that intention was evidenced exclusively by his own declaration, and the shooting which followed his arrest at the Trevi police station did not carry the death penalty, as capital punishment existed in Italy at that time only for the murder of the king, the crown prince and Mussolini.

Thus Schirru was assassinated for his intentions as proved by his admission.

He faced death heroically. He well knew that, by asserting his intention of ridding Italy of its tyrant, he was throwing himself in the hands of the tyrant's executioners. Nevertheless he did not hesitate. As he himself says in his Testament, which was published in Italian after his death, life had come to have for him only one purpose: the devotion of it to fighting for the liberation of the Italian people from the mediaeval tyranny that degrades it — and the instant he found himself a prisoner, unable to realise his long coveted design, he could no longer dedicate his deeds by his words and sacrifice.

To this unsurpassed devotion to the cause of liberty, the Italian workers look as to a source of courage and hope for the future.

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