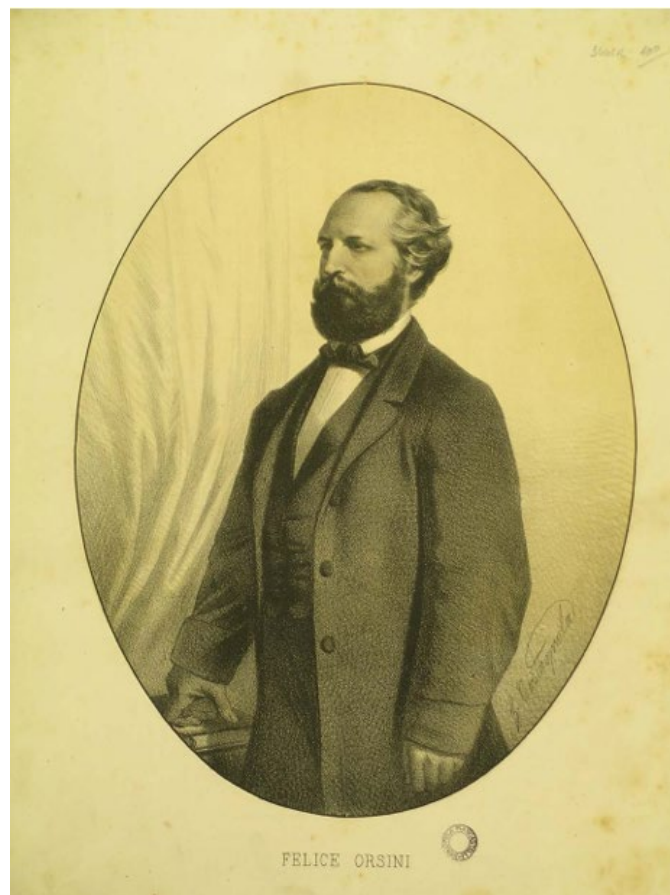


Felice Orsini



**Municipality of Meldola
Committee for the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the death of Felice Orsini**

**FELICE ORSINI
AN ADVENTUROUS, GENEROUS, TRAGIC EXISTENCE**



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Biography

Felice Orsini

Felice Orsini was born in Meldola on 18 December 1819, the son of Andrea (Lugo, 1787 - Bologna, 1857) and Francesca Ricci (Florence, 1799 - 1831). His father was the administrator of the Borghese Aldobrandini family in Meldola, who were succeeded by the Doria family. When Felice was two years old, his parents moved to Florence. Firm, however, his ties with Meldola remained strong.

In 1828, his father was expelled from the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, for political reasons: in 1821 he was already listed as a leader in a list of Carbonari compiled by the Tuscan police. Andrea settled in Bologna; Felice was with him, but after a brief residence in this city, he was welcomed in Imola by his paternal uncle Orso (1786 - 1864), a wealthy merchant, and his wife, Lucia, with whom he stayed until 1839, when he was admitted to attend the Faculty of Law at the University of Bologna, where he graduated in 1843.

On 5 July 1836, Felice fatally wounded Domenico Spada, a member of the Orsi family, with a pistol shot: the court in Ravenna declared that the shot had been fired accidentally.

In 1844, Felice was arrested, as the author of an insurrectional plan, and sentenced to life imprisonment. His father Andrea was also arrested.

The amnesty granted in 1846 by the newly-elected Pope Pius IX also restored Felice's freedom and he settled in Florence, his mother's hometown, where he was very active in the conspiracy. Here he met Assunta Laurenzi, whom he married on 28 June 1848.

When the First War of Independence broke out in March 1848, he took part in it, framed in the Free Corps of Hunters of the Upper Rhine, commanded by Livio Zambecari from Bologna. The Zambecari Battalion took part in the following autumn in the defence of Venice, which had risen against the Austrians and was resisting their siege.

Elected, in the constituency of the Province of Forlì, as a deputy to the Constituent Assembly, which, in Rome, on 9 February 1849, proclaimed the Roman Republic, Orsini carried out important missions on behalf of its rulers: to Terracina, to put an end to the violence and abuses of all kinds committed here by Callimaco Zambianchi; to Ancona, to eradicate the anarchy that dominated there, and to Ascoli against banditry.

The fall of the Republic in early July '49, following the French military intervention in support of Pope Pius IX, forced Felice to exile.

After a brief stay in Florence and one of about eight months in Genoa, he was in Nice with his wife at the beginning of March 1850. Here his two daughters, Ernestina (1851 - 1927) and Ida (1853 - 1859) were born.

It was here that he met the great Russian writer Alexander Herzen and, thanks to him, the couple Giorgio Herwegh and Emma Siegmund, with whom Orsini established a strong ideal bond: she was to play a very important role in the patriot's later life.

Although he dedicated himself to mathematical and military studies and to the hemp trade, the love for his nation remained predominant in Orsini: he accepted, in fact, to lead a Mazzinian insurrectional attempt in September 1853, in the area of Sarzana and Massa, which quickly failed.

In May 1854, he prepared another Mazzinian insurrection in Lunigiana, which also failed, like the attempt made, again at Mazzini's behest, in Valtellina, in August of the same year.

His separation from his family also dates back to August '54: his daughters and wife, who did not intend to follow him in his adventurous life, remained in Nice.

From Milan, where he went in October on Mazzini's orders to strengthen the patriotic ranks after the failure of the previous year's revolt, Orsini reached Vienna and Hungary: here he was arrested on 17 December 1854.

Locked up in the Castle of San Giorgio in Mantua on 28th March 1855, he escaped the night of 29th-30th March 1856 in a legendary style.

Settling in England, he began an intense work there to raise public awareness for the cause of Italian independence, also writing two volumes *Austrian Dungeons* (1856) and *Memoirs and Adventures* (1857).

Having detached himself from Giuseppe Mazzini, the decision matured in Orsini to strike out against Napoleon III, considered by many patriots to be a traitor of Carboneria, an enemy of the freedom and independence of Italy, which he had suppressed with his military intervention against the Roman Republic.

The conviction was also widespread that the elimination of Napoleon III would lead to the advent of the Republic, first in France, then in neighbouring states.

The events of the attack, carried out on 14 January 1858, while the Emperor, with Empress Eugenie, was on his way to the theatre, are well known. The three bombs, dropped by Orsini's accomplices, caused 8 deaths and more than 150 injuries, while the imperial couple remained unharmed.

In the trial that followed, Orsini's noble attitude, further strengthened by the content of the two letters he wrote to Napoleon III, on 11 February and 11 March 1858, redeemed the choice of the assassination attempt, at least on the level of ideal motivations.



However, the condemnation to the guillotine was inevitable: the execution, on 13 March 1858, was met with great dignity, to the cry of 'Long live Italy, Long live France'.



Biography taken from Angelo Santi

Felice Orsini was born in Meldola on 18 December 1819, specifically in the mezzanines of the Palazzo del 'Principe' in Piazza Maggiore. Andrea Orsini di Lugo, Felice's father, was minister of the property that the noble Borghese-Aldobrandini family, who were later succeeded by the Dorias, had in these places; and the administrator lived in the palace owned by his lords. But although born in the Prince's palace, Orsini gave his son Felice to a modest family who lived at the end of the S. Michele loggia.

On the floor below the flat where the little Orsini lived, a certain Caterina Poggi lived with her parents.

Cattaneo, father of the late patriot called 'Patachietti', was employed as a servant in the Orsini household, and when breast-feeding time was over, he took away the Orsini baby's belongings, leaving the cradle to Caterina Poggi, a friend of his.

The wooden cradle, artistically crafted after an accident, had the painting that adorned it ruined by fire, but I, who received it as a gift from the son of the late Caterina Poggi, nevertheless preserve it with devotion. (The cradle was later donated to the Municipality of Meldola, which still preserves it today).

Our Felice spent his early childhood in Meldola and then moved to Imola, entrusted to the care of his uncle Orso Orsini, who always held him dear as a son.

It is certain that Orsini sometimes came to see his birthplace and his first friends, and here he became very close, despite differences of opinion, with Antonio Fusignani, a pharmacist and papal, and with Carlo Farnetti, a cultured and elegant genius with very liberal sentiments, who died young in his homeland on 20 September 1858.

Francesca Versali Ved. Rossi, aged 83 and who was a maid in the house of Lucrezia Ricci in Grammatica (sister of Orsini's mother) remembers very well having served Orsini as a

guest of her aunt at table once in 1842. The excellent old lady remembers that Orsini, with his fork and spoon, performed manoeuvres during the meal as if performing military exercises.

He soon began his life as a conspirator. In 1844, he was arrested and taken to the Fortress of S. Leo, from where he was transferred to Rome to be judged by the Sacra Consulta and sentenced to prison for life. Pius IX's amnesty restored his freedom.

Having been released from the prisons of Civita Castellana, he returned for a short time in that same year (1846), to Meldola, and was the welcome guest of his friend Fusignani, who lived and had a pharmacy in the house formerly inhabited by Mr Benazzi Pio, in Via Cavour. Acclaimed after his return to his homeland by a crowd of people, he looked out of a window of the room he occupied, above the pharmacy, and spoke to the applauding fellow citizens and repeatedly thanked them for their feelings of patriotic sympathy.

At that time, Orsini also frequented the Zavatti brothers' old apothecary shop, where he remained taciturn and thoughtful for a long time, with his head on his hand and one elbow on the coffee table.

Having broken the war against Austria in 1848, Orsini went back to Meldola and stayed there for a few months. It was in the Civic Guard, which had already been set up here the year before, and whose first military movements were directed by a certain Versari known as 'e Suldà', a former papal gendarme, that Orsini, in his capacity as leader of a squad, trained the citizens in the Market and in the Ranieri Gardens.

Dressed in black, he used to keep his top hat, then as now, vulgarly called "a bomb", and his redingote all buttoned up. Asked one day why he dressed this way, he was heard to reply: 'I want to get used to wearing the uniform'.

The sections of the Civic Guard were, in 1848, twenty-one and each consisted of eight soldiers. Orsini was head of the 21st and with him there were Felice Martinelli, Ragonesi Giovanni, Vierani Giovanni, Farneti Pietro, Gardini Luigi, Montanari Vittorio and Marzocchi Giuseppe. The Meldola volunteers in '48 followed part Felice, and part Pietro Buda. With the former they were the most ardent: with the latter the most temperate.

Leading a company of the battalion commanded by Livio Zambecari (a company made up largely of Meldolesi and Bolognesi), Felice Orsini fought in Vicenza, where his close friend Nicola Liverani from Meldola, whom he later recalled in his memoirs, died a glorious death.

In September 1848, he garrisoned the fort at Marghera and remained there until the garrison's daring sortie on the night of 27 October. He assisted in the taking of Mestre, in which he commanded the vanguard of the right wing. His attendant during the campaign was the late Mazzi Giuseppe, known as Fafita.

And from the military field, Orsini moved on to the political one. After the Pope's flight to Gaeta, he was a candidate for the Roman Constituent Assembly in the constituencies of Bologna and Forlì and was elected in the latter on 21 January 1849, together with our fellow citizen Avv. Vincenzo Torricelli. Orsini collected 4,802 votes: Torricelli 4659. Shortly afterwards, the new deputies of the people were given a banquet in the Teatro dei Condomini, now the Municipal Theatre, and Orsini in the uniform of Captain, with a hat

almost resembling that of an officer of our Carabinieri, delivered a warm and applauded speech there.

With the fall of the Roman Republic, Orsini was able to return to Genoa and from there he wrote to his friend *Ciro Ronchi*, to whom he sent the letter certain *Manfredi Francesco*, to the 13 scudi that *Ronchi* had lent to *Manfredi*, on behalf of *Orsini* himself.

By now he was a refugee: but the desire to see the country again was always alive in him. After escaping from *Mantua*, he came to *Meldola* /hosted/ in the home of a young engineer, *Michelacci*, with an excellent family and sentiments worthy of an Italian.... Still with a limp, being in *Meldola*, his home town, showed the boldness of the man, accustomed to defying all dangers.

...Having once fallen ill from *erysipelas*, *Orsini* was treated and cured by *Dr. Scipione Mastri*, *Paolo's* paternal ancestor, but I do not remember in which year this happened.

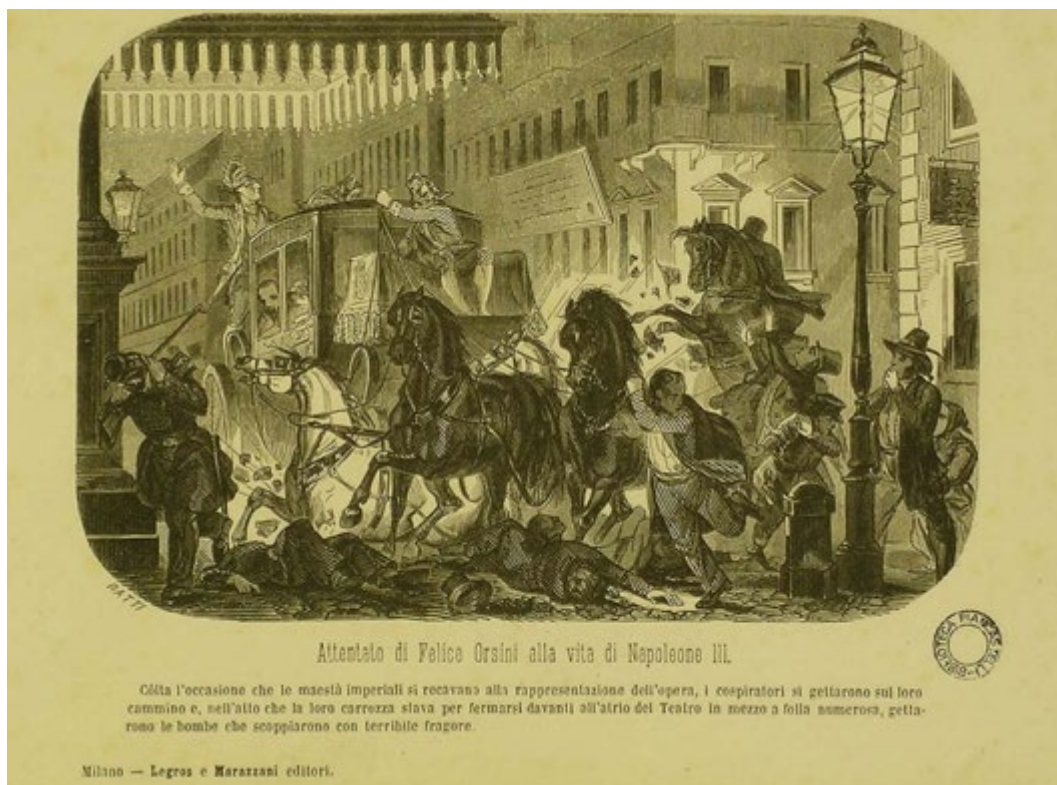
Another time, at the home of *Andrea Rolli*, one of the liberals of '31, a luncheon was held, which was attended, with other friends, by our *Felice*, who remained almost speechless.

Among the guests were *Dr. Vincenzo Torricelli*, *Tommaso Zavatti*, *Giuseppe Ragonesi*, *Agostino Antolini*, *Battista Partiseti*, *Ciadini*, *Garzanti*, *Guidi* and some others.

Pellegrino Artusi, in his work "*La scienza in cucina*" (*Science in the kitchen*), recounts that he once saw *Orsini* in a café in *Meldola*, at the moment when, trembling with anger against a man who had abused his trust and offended him in honour, he invited a young man to follow him to *Florence*, to help him, he said, to carry out an exemplary revenge.

Great was the grief of the liberal youth and friends at the news of *Orsini's* beheading, which occurred, as we know, on 13 March 1958, after the attempt on *Napoleon III*.

His close friend *Ciro Ronchi* was seen, in the backroom of the now *National Café*, crying like a child.



From: Angelo Santi - *PAOLO MASTRI AND HIS HISTORY OF MELDOLA unified and updated.*
Gastaldi Editore, Milan 1961

Felice Orsini - Chronology

1819 He was born in Meldola.

1828 His paternal uncle Orso welcomes him into his home (after his stays in Florence and Bologna, due to his father's expulsion from the Papal States and the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, respectively).

1836 He mortally wounds Domenico Spada, servant of his uncle Orso, by accident (as ruled by the Court of Ravenna).

During these years, Orsini continues to see two of his great friends in Meldola, although they have very different ideas: the liberal Carlo Farnetti and Antonio Fusignani, pharmacist and papal.

1842 He is in Meldola, guest of his maternal aunt, Lucrezia Ricci.

1843 He graduated in Bologna in Law. During his university years (1839-'43), he joins the "Giovane Italia" (Young Italy).

1844 He was arrested in Bologna, for conspiratorial activity. For this he is judged and sentenced to life imprisonment.

1846 He was released from prison thanks to an amnesty granted by Pope Pius IX. He returns to Meldola, as a guest at the Fusignani house. During his stay he attends the apothecary shop of the brothers.

1848 Served in the Meldola Civic Guard.

The First War of Independence breaks out, and he joins the Battalion of Hunters of the Upper Reno. He leads several volunteers from Meldola: we remember his attendant, Giuseppe Mazzi, known as Fafita, and his great friend Nicola Liverani, who died in combat in Vicenza.

1848 He Marries the Florentine Assunta Laurenzi.

1849 He was elected to the Roman Constituent Assembly, together with Vincenzo Torricelli, lawyer from Meldola. Fellow citizens celebrate the newly elected.

On behalf of the government of the Roman Republic, he works in Terracina against the abuses of Callimaco Zambianchi; he restores order in Ancona; he takes action against brigandage in Ascoli.

1850-1853 He settled in Nice. Here he meets Emma Herwegh and this is the place where his two daughters, Ernestina and Ida, were born.

1853-1854 He agreed to lead several Mazzinian insurrectional attempts: one between Tuscany and Liguria, another in Tuscany, one in Valtellina. The uprisings fail almost instantly.

1854 After a stay in Milan to prepare an anti-Austrian insurrection there, he reaches Vienna and Hungary, where he is arrested.

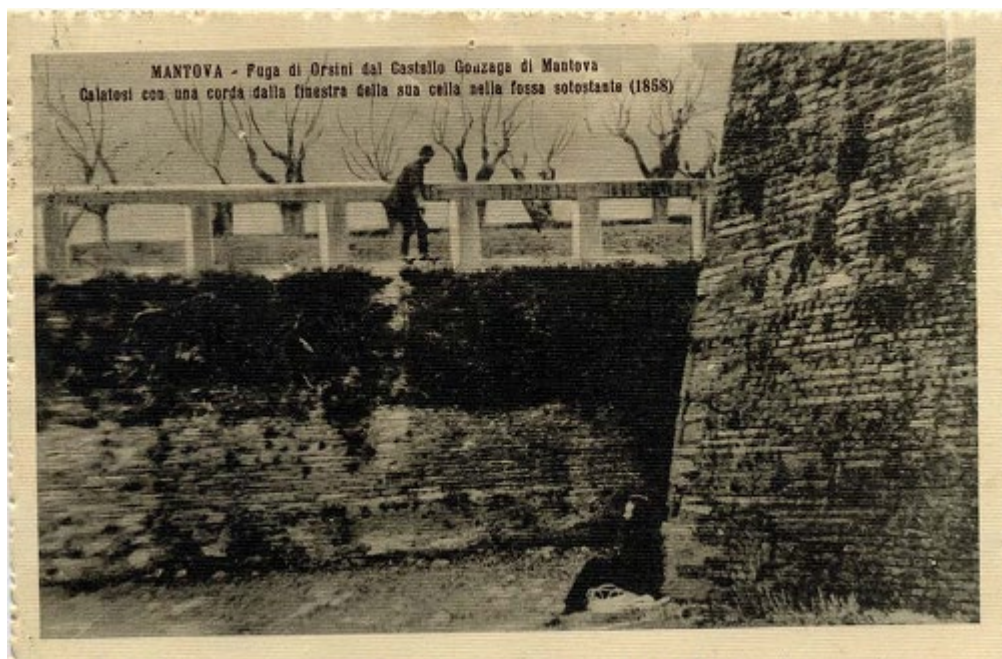
1856 He escaped from the prison of the Castle of San Giorgio in Mantua, where he had been imprisoned the previous year.
After his escape he also stays in Meldola, as a guest of the Michelacci household.

1856-1857 He lived in England. During this period he breaks away from Mazzini.

1858 On January 14, he makes an attempt on the life of Napoleon III; for this he is sentenced to death: March 13, 1858, he is guillotined.

The escape from the prison in the Castle of San Giorgio, Mantua

We narrate such an escape, which was truly legendary, by recurring to Orsini's own telling of it in his Political Memoirs.



In prison, O. got to know Pier Fortunato Calvi¹: he was in the adjoining cell and he established a respectful relationship with him, while communicating with him with the cautions and expedients made indispensable by their mutual condition as inmates. His execution in June 1855 threw O. into distressing reflections and deep utter prostration, occasionally followed by moments of exaltation. Under these conditions, the resolution to escape takes more and more shape:

" You know! When a human has the will, he can do anything." I stopped myself to assume the most gentle and tame demeanor that was possible for me, in front of the guards, the warden and the judges; I thought of spying on every locality, when I was being led to the

examinations, of beginning in time to ask questions to obtain information necessary, but disparate, and such as would not induce suspicion anyone of what he was pondering; I assumed the guise of the rabbit, of the most harmless and shy, always writing for the composition of a historical work, and showed me of a character sweet and cheerful. Within my soul he armed me with unequalled patience and constancy, and when these would leave me for a moment, I would immediately turn my mind to the fatherland, the children, and a revenge ... With the guards I gave signs of much docility and humility; I used to say, "Now I'm going to enjoy it with some good wine, since in six months my neck will be stretched" ... And I used to make the guards drink ... Constantly conducting myself in this manner, I came, in four months of perseverance, to know everything, which was necessary for me ...

He failed in his attempts to use opium to put the overseers to sleep, so the escape of numerous inmates was not possible. The use of morphine also does not yield the desired results. O.'s strategy of necessity shifts: he asks to be transferred to a single cell, to accomplish the desired escape in the most classic way, by climbing down from the window. He is, therefore, assigned cell No. 4, the worst for his plans, as it was the best secured, having a double grating. O. does not give up: outside accomplices procure for him, in order to cut the bars, very thin, but very resistant saw.

Of these accomplices, the identity is not certain, although the fundamental role of Emma Herwegh, acknowledged to her by O.² himself and indicated by herself as follows in a letter from Zurich, dated April 6, 1864, addressed to Count Grilenzoni.³: Three times in a row he asked me for files, and I sent them in the manner indicated to me by him, bound within a book. As evidence of this, the Herwegh correspondence, preserved in Mantua, includes the invoice of the Zurich bookbinder who "packed the shipment"!

Emma also manages, though with much effort, to raise the money needed to support O. immediately after the escape, i.e., "to avert dangers and compensate possible saviors," as written by Luzio³. The prisoner and the trusted German friend communicated through seemingly formal and generic letters, which actually contained all the indispensable information, not visible to the naked eye, as it was penned with a sympathetic ink made from lemon juice, which became legible when exposed to a source of heat.

With a ruse, then, O. secures four sheets and as many towels:

It was not noticed, whether every month there were less or more dirty sheets, because they belonged to the administration of the life sentence or the galley of Mantua, where seven hundred convicts were staying, a good part of whom were sick ... The laundry was very coarse and strong After this I gave myself to take the height of the window from the floor of the pit; and several times, in the early evening, pushed out with the handle of the broom four nuts tied together with thread, and in a way they rattled and made noise to each other ... When I noticed that the thread was no longer flowing, I gave it some tugs, and the nuts jolted from the ground ... I pulled them up, and measured the thread ... this was precisely the height of the window from the pit floor.

Between cautions of all kinds, to divert suspicion, showing himself increasingly meek and resigned, and as many expedients to continue to enjoy the benevolence of the guards and thus ensure a certain carelessness in the control of the cell, he begins the laborious work of cutting the two window gratings, with his ear always straining so as not to be heard or surprised.

I prepared some wax mixed with brick and coal dust, and thus imitated the color of oxidized iron: with this I closed the cuts in the bars

Sometimes I could take no more: I would remove myself from the work, exhausted by fatigue, all sweaty, weakened, and challenged. I would throw myself on the bed; after a few minutes had passed, I would regain strength, and cry out, "No, they won't hang me." And I would fly to work ...

Once four strips have been made from each sheet and two from the towels and joined each side with a sailor's knot,

On the night of March 29-30, 1856 I tried to get food, drank a few glasses of good wine: aquavit, nothing; I gave some instead to the guards: I tried to calm myself, went through several times the knots in the sheets, and hung one on the irons; then I mounted the chair, attached myself, and made the test of leaving myself dangling; I measured my strength well thus, and if the sheet held, everything would go well ... At 1:30, here came the visit ...

Finished [began the escape] ...

Passed ... the first bar ... I turned my legs toward the second bar, drove them out, and passed my right arm and head, while holding the rope with my left hand: with the tips of my feet I made force against the wall, and found a kind of wall where I could rest. Adjusting myself with some rope between my legs, I began very slowly to descend, keeping my right shoulder against the wall. The night was very dark ... Finally, having reached almost the end, and no longer being able to hold on, I wanted to rest for a moment; I rested my right foot against the wall, and immediately the rope from my legs; I glanced down, and warmed by imagination judged that I was near that on the ground: then I let go, and fell from a height of nearly twenty feet. I struck my knees, and felt a sharp pain in my right foot.

After vain attempts to get himself out of the pit, which surrounded the castle, O. decides to wait out the day. Giuseppe Sugrotti, called Toffin, was passing by and offered him help. With the help of two passing peasants he draws the escapee from the pit, sets him piggyback on his shoulders (since his sprained foot hardly allowed O. to walk) and pretending to carry a drunk man, with whom he was singing at the top of his voice, hides him in a cane field, feeds him with the help of his friend Domenico Carlini and arranges his transportation, thanks to the carter Effrem Bengatti -profusly rewarded-, up to a place outside Mantua, Marmirolo, where trusted friends of O. ensure its transfer (and salvation) to Piedmont.

Some of the stages described above are reconstructed in the nineteenth-century pictures reproduced here.

The hypothesis that O. escaped by corrupting the jailers and, thus, passing through the entrance of the prison, is denied by O. in the first place², but also by the careful investigations carried out in this regard by the Austrian authorities.

After some stops in Genoa and Switzerland, O. reached London.

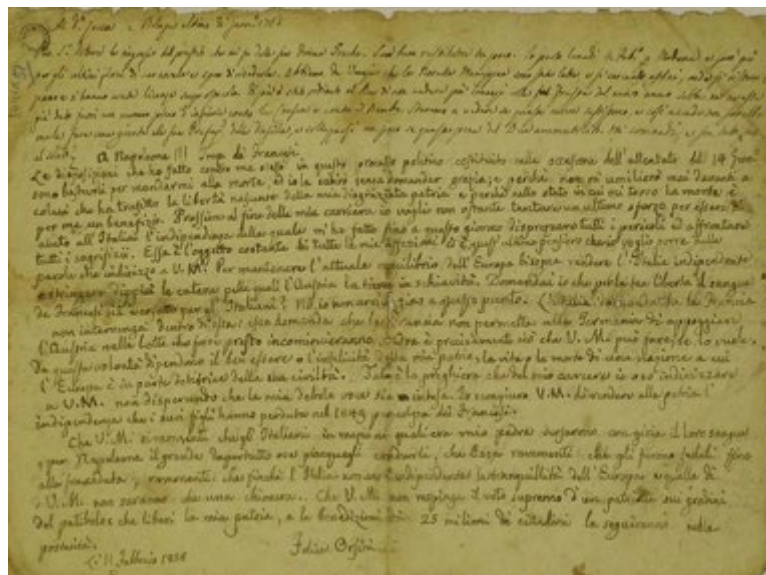


¹ Pier Fortunato Calvi (Noale di Padova, 1817-Mantova, 1855) was sentenced to death by the Austrian government for leading an insurrectional attempt in Cadore in '53.

² In Political Memoirs, O. writes: I owe everything to my friend L., Mrs. Herwegh and Pietro Cironi. After these I am indebted for salvation to myself, to Providence, and to the men who picked me up from the pit and assisted me thereafter.

³ See: A. Luzio, Felice Orsini and Emma Herwegh. New documents, Felice Le Monnier, Florence, 1937.

The two letters to Napoleon III



To Napoleon III

February 11, 1858

Sire,

the statements I have made against myself in the political trial for the attempt of January 14 are sufficient to send me to death, and I shall suffer it without asking your pardon, both because I will never humble myself in the presence of those who killed the nascent liberty of my unhappy fatherland, and because as long as this is in servitude death is good for me. Near the end of my days, I want at the very least to make my last efforts to see that I benefit Italy, whose independence made me until now despise all sorts of dangers and sacrifices and was the constant object of all my passions. And this thought of mine I intend to implement with the following words which I address to M. V. Im.

Europe's present political arrangement lies in your power today to make Italy independent or to keep it a slave to Austria and all sorts of foreigners. Do I imply by this that the blood of the French be shed for the Italians? no: they do not ask that of you; they ask that France does not intervene against them: they ask that France not allow any nation intervene in the future and perhaps imminent struggles of Italy against Austria. Now well this precisely is what M. V. I. may will when it pleases her most: on Your will depend on the welfare or unhappiness of my country, and the life or death of a nation to which Europe is indebted in great part to its civilization.

All but a simple individual, from my prison I dare to send a feeble voice up to M. V. I. in order to beg her to restore to Italy that independence which her sons lost in 1849 by the French themselves.

Remember M. V. I. that the Italians (and among them my father himself) rushed to shed blood for Napoleon the Great wherever it pleased him to lead them: remember that they were loyal to him until his fall; remember that until Italy is made independent, the tranquility of Europe and M. V. I. is a mere dream.

Do not despise M. V. the words of a patriot standing on the edge of the gallows: give independence to my homeland, and the blessings of 25 million inhabitants will follow you wherever and forever.

F. Orsini

To Napoleon III

March 11, 1858

Sire,

the fact that M. V. I. has allowed my letter written to you on February 11 p. p. to be made public, while it is a clear argument of your generosity, shows me that the vows expressed in favor of my homeland find an echo in your heart: and for me, though close to death, it is certainly no small comfort to see how M. V. is moved by true Italian senses.

In a few hours I will no longer be here, but before I take my last vital breath, I want it to be known, and I declare with the frankness and courage that I have never denied to this day, that assassination in whatever guise it may be does not enter into my principles, even if by a fatal mental error I allowed myself to organize the attack of January 14. No, political

assassination was not my system, and I fought it by exposing my own life, as much in my writings as in public events, when a government mission put me in a position to do so. And let my compatriots instead of placing confidence in the system of assassination far from them reject it, and know by the very voice of a patriot who dies, that their redemption must be won by self-denial, by the constant unity of effort and sacrifice, and by the exercise of true virtue: qualities that are already springing up in the young and active part of my compatriots, qualities worth to make Italy free, independent and worthy of those glories whereby our forefathers illustrated it.

I die, but while I do so calmly and with dignity, I want my memory to remain unstained by any misdeed.

As for the victims of Jan. 14, I offer my blood in sacrifice, and I pray the Italians that made one independent day give worthy recompense to all those who suffered injury.

Lastly, allow M. V. I. to ask you for the grace of life, not for me, but rather for two accomplices who were condemned to death with me.

With the deepest respect I am

*By V.M. I.
Felice Orsini*

