

Pier Vittorio Buffa

I did not want to die like that

Santo Stefano and Ventotene. Stories of life sentences and
confinement

Foreword by Emma Bonino

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by *Emma Bonino*

I thought I knew everything about the confinement in Ventotene and about the people who lived there: from Altiero Spinelli's *Manifesto per l'Europa*, from Ada and Ernesto Rossi... I thought I had read so much about it that I knew exactly how things had happened.

Instead, precisely for someone like me, the reconstruction of those years undertaken in *I did not want to die like this* is both surprising and exciting.

This is a good book, written in a pleasant way, both dramatic and enjoyable. Two things that seem to be mutually opposed, yet in this case are not.

The pages of this book reconstruct the lives of the prisoners, photograph details that were in danger of being forgotten for ever, and thus they become an important acknowledgment for all of those persons who lost their freedom defending their ideals and who remained segregated in Fascist prisons or confinement islands. These are the stories not only of the most renowned personalities, those whose names and actions played a role in the history of the Republic, men like Spinelli and the other federalists, like Pertini, Terracini, Scoccimarro... Men who from prison and confinement wrote and narrated, nourishing generations of libertarians and anti-Fascists. But this book is mostly a tribute to those who could not tell their own

stories, who died, as Pier Vittorio Buffa writes in the first pages, “before they could see how their sacrifice contributed to the birth of a democratic and republican Italy”. In these pages we meet great unknown heroes who without this book risked being lost to our memories, to the history of this country.

We meet Giovanni Bidoli, whose story impressed me: a tenacious fight for defending his own ideas which end in a concentration camp and in an exhausting march during which he would disappear.

We meet Stipettaio, the anarchist who built the small cabinet which was used, they say, to carry out of the island the *Manifesto and* other important secret documents, and who prepared a wooden tray on which Ernesto Rossi painted beautiful scenes from the lives of the prisoners confined to Ventotene.

And others yet. The sick man defended by Pertini, who convinced the director of confinement to take him immediately to the hospital. The anarchist Domaschi who shared a cell with Ernesto Rossi...

It is precisely when reading these stories that you realize that you were wrong when you thought you knew everything and that there was nothing you could add to your knowledge about that piece of the history of Italy. Even regarding Altiero Spinelli I discovered a detail of his life that I ignored. At Ventotene he has learned to raise chickens: behind his small watch-repair shop he had set up an efficient chicken coop. It is through details such as this that one truly enters into the life in confinement. A life that was difficult like all segregated lives, a life of struggle marked by the passages of the steamboat *Santa Lucia* which brought provisions, mail, and often new companions as well.

I know the island of Ventotene well, at least I thought I did. I have been there many times, I have visited all, by land and by sea. But I had never really caught the feeling of confinement. Its silences, its muffled sounds, its screams, its despair.

The human stories narrated in these pages really allow having a clearer picture of that large and varied community, bound by deep tensions and great love, which somehow managed to maintain a level of vitality, to survive the dictatorship, and to be ready when the time came to take up arms and build a free Italy. A community to which Bidoli, the Stipettaio and the others belonged to.

I did not want to die like this, as can be immediately understood from the title and the cover, discusses confinement in Ventotene and the life-sentence prison in Santo Stefano. It speaks about the two islands together, the (“distant and opposed worlds of two islands separated only by a straight, but linked by a common past of segregation and suffering”) with the declared purpose of explaining the fundamental differences of their fates, erase any doubt or confusion regarding their roles in recent history, of grasping that which bound them then and binds them today. Also in this case through the tools that are the pillars of this type of work: in-depth research, resulting from intense passion and effort, the stories that emerge with their heart rending everydayness and the enormous suffering, the role of the chronicler who narrates all of this with discretion and reserve, without standing in the way.

In this historical chronicle two opposed characters stand out whose memory should not be forgotten.

The first is Marcello Guida, the police commissioner who was the last director of confinement at Ventotene, the man who wrote the ‘*cenni*’ (the reader will discover what they were about later in the book) that sealed the fate of hundreds of people, the man who the morning after July 25 got rid of Mussolini's portrait from the wall of his office and the Fascist pin from his collar. Guida had a career also during the

Republic, he was Police Commissioner in Milan the day of the attack on piazza Fontana and, as will be recalled in the book, he immediately declared that the anarchist Pinelli had jumped out the window because his alibis had been proven false. Pertini, when he was president of the Chamber of Deputies refused to meet with him.

The other is his opposite. The man to whom Buffa devotes a paragraph entitled “The reformer”: Eugenio Perucatti, director of the prison of Santo Stefano from 1952 to 1960. His approach to the life-sentence prison is different from that of all his predecessors. Innovative, revolutionary, exceptionally modern. The first thing he did was order the files of each detainee and studied them in order to understand whether there were some innocent people detained in the structure. In his first meeting as a director he read out article 27 of the Constitution, in force for some years, which establishes that penalties “cannot consist in treatments that go against the sense of humanity and must tend toward the re-education of the condemned”. Perucatti's words about the life-sentence prison we Radicals repeat it, word by word, today. Marco Pannella committed his efforts in support of them, and Rita Bernardini repeats the every time she visits a prison. Words and concepts which Perucatti used in the Fifties but which represent the current stance of Radicals today.

Perucatti's attempted revolution and the stories of the prisoners who died on the island of Santo Stefano confirm, were it necessary, the fact that the battle against life-term sentences is a battle that must be fought to the end, until the abolishing of a penalty that is both inhuman and anti-constitutional. *I did not want to die like this*, with its dramatic stories of people 'buried alive', gives an important contribution to this fight.

I did not want to die like this.

Is the desperate cry that can be heard by those who know how to listen from every rock and ravine of the islands of Ventotene and Santo Stefano. Today they are popular tourist

destinations. Yesterday they were places of awful suffering “always a house of punishment and pain”.¹

They did not want to die like this, without getting to see how their sacrifice contributed to the birth of a democratic and republican Italy, all of those anti-Fascists confined in Ventotene and killed by disease or by the Nazi-Fascists before 1946.

They did not want to die like this, the hundreds of murderers and thieves, innocent men and political prisoners, dead in the most terrible prison in monarchic and republican Italy, nicknamed the 'tomb of the living'. They did not want to die in the island of Santo Stefano, forgotten by everyone, locked in a thin coffin a couple of inches underground in the small cemetery where crosses are corroded by time and lack of care.

Separate and opposed worlds, that of patriots and assassins, although during the dark era of Fascism the boundary lines got blurred and many anti-Fascist became common criminals by the passing of a sentence.

¹ Luigi Settembrini, *L'ergastolo di Santo Stefano*, Ultima spiaggia, Genova – Ventotene 2010, p.153.

Distant and opposed worlds of two islands separated only by a straight, but linked by a common past of segregation and suffering.

Ventotene, the larger of the two islands, with less than one thousand inhabitants, is the island in the Tyrrhenian, not far from Ischia, which had been used as a prison since the days of the Bourbon. And earlier, much earlier yet, by the Romans: August exiled his daughter Julia, and Nero his wife Octavia. The Fascist regime in the late Thirties sent to the island individuals considered as dangerous subversive elements, the greatest enemies of the regime. It had the contrary effect. Instead of breaking and silencing Socialists, Communists, Anarchists and members of Giustizia e Libertà, it turned Ventotene into a sort of incubator for the future Italian Republic and of the future European Union. More than twenty members of the Assembly that would write the Italian Constitution would live in the cells of confinement. And in the narrow space in which the eight hundred prisoners had to eat,

study, walk and sleep was born *For a free and united Europe. A draft manifesto*. Altiero Spinelli, Ernesto Rossi and Eugenio Colorni prepared and wrote it in the midst of World War II, when Europeans were killing each other. It is known throughout the world as the *Ventotene Manifesto*,² and recognized as the foundational act for the future European Union, turning the small Pontine island into the cradle of a united Europe.

Santo Stefano, less than twenty-eight hectares surrounded by the sea and only a mile away from Ventotene, became a prison for prisoners sentenced to life imprisonment at the end of the 18th century, when the King of Naples Ferdinand of Bourbon commissioned the architect Francesco Carpi to build a prison on it.

² Altiero Spinelli, Ernesto Rossi, *Il manifesto di Ventotene*, foreword by Eugenio Colorni, Mondadori, Milano 2006.

Carpi designed a structure that was very advanced for its time, a large panopticon building³ in which a single guard surveilled all the inmates. The Kings of Naples would send there murderers and *camorristi*, as well as political opponents such as Luigi Settembrini and Silvio Spaventa. The Fascists would do the same: the cells of the panopticon would house the future President of the Italian Republic, Sandro Pertini, and the future president of the Constituent Assembly, Umberto Terracini.

Pertini and Terracini, condemned by the special court instituted by the Fascists in 1926, lived together with thieves and assassins, and see death and pain up close. Once their sentences were completed they were not freed, but being considered dangerous 'subversive elements' they were confined to Ventotene, where they would remain until the fall of Fascism, in the Summer of 1943.

The story of these two men can be considered as the link between Ventotene e Santo Stefano. An important story that must be told, preserved, defended. It is a story of pain. But also of hope. The hope that the projects to turn the islands into a great campus where Europe, peace and fair punishment continue to be discussed may become a reality. The hope that the cells and the places that imprisoned and segregated will

become the cells and places of freedom.

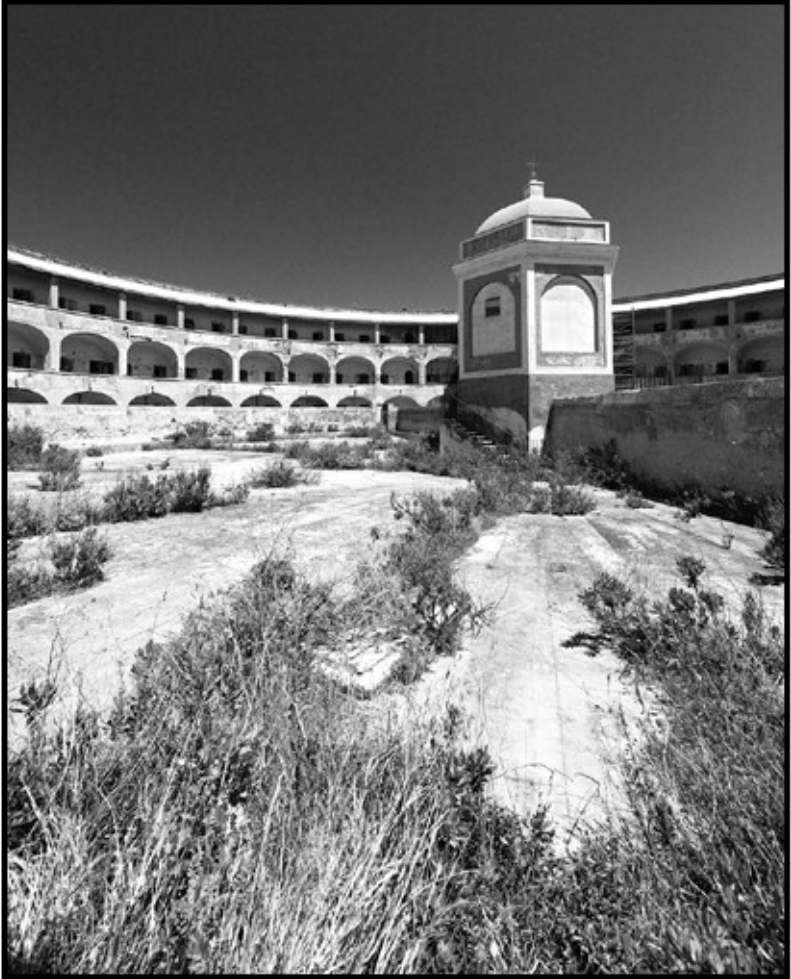
This book, a sort of *Spoon River* about those who suffered and died on these islands, aims to be a guide for understanding what happened on those two beautiful islets, and a memorial.

³ Jeremy Bentham, *Panopticon, ovvero la casa d' ispezione*, Marsilio, Venezia 1982.

It is important not to forget those who, when freedom did not exist, gave all they had, including their own lives, to secure it and leave it for future generations as the greatest possible gift.

It is equally important not to forget that life-imprisonment sentences do not bring about redemption and life, but only despair.

Life- sentence prison



In the previous page the interior of the life-term prison of Santo Stefano with the church and in the background the balconies of the cells(2016).

In a room in the prison of Cassino, well organized along a wall, is all that is left of the archives of the prison of Santo Stefano.

When the prison was closed in 1965, all the documents and files went from the archives in Santo Stefano to a container bound for Cassino. Here, years later, the penitentiary agents in the institution organize the files, catalogue and register the documents. Day after day the personal files of the prisoners become consultable once again, a mountain of paper that gathers the lives of thousands of people.

Many files contain only a few pages, some only the notification everything was sent to the prison where the detainee had been transferred. Others instead are bulging: dozens, hundreds of letters, notes, communications, sentences... Submerging oneself in them one often would like to retreat because suddenly it is the most intimate aspects of their lives that are being revealed. Because in prison there isn't even any privacy, or confidentiality. Needs, thoughts, hopes, become the subject of bureaucratic communications. In order to write to one's wife it is necessary to make a request which remains recorded on file. The letter, before leaving the island, is read and controlled; if one is sick the medical files are there, with detailed reports and analysis...

Yet the files, letting the chronicler into the lives of those men, help him understand what it means to be in prison such as this, and to know that one will probably never leave it alive. It is thus something that goes beyond individual destinies, it becomes a choral narrative of men who, guilty or not, were isolated for ever from the rest of the world.

The files of those who died on the island are thicker and the first time you take one in your hands you are afraid. On the cover, in large hand-written capital letters, it says DEAD. Inside the first page there is almost always a list of the remaining possessions of the deceased: some underpants, some socks, a jacket and the money kept by the prisons management

in the prisoner's personal account. A few lire which almost nobody ever claims and which remain in the coffers of the State. Then letters that are almost identical, addressed to the mayor of the village so that he informs the family. The authorization for the burial. The medical certificate that too often indicates the cause of death as “cardiac arrest”.

Yet the last public act, which marks the end of the life of a prisoner at Santo Stefano takes place one mile away, at the offices of the Council of Ventotene. In their registry are the names and last names of all the detainees who died on the island. It is easy to identify them because all the reports begin with a phrase that remained unchanged over the years: “Having received from the Director of the Prison of Santo Stefano notification concerning the death of...”.

Angelo De Libero, born in Sezze, in the province of Latina, died on January 9, 1900, the first in the new century. On 22 July, 1962, Benigno Pilia (cf. p. 135) was buried, the last to die on the prison-island. Sixty-two years during which the Council registered, excepting possible omissions or errors, two hundred and fifty “death notifications”. Going back in time one is lost in infinite lists until the early 19th century, when the prison was only a few years old. Luigi Settembrini, the Neapolitan patriot and writer, and who spent eight years on the island, calculated that over a period of twenty years more than one thousand two hundred men had died in the prison, approximately one thousand of which were murdered by their fellow inmates or by the jailers.⁴

In the small cemetery, a few dozen meters from the entrance to the prison, the name remains visible on only thirty-nine of the remaining forty-seven tombs. Thirty-nine for the thousands of men who died on the island. And the names are there only because in the early Seventies Luigi Veronelli, the famous writer, anarchist, enologist and gourmet, visited the island. After the closing of the prison he was the guest on the island of a wine producer from Ischia who had sharecropping rights on

Santo Stefano (the island, with the exception of the prison, is private property).

Veronelli stayed with the family in the house of the old farmer that had taken care of the land around the penitentiary and discovered the “tiny cemetery, buried among the rocks”.⁴ A small plot surrounded by a wall in ruins, piles of earth, iron crosses that are only partially legible. Veronelli takes a pen and a piece of paper and carefully writes down the names, last names, years of death and exact location of the tombs. The result is a precious list: thirty-nine names of men who never left the island. Among them lies Gaetano Bresci, the anarchist who assassinated Umberto I, and other thirty-eight that were never included in the great chronicles of our country.

⁴ L. Settembrini, *cit.*, p. 163.

⁵ Luigi Veronelli, *Santo Stefano: un incontro inatteso*, in *Archivio G. Pinelli, Bollettino*, n. 16, December 2000, p. 27.

These are men who symbolically live again in the work of a group formed in 2011 and which took on the name of ‘Free from Life-Imprisonment’.⁵ Each year this group (formed by ex-prisoners, prison directors, relatives of people who spent time in prison, as well as people who simply are against life-imprisonment) returns to the island together with Salvatore Schiano di Colella, the man who has become a scholar and protector of sorts, a very special custodian of the ex-prison. They re-write the inscriptions corroded by the wind, they help Salvatore clean, tidy up, get rid of weeds, put stones back in place.

It is as though they had adopted those thirty-nine dead prisoners and by taking care of their tombs were sending out a message to the world saying that life-imprisonment is a punishment that a civilized society should abolish. And as if, although with other premises and aims, they had taken the testimony of Luigi Settembrini who, from a cell in Santo Stefano wrote: “Any punishment that does not have as its purpose the correction of the offender and the reparation to

society for the damages suffered, is not punishment but rather blind and merciless revenge which offends God and humanity”.⁷

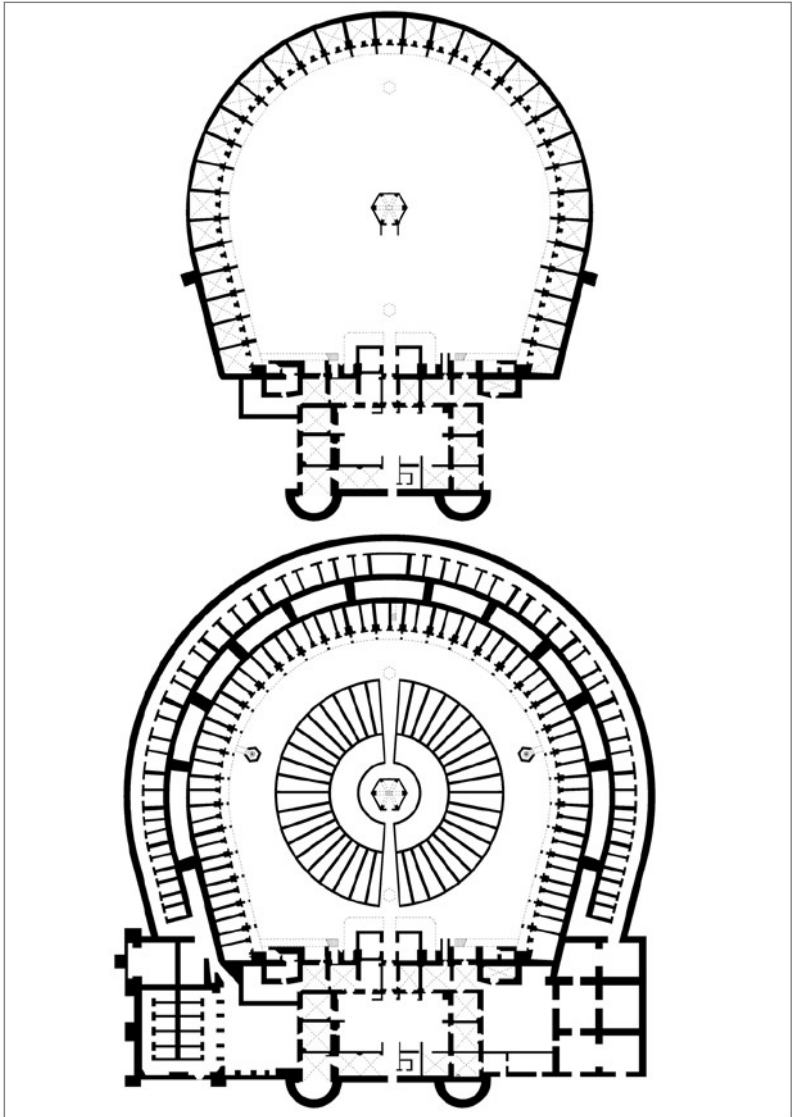
The house of Bourbon

The construction of the prison began between 1792 and 1793. In France the winds of revolution were blowing strong, and Louis XVI is tried and sentenced to death by guillotine. The book *On Crimes and Punishments*,⁸ written by one of the greatest of representatives of Italian Enlightenment, Cesare Beccaria, had been published almost thirty years earlier. In England, Jeremy Bentham had published his *Panopticon* a year earlier. The new prison is therefore an attempt to combine in one structure a double need. That of the King of Naples to get rid of murderers and political enemies, and that of architecture and philosophy to build a prison following the most modern and enlightened principles. Thus Francesco Carpi inspires his design on Bentham's ideas and builds a structure that appears like an upturned theater, which is exactly how Salvatore Schiano di Colella describes it today to the tourists that climb to the top of Santo Stefano.

⁶ <https://liberidallergastolo.wordpress.com>.

⁷ L. Settembrini, *cit.*, p. 173.

⁸ The first edition of the essay is from 1764. There are a variety of different editions available in the market today.



The plan of the prison of Santo Stefano when it was closed in 1965. Above it the original plan designed by Francesco Carpi. The penitentiary was inaugurated in 1795 (Courtesy of architects Stefano D'Alessandro and Cesare Garavoglia).

Salvatore lives in Ventotene, he has obtained testimonials, has studied the history of the prison, reconstructed it in detail, and describes it to visitors with accuracy and passion. At one point he takes from his backpack two superimposed images, one is the plan of the prison, and the other is the San Carlo Theater in Naples, which was inaugurated in 1737. They are basically identical.⁹ “Imagine you are seeing”, writes Settembrini, “a vast open-air theater, painted yellow, with three orders of arched galleries, which are the three levels which hold the cells of the condemned: imagine that instead of the stage there is a great wall, like an immense backdrop... that in the middle and above that wall there is covered loggia... in which there is always a guard watching over the entire theater... this building is shaped like a semi-circle, with a vast courtyard in the middle, and in the middle of the courtyard a small hexagonal church”.¹⁰

⁹ See as well the in-depth study by Antonio Parente, *L'ergastolo in Santo Stefano di Ventotene. Architettura e pena*, Ufficio studi, Dipartimento amministrazione penitenziaria, Ministero della Giustizia, Roma 2008.

¹⁰ L. Settembrini, *cit.*, p. 159.

26 September 1795 is remembered as the day in which the yet unfinished prison was inaugurated: the first two hundred detainees arrives in chains to the island and are housed in the cells that are already finished, which are on the bottom floor. “On February 19 of the following year the first mass was celebrated by chaplain Ricca”.¹¹ In 1797 the work is completed, and more than six hundred detainees are held prisoner in the structure. On August 26 of that same year the first mass escape was attempted, which finished in a violent battle with two dead and many wounded.¹²

Two years later, when the Neapolitan Republic falls in June 1799, hundreds of its supporters are ferried to the island and imprisoned in Santo Stefano. Raffaele Settembrini, Luigi's

father, is among them. It is the first massive use of the Pontian islands as a political prison. It is after the Neapolitan insurrection of 1848 that Luigi Settembrini, man of letters, lawyer, patriot, later Senator of the Italian Kingdom and founder, together with Silvio Spaventa, of the Great Society for the Italian Unification, is arrested and condemned, a sentence that was then commuted to imprisonment for life. A total of approximately twenty political prisoners are at Santo Stefano at the time.

Luigi Settembrini was a careful chronicler of the Bourbon prison. When he arrived in Santo Stefano he was put in cell 25 on the third floor, which he shared with an “old Calabrian who is seventy-five years old and has committed thirty-five murders”, with the “brigand known as Moscardiello”, the Abruzzese Giovanni who participated in a massacre in which eleven people were killed, with another “young Abruzzese condemned to death” for murder whose sentence was commuted, and with a man from Puglia, sentenced to life-imprisonment for murder. The cells have “an area of sixteen square palms [eleven meters]... in which nine, ten or more men are kept. They are black and smoked like village kitchens, and have a very miserable and dirty appearance”. Thirty-three cells on each level, which thus permits holding up to eight hundred people, approximately.

Settembrini's descriptions bring to life the images, sounds and smells of an infernal pit. The loggias placed around the structure outside the cells overlook the courtyard, where “you can see nothing more than the condemned painfully dragging their clanging chains”. These are those “condemned to chains”, who unlike those who are condemned to life-imprisonment, can move about within the structure, and even go out to cultivate vegetable patches and grapevines: “They drag their chains and can wander about the courtyard. The fortunate ones among them go alone, some carrying all sixteen rings of the chain, others eight. The very fortunate carry only four”.

“Sometimes you see the bench on which beatings were given, often also the stretcher carrying the corpses of those that have been killed”. Beatings are one of the terrible punishments daily performed in the prison. “The guilty party lies face-down on a bench in the middle of the courtyard and is beaten by two jailers with two pieces of rope covered in tar and dipped in water on his buttocks, sides and thighs. The commander prescribes the number of blows... the condemned must watch, and the victim implored the Virgin and saints they were cursing only moments earlier... These punishments are continuous, beatings take place almost every day: some have received more than two thousand blows overall, and die of consumption but not broken”.¹³

October 1860. The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies is approaching its end. On the 26th Giuseppe Garibaldi and Vittorio Emanuele II, soon to be King of Italy, meet in Teano while the rest of the Bourbon army are entrenched in Gaeta with their King Francis II. It is the last attempt of the Bourbons to oppose any resistance.

¹¹ Giuseppe Tricoli, *Monografia per le isole del gruppo ponziano*, Ultima spiaggia, Genova – Ventotene 2011, p. 203.

¹² Amelia Pugliese, *Viaggio nella casa di correzione penale di Santo Stefano* (http://bit.ly/amelia_pugliese).

¹³ References are from the chapter “L’ergastolo di Santo Stefano. Notizie storiche”, in L. Settembrini, *cit.*, pp. 153-173.