Letter to Governor Fuller, July 28, 1927

1927

People:

Author: Bartolomeo Vanzetti

Tags: south braintree crime, bridgewater crime, braintree crime, west bridgewater, south braintree, governor fuller, federal police, samuel johnson, american jury, italian witnesses.

Text:

Vanzetti's 1927 Letter to Governor Fuller

The letter below was written shortly after Vanzetti was interviewed for two hours by Governor Fuller. Vanzetti asked the Governor if he might write him about topics not discussed in the interview. This is the letter he sent. Six days after this letter was mailed, Governor Fuller issued his decision allowing the executions to go forward.

July 28, 1927. Charlestown Prison

Hon. Alvan T. Fuller,
Governor of Massachusetts,

State House, Boston.

YOUR EXCELLENCY:

You told me Tuesday night that I might dictate to a stenographer the part, of my statement which I wanted to make to you, but was prevented by lack of time from making. So I will say as follows:

1. I don't tell the truth to the police about my revolver, where I have been in West Bridgewater and on the night before, that they asked. I did all these things in order to avoid the arrest of my comrades, because I know that if the police would have been in the houses of my friends, they would have found Red literature, maybe a revolver, and that would have been enough to mean deportation, or even death to them. When I told these things I did not know that I was going to be indicted for the Bridgewater crime and South Braintree crime. After a while I understood, but I am not a man to put some other in trouble to go off myself from trouble. And my opinion was that even if the police would have found me a liar on such things as where I buy the revolver, they would
not have been able to find me guilty on things that I have not done.

And this is the real reason of what I told first to Katzmann and then to the others. For example, I told Katzmann that I was in a certain place the night before or two nights before, when he asked me where I have been.

When Katzmann did ask me where I was the day of the 24th December, 1919, and the 15th of April, 1920, I did not know that they were the day of any crimes. I remember the day of the 24th December because it was a very special day. I did not remember the 15th of April, which was more near, because it was an ordinary day, and I had nothing in particular to remember. I beg your Excellency to observe that the lies that I have said have no relation whatever with the crimes, or with concealing something related to the crimes. You can see it was only to spare a search of my friends' houses, arrest, and so on.

2. As I told you, we were warned a few days before that the Federal police were about to make other raids on the Radicals. For some months the papers had been full of talk about arrests of Radicals, and all Radicals of every kind were pretty thoroughly scared. I suppose you know that
in Italy the common people has always been afraid of the police.

It is hard to get over such ideas, especially when you know what they have
done to our comrades in this country. They have murdered three or
four or five men. I don't believe Salsedo committed suicide.

I believe he was murdered by the Federal police in New York. If he
committed suicide it was because they drove him to it.

3. Now about Boda. We were at the Johnson house, West Bridgewater,
to take Boda's automobile together with Boda and Orciani. Your Excellency
told me that there has been much suspicion of Boda in this case.

I have known Boda for a long time. He was not a particular friend
of mine but he was sympathetic with my ideas. There is nothing against
Boda in this case. The last time I saw Boda's car before May 5th
was at a picnic on the outside of Brockton, about a year before the Bridgewater
crime, in the summer. Coming home from, the picnic he gave me a ride
in the car as far as Brockton. That is the last time I have seen
his car. I don't know what kind of a car it was. I don't know
anything about the different kinds of motor cars. When we spoke to
Boda that night about the car he said, “Well, we'll go to see if it is
ready." Mr. Thompson has told me that Mr. Johnson said that Boda's car was out of repair for a long time before May 5, 1920. I don't know anything about it. Very soon before our arrest Chief Stewart spoke with Boda and did not arrest him, which meant that if Stewart had any suspicion of him it must have been very recent. He has, for what I know, a clean record. I knew that at one time Boda kept a cleansing store with his brother in Wellesley. After I came back from Mexico I saw him a few times. He told me that he was selling groceries and things like that. I don't know when Boda left the country, and he never told me why he left it. It isn't hard to imagine why he left. He knew he was with us on the night of May 5th. He saw that we were arrested and charged with a serious crime. He knew we were innocent, but still he saw that we were charged with these serious crimes. It isn't surprising that when-he thought it over he made up his mind that he might get into the same trouble if he stayed around here. So I am told that he went directly to his native town, where they could have found him if they really wanted him. He knows he isn't guilty of any crime in this country. Mr. Thompson says he thinks he could get
Boda back, but he is a fool if he came back in this country after he sees how two innocent men have been convicted of a crime we did not do.

The automobile at the garage was there from 1919 and could have no relation with the crime. He left Coacci’s house because he remained alone--Mrs. Coacci go away, Coacci go away; he remain alone in that house; he had to leave. I am told that Mr. Samuel Johnson was a neighbor of Boda's, and says that he remembered this time; he go many times, at every time of the day, by the Coacci house; saw many times the garage open; never saw any automobile in it, and never saw Boda to drive any automobile that winter and spring of 1920.

He knows there was never any Buick car in Coacci's shed.

Boda is a very small man. He does not weigh over 120 pounds, something like that. He had a very small mustache. I don't think any witness described any such man at the Bridgewater crime, or neither at the South Braintree crime; and anyway, Mr. Katzmann and Mr. Williams said at the trial that they did not claim Boda was at the South Braintree crime. I am told he is willing to come back here to face whatsoever, and if this is true, he is a fool, because with all the machinery of the
state and the reactionary rabbles against us, nothing is more easy than
another masterly and successful frame-up against him as it was against
ourselves. This is the man on whom you and they say to have plenty
of suspicion, which cannot be but purely arbitrary.

4. I want to ask your Excellency to remember that Mr. Stewart and the
others seemed to have had at one time the same suspicion against Orciani
that they had against Boda, and yet they let Orciani go, and he stayed
around all during the trial, and they made no effort to show that he was
guilty of anything. I don't think that we ought to lose our lives
because people have a suspicion which they cannot prove and which are not
true against two of our friends.

They say that Orciani disappeared. I am told that Orciani often
drove Mr. Moore's automobile during the trial, until the latter days of
the trial. Orciani has a clean record, is an honest and steady worker,
and has a good reputation; has a family and a job and good money.

Nobody has ever suspected him. He was arrested the day after we were,
and he proved his innocence of the Braintree crime by showing that on the
day and on the hour of the crime he was working for a company in a foundry.
On such proof they released him, not, I believe, because they could not have found perjurers to testify against him to put him on the Bridgewater crime, but because I have all the reason to believe that they saw on the same register of the same company that on the day of the Bridgewater crime he was equally working for the same company. The state could not get around such a record as that by any amount of perjury or identification.

The most idiotic of men, seeing the mood, the nature, the character of the environment in which we were tried, the manner in which we were tried, could not help realizing how easy it is to be found guilty; and that Orciani, having been with us in West Bridgewater at Johnson's house, and having proved absolutely his innocence of both crimes, he could have equally been put under indictment as an accessory after the fact, I believe lawyers call it, and to be found guilty and yet be innocent, which was enough to ruin his life.

People don't seem to understand that Italians are unpopular anyway, especially if they are poor and laboring people. Their habits are not the habits of ordinary Americans, and they are suspected. They don't get the same chance before an American jury that an American would
get. The jury cannot help being prejudiced against them, and then
if on top of that the Italians turn out to be Radicals, they have no show
at all. One good looking American witness seems to outweigh a dozen
Italian witnesses, even though we Italians know that the Italian witnesses
are perfectly honest, truthful people. Before Americans will put
an Italian on the same basis with themselves, and accept him as probably
telling the truth, he has got to make money and own property.

Now you see, Governor, so far as Orciani and Boda are concerned, there
is no reason whatever for going against us because of anything that they
did or did not do.

5. Now, Governor Fuller, you have told me that almost all those who
have seen me and say to have seen me have identified me. Now to show
you that only such people as witnessed the crime or the passing of the
bandits, or something relating to it, I will tell how Bowles did identify
me. For three or four consecutive days he brought with company trucks
gangs of people from Bridgewater to identify us at the Brockton Police
station, hundreds and hundreds of people. You have no idea how many
people were brought to identify us by Bowles and others. I remember
in the crowd a Chinaman, Japanese, Salvation Army people, Negroes, and people of every kind and class, even children. Even suppose that only a third of them came from Bridgewater. You see that there are a thousand or hundreds of people in a condition to see the crime or the bandits, and out of these several hundred only one or two persons said that they seen me and all the others deny it squarely. Now how can you say to me that all the people who saw the crime identified me, or more than the smallest possible part, that is, one or two people, or three, out of hundreds. And then you remember that these three all changed their testimony between the time they talked to the detectives and the time they testified in court. Out of the five or six witnesses that perjured voluntarily against me, only one or two have come to identify me when they come together with these hundreds of people.

And one of these is Mrs. Georgina Brooks, and I am told she is half blind. I don't know this. All this time Mr. Bowles did not identify me. Then they brought me to the Plymouth jail. When the preliminary hearing came in Brockton he was again together with those
that brought me from Plymouth to Brockton. After the first time that we were in Brockton we have to come back again on the second time, and on the second time we met a funeral on the outskirts of Brockton, and have to stop the automobile, which was driven by Chief Stewart. Now when the coffin went by before us we took our hats off, and in that time Chief Stewart was sitting in front, and turned to the side to talk to Bowles, and Stewart said, "Well, what do you say, Bowles?" and Bowles said, "By gosh, I think I know him, I think he is the man," but in a very uncertain way. Then at the hearing he went on the stand and he testified that I was the man, but that he cannot be positive, he was only pretty positive. Mr. Vahey at that time defended me, and Bowles left the stand red like a cooked lobster, all trembling, and accompanied by the smiles of the court.

And this is the way that he has had to identify me. But the jury did not know that. But I ask if a man that makes such identification can be believed.

I was really surprised, your Excellency, that you had not read the long letter that Mr. Thompson says he wrote you about these detectives' report, showing how Bowles, Harding, Cox changed their testimony from what
they told the detectives right after the crime, and what they told on the
witness stand several months later. I don't see how I can get justice
in this case unless you know that fact, and beside that, you can see even
from the report of the preliminary hearing and the one of the trial that
on these two times they are changed their testimony in order to describe
the bandit looking as I am. They can be American as they can be,
but I am wronged if you want to believe them after all the proof you have
that they have changed three times their testimony.

But not to make too long a story, I will also submit to you that these
witnesses from Bridgewater came all together on the corridor at the trial,
which was for them a real picnic. They laugh and jeer at the Italians
that were there, and myself, and there was a clique of them to create a
hostile atmosphere in the court against the general sympathy that I have
by all the people who know me.

Of course your Excellency cannot expect that any of the jury will admit
to you that they made a mistake, or that any witnesses for the Government
will now come forward and throw doubt on their own testimony. And
you cannot expect that Mr. Vahey and Mr. Graham will admit anything which
will show that they did not do their duty to me. The case has got to be decided on broader grounds than that. It is not on what the witnesses and the jury and the lawyers say now. It is on what they said and did at the trial of these two cases, and it is what the witnesses said before the trial, and it is their changes in testimony, and it is the methods that the police took to get them to identify me first, and then Sacco and me. Nothing that anybody can say now can change those facts or explain them away.

Just think of convicting a foreigner on the testimony of a boy who said he can tell a man is an Italian from the way he runs, or what nationality he is by the way he runs. Would that testimony convict an American before an American jury? He said that he identified me; he pointed to me and said, "The man in the booth," with all the despicable at his command, in order to impress the jury against me. If I am right he said at the trial that the bandit wore a light cap, and on the day of the crime he told the police or the detectives that the bandit wore a felt hat which fell on the ground.

Harding (this is the man that described me more particularly, and my
head as a funny bullet-shaped head) on the day of the crime, and also a few days later, said that the automobile was a Hudson, and he apologized to the detectives to be unable to testify against the bandit with the shotgun because all that he saw of the bandit was an overcoat, and not his face at all. Save mistake, he said at the trial that the bandit was bare-headed. He must have said so, for otherwise he could not have seen and studied his bullet-shaped head. So that till now we have a bandit who at one time wore a cap, a hat, and is bare-headed—all at one time; one witness says one thing, and another says another.

If your Honor knew the pitiable state of Georgina Brooks when she start to take the stand, you would realize that that woman was for an unknown reason compelled to do it against her own conscience, and I beg your Honor to look at her story and judge for yourself if it is possible to believe it--a woman that goes to see her parents for the Christmas vacation, with a valise in one hand and her children by the other hand, tried to cross the street, and was afraid of the automobile because the engine was going, and instead of passing back of the automobile she passed in front of the automobile. If she was afraid she would have passed in back, but
she said she passed in front and saw the bandit. Then she looked
at that man three or four times; went to the depot, and going on with these
children and the valise she turned around three or four times, I don't
know how many times, to look at these men. Later she said that she
suspected that man. Why didn't she tell it to the police? She
stayed about twenty or twenty-five minutes in the station waiting for the
train. Why didn't she telephone the police? Now that I know
the attitude of the Americans, that they telephone to the police whenever
they see something suspicious, I believe that you could never believe such
a thing, that she has had any suspicion. It looked to me that she
rather is very suspicious herself.

6. Now, when Chief Stewart came to my home to take my clothes, he didn't
take my two maroon sweaters that I have worn all winter long, and I just
left them before to go to New York. They were both in my closet in
my own room. He didn't take that because being a sweater with a high
collar, it would be against the witnesses, that say I have a certain kind
of a shirt, because with that sweater you could see nothing. Beside
this, he didn't find no cap in my closet and he go around in the kitchen
and in the other places in Mrs. Fortini's house looking for a cap.

This is what he did. And he took that cap, that by chance was mine, from a nail inside by the cellar ladder leading from the kitchen.

It hung on a nail there; and I think that is enough to show that he was ready to do anything.

7. Now on Mrs. Johnson. Of all the witnesses against us, the only one that said something true was Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, as in fact we were to their house. Yet they did all they could to induce the jury to believe that we act suspiciously at their house, in order to get the conviction and get the $200 reward that they were promised. In fact, this woman described certain little things on the face of Sacco, and the color of the face of Sacco, that no person could have seen on a country road in a dark night as dark as it was when we were over there. After having described Sacco particularly she made a great mistake; she said that I have an overcoat and Sacco was in his coat. The things were just the reverse. When we were found guilty she went to the company in Brockton to get her $200 reward, and the company said that they would not pay until my sentence, and she made much noise and insisted for
the $200 right away, so that it was reported by the Brockton press, and

finally she was paid the $200 by the White company's lawyer. Don't

forget that Mrs. Johnson has done all what she can to influence the jury

gainst us in order to get the conviction in order to get this $200.

Also her brother-in-law, Samuel Johnson, told the Advisory Committee that

she had been paid that sum. I am told there was $1000 paid; the Johnsons

got part and the policemen got another part.

8. Now about Capt. Proctor at the Plymouth trial. My cartridges

were taken by me from Sacco's house on the day of the arrest, before going

to West Bridgewater to get the automobile, with the intention to give them

to one of my friends in Plymouth, who would give me 50¢ for the cause.

I so told Rosie Sacco and Sacco. I suppose the cartridges weren't

worth 50¢, but he would give me 50¢ as a contribution to the

cause, and I would have given him the cartridges. Rosie Sacco and

Sacco were most willing to come to Plymouth and testify that I have taken

the cartridges from their house, but Mr. Vahey opposed absolutely their

testimony on the ground that it would hurt Sacco. I never knew what

was in the cartridges, and I never owned a shotgun since I have been in
Do you think, Governor, that if I had been guilty of either one of these crimes, I would have been found on a street car carrying four buckshot cartridges in my pocket, and a revolver that was stolen from a murdered man? I think if I had committed a murder I should have been careful not to have any cartridges in my pocket, and certainly not to have a revolver that had belonged to a murdered man in my pocket. And when you think that the day I was arrested, May 5th, was five months after the Bridgewater crime and three weeks after the South Braintree crime, I don't think you would believe that anybody could possibly have been such a fool as they tried to make me out, to keep carrying on my person the evidences of guilt. You cannot have it both ways. If we are clever bandits, then we don't do such things as that. If we do such things as that, we are not bandits. Bandits try to put away the evidence of crime, not to carry it around with them.

9. Now, Governor, I have told you that Beltrando Brini has told the truth, and also the other seventeen or more witnesses. The only way to find us guilty is to make up your mind not to believe our witnesses,
and not to want to believe our witnesses. To believe that a boy of
twelve years, as I have told you, can resist for three or four hours of
cross-examination of Katzmann if the boy were telling a false story, is
simply absurd; and to believe or to want to believe people that have changed
three or four times their testimony at Bridgewater, is certainly not logic.

If you do not want to believe Beltrando, you do not want to believe all
the other of my witnesses. If such is the case, your Honor should
indict all the Plymouth defense witnesses as perjurers. By deadly
and personal experience with the Massachusetts judges, low and high, I
really believe it easy to find a Thayer who would succeed to send them
to prison as perjurers for having told the truths in the cause of Vanzetti.

Then, having sent me to the chair for a crime I have not committed, give
a medal and rewards to the Bridgewater state witnesses which changed their
false testimony three times to doom an innocent man and help to doom another
one.

10. When I was arrested I do not know that I could have refused to
speak with the policemen. And beside that, they questioned us with
a big stick at their side, one by one; and we know of the third degree,
have heard of it in several cities of this country. If it had not been for that, I would not have told a lie. I would have waited for a lawyer, and I would have told my affairs to a lawyer, and I would have no reason to tell the lie, because I only told the lie because I believe that I must answer to them, and that if I did not lie they would go to my friend's houses; and that is what has compelled me to tell the lies when I told them to the police. Katzmann told me if I don't want, I can refuse to speak with him; but it seems that he was the only human being that I saw from my arrest, when he came to speak with us, and I told him more or less what I had told the police. I didn't know the difference at that time between the Federal police and the state police, and I think that everybody can arrest the Radicals. Chief Stewart said in court that he told me that I needn't answer his questions; but I never got that idea from him; I didn't understand it at the time.

I see I have spent a great deal of time talking about the different points in these two' cases; but what is the use talking about all these points when the case comes down to a very simple point. I am an Italian, a stranger in a foreign country, and my witnesses are the same kind of
people. I am accused and convicted on the testimony of mostly American witnesses. Everything is against me--my race, my opinions, and my humble occupation. I did not commit either of these crimes, and yet how am I ever going to show it if I and all my witnesses are not believed, merely because the police want to convict somebody, and get respectable Americans to testify against us? I suppose a great many Americans think that it is all right to stretch the truth a little to convict an anarchist; but I don't think they would think so if they were in my place.

And if any of them were accused of crime in Italy, and tried before an Italian jury at a time when Americans were not very popular in Italy, I think they would realize the truth of what I have been trying to say.

I don't understand what -your Excellency meant by telling me what the Fortini's said to you. Mrs. Fortini certainly saw me early in the morning of December 24th in her house and called me down-stairs, as she testified. None of the other Fortinis testified at Plymouth.

Mrs. Fortini's testimony was true. The same was true at Dedham.

Mrs. Fortini testified that I was in Plymouth selling fish. The only man member of the Fortini family that has any brains is Tony Fortini, the
nephew, who now lives with James Caldera in Plymouth. He saw me on December 24, 1919, and I think he saw on me April 15th in Plymouth.

The youngest Fortini boy is simple-minded. The father is alcoholic.

The oldest Fortini boy is a domestic tyrant, and I have told him many times that if I were his brother I would throw him out of the window for the way he treated his mother. The other boy is a good boy, but not very intelligent. The father and three sons usually left the house before seven o'clock in the morning to work, and I should be surprised if they saw me on April 15th; but I think that some of them must have seen me, as the mother did, on the early morning of December 24th.

Respectfully yours,

(Signed) BARTOLOMEO VANZETTI

From: umkc.edu.

**Chronology:**

**July 28, 1927**: Letter to Governor Fuller, July 28, 1927 -- Publication.

**February 10, 2017**: Letter to Governor Fuller, July