

The Buenos Aires Tragedy

29 January – 2 February 1931

The Last Fight of Severino di Giovanni and Paulo Scarfó

No discussion of Italian Anarchism, the movement in Argentina or illegalism can pass over Severino di Giovanni and his comrades in silence. With both written propaganda and acts of violence they attacked fascism, the framing of Sacco and Vanzetti, the dictatorship and the entire capitalist order.

Their uncompromising revolt led them into conflict with other anarchists - and to a final, fatal showdown with the state that they defied. This pamphlet is a tribute originally published in *L'Adunata dei Refrattari*, drawing on letters from comrades in Argentina who had escaped the final repression.

A letter from América Scarfó - lover of Severino, sister of Paulo and comrade of both - is also included.

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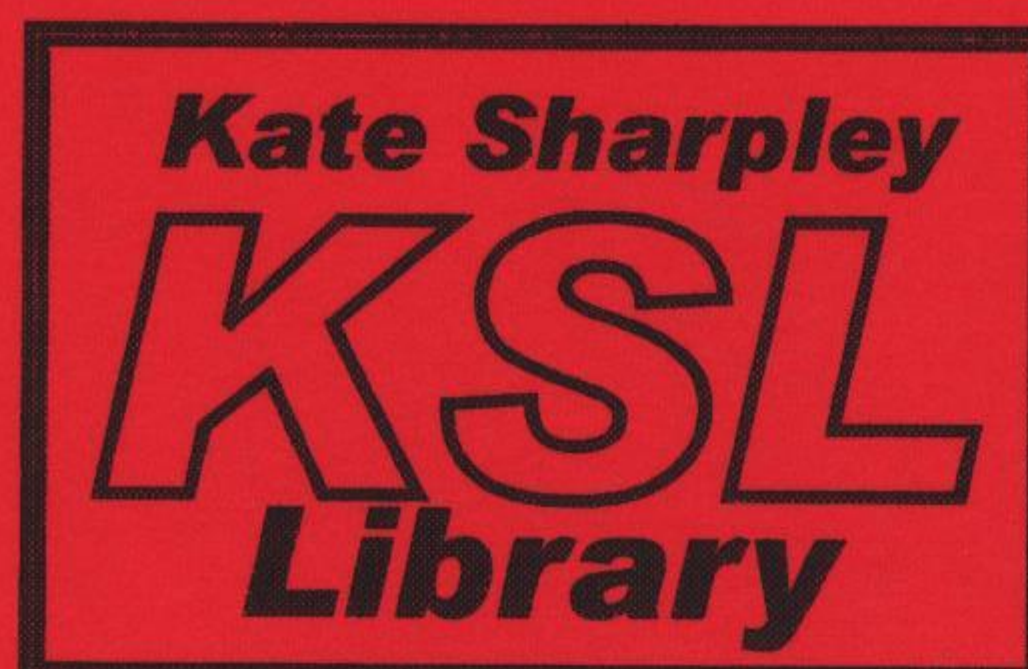
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Sources :

L'Adunata dei Refrattari, special commemorative edition of Saturday 28 March 1931, allegedly the only account of the tragedy actually produced by anarchists. Reprinted in Severino Di Giovanni – *Il pensiero e l'azione* (Gratis, Florence 1993) pp. 13-43.

Letter from América Scarfó (no name on original) from *Man!* vol. 1 no. 3, March 1933.

Cover pictures: Paulo Scarfó taken from *Man!* Severino di Giovanni also taken from *Man!* (Volume 1 Number 3 March 1933).

Translated by Paul Sharkey

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THE BUENOS AIRES TRAGEDY

29 JANUARY – 2 FEBRUARY 1931

SEVERINO DI GIOVANNI

Severino Di Giovanni was born in Chieti on 7 March 1901. Of his youth little is known. A comrade who writes us from Buenos Aires tells us that from an early age he was bright, lively, intolerant of family authority and that his parents put him in a home in Ancona for a time. Where, of course, his innate rebelliousness must have been cultivated systematically until it matured into a thoughtful revolt against social tyranny.

While still young he married Teresa Santini, by whom he had four children. In 1922 he emigrated to Argentina and shortly after that found work as a type-setter.

"Those who remember him in the days before he became a fugitive" – the comrade mentioned earlier writes – "know the enthusiasm with which he dedicated himself to spreading anarchist ideas and well remember that, whereas he had an impetuous temperament, his jovial character made him a welcome colleague and dear friend to all."

On the day after he was arrested, a Buenos Aires socialist newspaper wrote of him: "The talk today is of a tall, thick-set Severino Di Giovanni with extraordinary physical vigour and elegantly dressed ... Back then he was rather lean, with the drawn features of a young man who could not always eat dinner. He dressed in a rather shabby fashion, more so than the average workman; jacket and trousers that one could see at first glance had seen much use, a vest to cover his chest, a kerchief at his neck, a beret worn at an angle and the usual proletarian zapatillas on his feet. No suggestion of Al Capone in any way. Features regular, darkish fair hair, slightly reddish complexion, it was only in his eyes, the colour of an azure sea, that one could see a bright, almost feverish glint ... We saw him first at antifascist rallies. He was of course opposed to all the political brands of antifascism. He saw socialists, democrats and even communists are no different from the fascists. He came to meetings to hand out and sell anarchist newspapers and reviews and, from time to time, to express his disagreement with the speakers ... And in place of the organised antifascism of various persuasions which, according to him, was a distraction to the masses, one day he launched publication of a little anarchist paper by the name of *Culmine*. He wrote, type-set and printed it himself, eating into his sleep time."¹

His first brush with the police came in 1925 on the occasion of the celebrations for the jubilee of the Savoyard blight [i.e. the 25th anniversary of Victor Emmanuel III becoming king of Italy.] All of the bigwigs from the Italian colony were gathered in the Colon theatre. At one point, a swarm of manifestoes rehearsing the infamous record of Italy's third king rained down upon the stalls from one of the boxes. Goons fell upon the disrupters, meaning to dole out a beating. Only to come upon Di Giovanni;

somebody apprehended him and they made do with handing him over to the police who, finding that he had acted in lawful self-defence, merely entered his name on the "Public Order register".

Meanwhile, *Culmine* carried on publishing and comrades recall that whereas it had no great literary pretensions, its columns championed his ideas with enthusiasm and utter sincerity and with exceptional courage. The campaign on behalf of Sacco and Vanzetti and the agitation of the enormous crowds that it brought on to the streets raised the issue of insurrection which Severino Di Giovanni openly argued was what was needed. Attacks on a number of American institutions in Buenos Aires infuriated the capital's political police which then embarked upon unrelenting harassment of the anarchists, especially those who stuck out their necks without regard for their safety. And Di Giovanni was one of the first to be targeted for stop and arrest tactics by the police. In May 1928, following a bomb attack on the Italian consulate in Buenos Aires, he became a police suspect – although initially they arrested Agostino Cremonesi merely because he had for a time been the administrator with *Culmine* – having been openly named by the anarcho-syndicalist editors of *La Protesta* as the bomber, and was obliged to go on the run.

From that point on his life begins to melt into legend. Banished from civil society, he fully accepted his fate and threw himself headlong into the fray, giving and seeking no quarter. His family came in for systematic police harassment and he was forced to stay away from it. He acquired new ties of affection about which the treacherous journalism of the gutter press would later speculate in its sadistic lust for scandal. "They swooped upon Teresa Santini, the mother of his children, in hope of extracting from her accusations and revelations likely to add further poison to the despicable campaign that the press was waging against him" – our correspondent writes – "but to no avail. His wife stated that up until such time as police harassment had forced him to abandon her, Severino had always been a good husband to her and a good father to their children with whom, even while he was on the run, he never failed to communicate when and how he could and for whose needs he provided."

"Daring to the point of disbelief" – our correspondent continues – "Severino Di Giovanni was never willing to listen to those urging him to show greater prudence, clear out of Buenos Aires or spare a thought for his own safety. He knew just how relentlessly the police were looking for him: he knew that every officer had a snapshot of him in his pocket, the authorities having given it a wide distribution, but he never gave it a thought. He had confidence in himself, in his own resources and reckless courage and the only voice he heeded was the voice of his own conscience reminding him, in the exuberance of his untamed passion, of the vital need for revolt and for struggle if the anarchist idea was ever to take root in the ranks of men."

His existence over these past three years amounts, like his whole career as a militant, to one constant affirmation. Propaganda by the spoken word or in the press was now out of the question for him. But he could still write. And write he did, to half of the

world, suggesting initiatives, proposing publications and embarking upon a number of them, such as the publication of Elisée Reclus's *Social Writings*, getting as far as the second volume of a projected edition of at least six.

And he struggled, committing his life day by day to the most demanding ventures even in the haunts of his persecutors: leaving his name and his very sincerity open to vilification from all of the Sanhedrin insulting his splendid audacity. And for three years, on the basis of audacity alone and on the honest passion of his belief, he triumphed over all the police snares and all the efforts made by treacherous subversives to stab him in the back.

The coup d'état on 6 September [1930] had scattered or broken all the opposition groups. General Uriburu's military dictatorship had shown itself particularly implacable in its dealings with the workers' movement. Newspapers – including one daily – trade union, political and cultural organisations were banned and shut down in the space of a few hours. Militants were rounded up en masse and, if foreign-born, deported, or, if native-born, consigned to island prisons or placed on board prison ships. Others escaped into exile.

All that was left of the revolutionary press, which had blossomed like nowhere else in the world up until just a few days before, were a few tiny news-sheets published irregularly and unreliably to testify to the vitality of a belief that was not giving in. Of the hundreds and thousands of militant workers, all that remained were a few small and secret clusters of uncertain future to defy the sanctions of the martial law introduced and enforced by the new regime.

Among those clusters – especially where words gave way to action – were Severino Di Giovanni, Paulino Scarfó and their friends. More active and more determined than ever.

"Up until a few days before capture" – our correspondent writes – "Severino Di Giovanni insisted to me that there was nothing else for it. The moment any freedom is suppressed and exercise of the most basic rights precluded, and propaganda of our ideas in every format proscribed and until such time as each and every one of our comrades has been arrested and shipped home or tossed into prison or consigned to tedious inactivity on the islands, there is only one thing left for us to do: arm ourselves and determine to use force to assert the rights and the freedom that we are denied, to show, through the sacrifice of our lives, if need be, that not everybody has given up, that the cause of freedom still has its champions and that anarchists know how to face up to the struggle so savagely foisted upon us, right to the ultimate consequences. This sound reasoning of his was one to which he stayed loyal throughout his life."

No question about it: the figure of Severino Di Giovanni displayed an exceptional mettle. It required not only the irrepressible enthusiasm of his extraordinary belief, but exceptional intelligence and shrewdness for him to stay in the breach, as the heart and soul of a stunningly versatile movement for nigh on four years. But the imaginings of drones and the malice of enemies concerned to explain away their own inability

to summon up what was needed, managed to weave around his name a legend more extraordinary than the human being could possibly have been, depicting the Severino Di Giovanni who eluded their determined tracking for so many years, as a fantastic personage endowed with superhuman gifts of ubiquity and vanishing powers, at the head of a no less fantastic gang of unknown disturbers of order and the peaceable digestion of the good bourgeois. The police certainly did not have much on him in their records. He had been arrested in 1925: and again in 1927 following an attack on the City Bank, in which he denied all responsibility and had had to be set free. He had never been tried or convicted of anything. Furthermore, he was alleged, on foot of public claims rather than reliable evidence to have been behind the 1928 attack on the Italian consulate: and the killing of Montagna, on the basis of a supposed statement made by the dying Montagna. But as far as the general public, fed on the crime pages of the hack press, was concerned Severino Di Giovanni had become the hero of an endless spate of crimes, including, the time he was arrested for the attack on the Italian consulate in 1928, the attacks on the City Bank, the Boston Bank, the Cathedral and the Ford Dealership, the attack on the Provincial Bank in San Martin, the Via Leandro N. Alen bank and the La Central Bus Company, the killing of Emilio Lopez Arango in 1929, of Agostino Cremonesi² and Giulio Montagna, the attack on the cashier of the Obras Sanitarias on 3 October 1930, and on the Braceras company, the raid on the Bank of Avellaneda, the attempted raid on the prison van for the purpose of freeing Alessandro Scarfó and Gomez Oliver (who were not in fact inside it) in 1930, bomb attacks on three railway stations last January, not to mention passing counterfeit currency, underground publications. etc.

True, not all of these were credited to him personally in the detective fiction of the major newspapers: but they were chalked up to the "gang" of which he was the presumed, absolute and unbending boss. As for this "gang" it was a group of men driven by a profound love of anarchist ideas and by an irresistible determination to deploy their daring and their very lives in the fight to speed their realisation. As for the absolute, unbending boss "that" – our correspondent writes us – "is an out and out invention. Along with a lively intellect and great powers of persuasion, Severino Du Giovanni had great audacity and the sort of impetuosity one finds in self-assured temperaments. But that he was the "boss" of a group of men blindly committed and obedient to him, no one can credit who knew his comrades. They were men of character with their own highly developed consciences and whilst they might bow to argument they would never have countenanced any hint of imposition. Like him, they were anarchists and if they operated as a group, this was only because they were like-minded, because there was a common agreement between them on choice of means and how they saw their goals. Relations between them were governed by a shared intense anarchist aspiration that would not countenance any sort of hierarchy."

MARIO CORTUCCI

Mystery still shrouds the means by which the military dictatorship's police came by such detailed intelligence that they were able to effect a round-up of Severino Di Giovanni and his closest confederates in less than twelve hours.

Following the bomb attacks on 20 January [1931] when three almost simultaneous explosions at three separate locations on the railway system in the capital claimed several lives and left a considerable number wounded, Mario Cortucci, an anarchist militant who had not yet decided to leave for exile, was arrested as a suspected accessory. Following the arrest of Severino Di Giovanni and Paulino Scarfó, the police hurriedly reported through the supine press that Mario Cortucci, who was denying any part in the recent outrages "ended up confessing, admitting that he had had dealings with Scarfó, Di Giovanni, etc., etc., and that these were living in a house in Burzaco. Armed with this intelligence, the police moved to arrest the fugitives."

Apart from the fact that prior to going to Burzaco the police had discovered and arrested Severino Di Giovanni near the printshop in the Via Callao and must therefore have been aware of his other address, the police's explanation of the mystery is more than suspect.

A conservative Montevideo newspaper wrote: "The name of this anarchist was given out to all and sundry and details were even supplied of his treachery? Does that not seem odd? Could the police on his trail, having achieved such spectacular success, have rewarded their informant by exposing him to execration and revenge by his comrades? Or might Cortucci not be, as seems to be the case, another victim?"³

The comrade who sent us this clipping from Montevideo adds the following note: "I know Cortucci and I doubt that he could be the traitor." Whilst our Buenos Aires correspondent writes us: "Anyone familiar with the police set-up in Argentina knows the Calvary of ghastly tortures to which those arrested are systematically subjected. In Mario Cortucci's case, suffice to say that 25 days after his arrest he is still attending the infirmary for treatment for the results of the treatment received from the police. According to the gutter press, he is supposed to be the traitor. There is every good reason to doubt this and it would not be odd if the news should slip out some day that Cortucci has killed himself! The gutter press in Argentina defies belief. The sadistic imagination of the goons shrinks from no atrocity if it promises to extract confessions and admissions from the prisoner. Anybody who knew Cortucci prior to his arrest knows well that he deserved respect and confidence."

THE CAPTURE OF SEVERINO DI GIOVANNI

One way or another, there must have been treachery because on the evening of 29 January the Buenos Aires political police, no more intelligent under Uriburu's military dictatorship than under Irigoyen's political dictatorship, was on the trail of Severino Di Giovanni in the vicinity of the Via Callao printshop where the clandestine outlets for anarchist propaganda were produced. Unable to bear inactivity and as ever

preoccupied with propaganda, Di Giovanni was a frequent caller to that printshop in the city centre, three blocks from the Congress Square, delivering manuscripts, correcting proofs, etc.

"For some days" – our correspondent continues – "there had been a suspicion that the printshop was under surveillance but Severino would not agree. He was convinced that he had changed so much as to be unrecognisable and he carried on visiting all the more keenly because his latest venture, publication of a pamphlet of his own called *The Right of Leisure and Individual Recovery* was close to his heart.

The press illustrated what happened with plenty of detail. Around 7.15 pm, in the Via Callao, on the corner with Sarmiento – one of the most central, busiest locations in the city – as Severino Di Giovanni was chatting with two other people, he was accosted by three detectives who informed him that he was under arrest. Instead of surrendering he grabbed his revolver and quickly stepped away from the group. The detectives, who in the meantime had been joined by other policemen, went after the fugitive, shooting madly. As the chase got underway fourteen year old Delia Berardone fell, mortally wounded; the police newspapers were to make capital greatly and despicably out of her death. Ducking into courtyards and scanning the rooftops, Di Giovanni must have realised very quickly that he was surrounded on all sides. Finding his path blocked, he opened fire on officers Jose Benito Uriz and Antonio Ceferino Garcia, wounding the former and killing the latter, and forcing his way past them. He reached a garage with no exit, the police closing in on his heels. Realising that he was caught in a trap he tried to hide but finding that it was pointless looking for a way out when there was none he turned to face the bloodhounds hot on his heels and "at the top of his voice shouted out: 'Let it not be said that you took me alive. I am Severino Di Giovanni and I will die by my own hand.' That said, he pointed the gun and fired a shot, slumping to the ground in a puddle of blood."⁴

In no time at all they were on top of him, handcuffing him and since he seemed to be seriously wounded he was removed to the Ramos Mejia Hospital where a medical examination established that his wound was not fatal: he was hit in the left breast and had a "four centimetre exit wound."

Patched up as best they could, he was then questioned by some bigwigs from the Interior Ministry. He replied that he had fired in "'legitimate self-defence' in that he had taken to his heels to save his life. He refused to say where he had been living or to reveal the alias he had been using."

At around 9.30 pm, under a heavily armed escort he was moved to the National Penitentiary where he was locked up in a holding cell and kept in sight of a guard.

SUMMARY PROCEEDINGS

Once he had been identified as Severino Di Giovanni – which was easily done, given the prisoner's own admission and the snapshots and fingerprints in the possession of the police – the Uruburu government appears to have had no intention other than to

shoot him as quickly as possible, taking care to surround the killing it intended to carry out with as much of a press outcry as it could raise from a spectacular campaign in the subsidised press.

As for shooting him, it was simply a matter of implementing the martial law proclaimed on 6 September and a military court would see to that.

Around midnight on 29 January, Colonel Pilotto, the prefect of police, after consultation with the Prisons Minister Sanchez Sorondo, urgently requested the formation of a court martial which was in fact formed at 2.20 am on 30 January in a hall in the Penitentiary, under the chairmanship of Colonel Conrado Risso Patron. Lieutenant Colonel Arturo Clipten Goldney would serve as prosecuting counsel. Lieutenant Franco was entrusted with the defence of the accused.

An hour before the proceedings got under way, when Lieutenant Franco visited his cell to inform him that he had been given the job, Severino Di Giovanni was in a deep sleep "as if unaware of what was about to happen" – the incredulous newspapers recorded. He woke after his defence counsel spoke to him: "I am fully aware of my situation. I know very well that they are going to shoot me and for that reason I have no intention of evading any of my responsibilities. I will make my deposition in only one way: by speaking the truth. I ask only one thing, that no attempt is made to have me abjure my ideas. I am an anarchist and I will argue that before anybody and regardless of the consequences..."

After this short consultation, he went back to sleep. The warders had to rouse him an hour later to bring him before the judges.

Lieutenant Franco was not exaggerating when he warned the accused that the trial would be a summary one. The braided killers gathered in session by night in the depths of a fortress, surrounded by weapons and armed men, had no time to waste on chat.

Severino Di Giovanni was charged with having offered armed resistance against the security forces, killing Delia Berardone and officer Garcia and wounding another officer, Uriz.

En route from his cell to the courtroom, the accused passed between two lines of rubber-neckers, reporters, photographers, officers, etc., drinking in every detail of his in the hope of divining his innermost feelings.

To one journalist, Di Giovanni appeared as follows:

"In appearance, utterly changed. He has put on some weight, so must weigh 85 to 90 kilos. Stands 1 metre 72 tall. His thick fair hair is brushed back, his face red with sideburns."

He moved in long slow strides, head held high and chest thrust out defiantly.

In front of the court he retained the proud demeanour of a man who knows that he has nothing to hope for, nothing to disturb him. Having listened in silence to the reading of the charges and to the questions put by the court chairman he replied "in a weary voice" – the reporter notes – "Yes, I am Severino Di Giovanni, son of Carmelo, an Italian, born in Chieti on 17 March 1901."

The chairman then invited him to state his details and he answered:

"I am aware of my situation and have no intention of shirking my responsibilities. As a good player I know that I have lost and I am ready to pay. So I shall make my deposition in just one way: by telling the truth, even though I know what awaits me. I do not cling to life and on the other hand I am convinced that this court martial will decide in four words to have me shot four times ... Against my wishes I have two personalities. Before you stands Severino Di Giovanni in flesh and bone. But there is another Di Giovanni, a product of legend, the creature of detective novels. This story has gone on too long but luckily I am being tried before a court that will resolve everything with four rifle shots, thereby putting paid to a tale that would not have ended had I been tried before an ordinary court. The Di Giovanni who stands before you is a man who goes to his death unrepentant. I am an anarchist and as such I hold ideas that may well be wrong and which you judges certainly do not share. But I do not want to get into a philosophical discussion here. Every doctrine dies when put into words and we anarchists are primarily of a practical turn of mind."

The chairman questioned him on the previous evening's events and he replied:

"I was attacked. That is the truth. It was not I who fired first but the police. So much so that initially I took to my heels with no thought other than getting to safety. I ran down Sarmiento as far as the Rio Bamba only to find a policeman there barring my way. In order to dodge him I started to run around an automobile. But the officer tried to catch me up. I saw that all was lost and then I opened fire. But the police had by then fired recklessly at me several times."

"How many shots did you fire?"

"I don't know ... I cannot recall."

"Think. How many?"

"I say again I cannot recall. I fired. I think I hit the officer but from then on everything is confused. I was overwrought. There were police bullets whizzing around me and I have only a vague and partial recollection of being pursued in my flight. I say again, I was caught up in an awful commotion. But I can assure you of one thing. I was attacked. I was not the first to open fire."

There were few witnesses: four police officers and a Russian who happened to be in the garage at the time of the arrest: and their only task was to identify the accused and repeat the official version of events that had occurred a few hours earlier. Officer Andrada who had been on duty in Cangallo and Ayacucho stated that he had seen Di Giovanni shoot. "Why are you lying?" – the accused interrupted him – "From where you were you absolutely could not have seen if I fired. You are lying!"

At 6.30 am after the witnesses had been heard, the proceedings were suspended. When they resumed, it was the prosecution's turn to speak and it bluntly stated that the charges "having been proved in full", fell under the provisions of Article 3 of the existing military code and it closed by asking for the death penalty for Severino Di Giovanni.

THE DEFENCE

At the heart of this tragedy, two men, two characters meet. Lieutenant Franco is a career soldier, believes in God and in the fatherland, in the State and in the order established by General Uriburu. But, in his own way of course, he has a conscience and, charged with defending an accused who is not even trying to snatch his life out of the hands of butchers whose only task is to finish him off "with four words and four rifle shots" and although understanding that the government's decision was final, he performs his task scrupulously, careless of the consequences that might ensue.

He launches into it by paying tribute "to the worthy servicemen who make up the court" and apologises right from the start if "by virtue of my being a soldier and not a lawyer, I make claims that, stripped of euphemisms, may seem bold."

"First of all I shall raise the issue of the competency of this court" – the defence counsel states, cutting to the crux – "I believe that the charge of which Severino Di Giovanni stands accused may not lie within its remit. Martial law obtains in the European monarchies where legal principle is absolutely at odds with the principles underpinning republican rule. Moreover, martial law is applicable only in instances of grave domestic upheaval, war or great public disasters posing a threat to the stability of society. Argentina is not at present an instance of war, neither external nor civil. Therefore the application of martial law is not justified."

The defence counsel carries on in this way, arguing the legitimacy and constitutionality of the regime set up by the 6 September coup d'état, seizing upon the chief argument by which the Uriburu government seeks to justify itself. But reality differs from the official fiction. That government is maintained through terror and knows that it could not survive without terror. So it cannot accede to Lieutenant Franco's superficial argument, and in tribute to an incorrigible reality that influences its every move in a very different way from the official fictions, it must conduct itself as if it were in a country torn by civil war and proceed by way of martial law. And then again ... Severino Di Giovanni is anything but a common criminal.

"In my view the record shows that Severino Di Giovanni did not attack the police but rather repelled an attack from them. Indeed, the accused emerged from the printshop in the Via Callao between Sarmiento and Corrientes. He made for this latter street whilst the owner of the printing works headed in the direction of Sarmiento. He was approached by officers whose presence was noted by Severino who realised that he had been recognised. He did not attack the officers but, turning on his heels, ran away towards Sarmiento. The police opened fire on him.

"Severino ran down Sarmiento towards Rio Bamba: police officers and private citizens started to follow. Up to that point he had not used his weapons. In Rio Bamba between Sarmiento and Cangallo, a police officer made to arrest him. Di Giovanni ran around an automobile parked there, with the officer in pursuit. And only when he thought all was lost did he open fire.

"At which point the violent emotion became even more intense. He reached the

premises in the Via Cangallo and slipped inside. He was like a madman, says the hotel owner who alerted the police by telephone that a lunatic had entered his premises. How many revolver shots were fired in Di Giovanni's direction? Who killed the poor girl in Callao and Sarmiento when the quarry fired his weapon only in Rio Bamba and Callao?

"On this basis I argue that Di Giovanni was not the assailant, but rather defended himself against police attack.

"Of the five witnesses who have made statements, four are police officers. Not so much as an expert witness to show which weapon killed the girl. When Di Giovanni reacted he did so face to face with an officer who already had him within arm's length. A battle had erupted around his person. Made of steel or not, his nerves were affected. And he fired for the first time in Cangallo and Rio Bamba. I believe, Mr Chairman, that this is a case of self-defence.

"The species's survival instinct has its chief encouragement in the instinct of self-preservation in the individual, no matter who he may be. Fifty revolvers spat fire at Di Giovanni.

"This was the Di Giovanni lapped up in the truculent comments of the crime reporters. The phantasmagorical figure who was the main police course served up by a police force of supernumeraries who had somehow to justify their own existence and budget.

"This honourable Court knows that the accused has not been convicted even once, nor had he been arrested when this legend was woven around him. The imaginary delinquent has been among us here for eight years. Admitting that Di Giovanni was somebody capable of eluding the courts, the police and the people, including the brains whose job it is to preserve order, would be tantamount to recognising that man's superiority over all of Argentina's physical and moral resources."

At this juncture Lieutenant Franco spells out his own views as one who believes the death penalty to be immoral and unjust: man, no matter how advanced, has never successfully created life: so he has no right to take it away. And he concludes by saying that the accused ought not to be facing a court martial but should instead be referred to the ordinary courts: and he repeats his apologies if he has "overstepped the mark in his pleas for the defence."

The eloquence of his counsel, not yet twenty two years old, profoundly moves Severino Di Giovanni who, almost in embarrassment, apologises:

"No one has ever moved me to tears. This young man has really touched me..."

But only for a moment. Whilst the court deliberates, the accused is escorted back to his cell and when they collect him for the reading of the verdict he strenuously insists that his fetters be removed. The warders struggle to overpower him and in the fierce tussle they tear off his jacket and he appears bare-chested before the court.

Defence counsel Franco appeals against the verdict but the Army and Navy Supreme Council confirms it and within a day President Uriburu signs the execution warrant.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Franco is punished with five days in the brig for having overstepped the mark in his argument for the defence ... and his military career can be said to be all but finished.

THE RAID ON BURZACO

With Severino Di Giovanni out of commission and in the hands of the night-time court that would dispatch him to his grave "with four words and four shots", the heroes of the Buenos Aires police under Inspector Bazan set off en masse, by truck and heavily armed, for Burzaco, a suburb of the capital, where the police by then knew that Severino Di Giovanni and whoever and whatever might still be there had been living – in the "Villa Ana Maria".

Under cover of dark the brave conquerors surround the house and lay siege to it. Dawn is breaking when, around 80 metres from the house, some of the besiegers notice three shadows moving in the opposite direction. They call upon these persons unknown to halt. No response. Battle is joined. The first shots from the unknown individuals drops officer Domenico Dedico, mortally wounded. Certain now that they are dealing with people who are not messing around, the police intensify their gunfire. The unknowns respond, taking cover behind the trunks of some trees. But force of numbers must soon tell. Two of the unknowns collapse, one after the other, riddled with bullets: the third, flattening himself of the ground to escape enemy gunfire, was overpowered by them and taken into custody.

The dead men are Juan Marquez and Braulio Rojas.

27 year old Juan Marquez, an Argentinean, anarchist and driver by trade, had been arrested by police several times for "resisting the police" and in 1928 had been given a seven year sentence for stealing a car. On 7 December 1929, while an inmate in Rosario, he capitalised upon a momentary distraction of the gaoler taking him to the infirmary and upon his own agility and jumped into the street just as he was, in vest and drawers, seized the first vehicle he came upon and managed to escape as if by a miracle. "The singularity of this cinematic undertaking of his" – our correspondent writes – "speaks to the man's character. He was a joker, all courage and commitment and, like his comrades, he devoted all of his activity to propaganda. Actually all he thought about was the paper that was due to appear in a few days' time and in his imagination he relished how discomfited the bourgeois bigots would be when they were obliged by force to read the arguments of the anarchists whom the dictatorship was so zealously striving to gag. He knew what awaited him and never budged without two .45 calibre revolvers and six spare rounds, ready to defend his life, whatever it would take. He knew about the torture used in police stations and was determined not to be recaptured. On leaving the house in Burzaco he certainly hoped that he might yet be in time to make good his escape. Instead he was felled with his chest ripped open by a heavy volley of rifle fire and we cannot say whether he had had time to fire his own weapons.

"He went to his grave carrying with him secrets of great value to the police and the generous dream which he, together with Paulino Scarfó, his inseparable friend, had scarcely begun to see realised. He had a profound knowledge of anarchist doctrines and his greatest wish was to see them spread and propagated: and since their propagation and distribution were hindered and barred by ferocious repression, he agreed to fight on the ground chosen by the enemy, without complaint, as a duty done with a light heart and an open mind. He died facing the enemy with his weapons at the ready, fighting the good fight."

Braulio Rojas, although known for his anarchist activities in Rosario and Cordoba, was utterly unknown to the Buenos Aires police and had no criminal antecedents. He was a 29 year old Argentinean, a builder by trade. "The press has gone to great pains to depict him as some big-time, terrifying criminal" – our correspondent writes – "but in fact they know nothing about him. The fact that he was discovered in the vicinity of the Burzaco house over which Severino Di Giovanni's shadow hovers, is all the fantastic imaginations of the gutter press needs to concoct all sorts of sordid nonsense. In fact, comrade Rojas had but lately joined up with Scarfó, driven to it primarily by the fact that it had become impossible for any proud and passionate spirit to work purposefully on behalf of his anarchist ideals within the framework of the law, so-called. He had taken the tragedy of the Argentinean anarchist movement intensely to heart: he had seen men scattered one by one and disappearing into the maw of prison, the islands or exile: he had watched workers' institutions and ideological papers vanish in an instant: the young losing themselves in sports that drain the intellect and dim the consciousness; and the citizenry resign itself to all of the infamous acts of dictatorship. And failed to still the impulses of his selfless heart. He fled the impotent life of the majority which he could not reconcile with the rebellious stirrings of his battler's temperament and threw himself into the fray, fully aware of what he was doing and of the consequences it entailed. To his comrades in the struggle he brought a priceless treasure of energy and youthful enthusiasm. And he perished – all too soon, alas! – in the ambush laid for him outside that house in Burzaco by the very order against which he had risen in revolt."

The prisoner taken was Paulino Orlando Scarfó, an anarchist, Argentinean, type-setter, aged 22, brother of comrade Alessandro Scarfó, arrested over two years before with Gomez Oliver. Now that Scarfó had been rendered harmless, the police ventured inside the house to find América Scarfó, Paulino's sister, and Elena Di Giovanni, Severino's ten year old daughter. Both were placed under arrest, of course. A search led to the discovery of a real arsenal: there were weapons pretty much all over the place in the sparsely furnished rooms. The haul included explosives, a photographic darkroom, a small printshop complete with press, an interesting book collection, manuscripts, etc., a car, some modest beekeeping equipment and a box of phony 5- and 10-peseta notes to an estimated value of some 200,000 pesetas.

PAULINO O. SCARFÓ

Comrade Paulino Scarfó was a thinker. He was active in the movement by the age of fifteen. He used the hours of darkness and stole from his sleep in order to read and study whatever he could not fit in with his day to day work and he committed himself to the cause out of an irresistible craving for understanding that is not content with dogma and half-measures but takes logic right to its extremes. He was alive to the need for propaganda and he busied himself with all the tasks suited to his age and enthusiasm.

"Then came the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign." – our correspondent writes – "Because of the bourgeois class's sensitivity to the protests from the world of labour, that protest must be articulated in a louder voice than the feeble voice of a propaganda newspaper with its necessarily restricted circulation.

"Dynamite's desperate scream makes itself heard. Those two comrades were murdered ... Hoover visited South America for fun and called in at Buenos Aires. Information given told the police that a terrorist attack was being hatched in Scarfó's room. The police dashed in and arrested his brother Alessandro and another comrade. There was no basis on which to convict them but he is Alessandro Scarfó's brother and had to go on the run. The backlash against the anarchists was becoming more and more violent. Outlawed, Paulino Scarfó was no longer in a position to turn up for work and earn his living. Then again, working for a boss is so degrading and left him with so little time to devote himself to learning and spreading anarchist ideas. Anyway, it was becoming clearer and clearer in comrade Scarfó's mind that the best propaganda is preaching by example: what better example of rebellion could there be than wholesale revolt against the established order's most sacred, most feared institutions? He threw in his lot with those who were of like mind and who meant to embark upon that struggle. He was well aware that in so doing he was stepping outside conventional morality and that he would draw down lots of enemies, even from within the ranks of his own comrades. But he felt that he had truth on his side against all the prejudices of the self-seeking established morality and he did not hesitate. As for his conscience, it was at ease now and it pointed out the way he had to go. He could very easily have creamed off the first daring haul and retired in comfort and, as time went by, sorted out his differences with the law. But there was no trace of self-seeking in his war on capital. The privilege of property does not change nor is it undermined by the fact that a certain sum passes from the hands of a holder to the hands of someone penniless but afflicted with the disease of greed. He knew how to be a rebel, to attack capital in order to undermine its rule and he expropriated and did not steal, expropriated because he was restoring to all of the disinherited a portion – however tiny – of the wealth that they and they alone had produced. Speaking of anarchist illegalism, he once remarked to me, not without a hint of sadness, that not all comrades have a deep-seated love of our ideas and he made no bones about the dangers that could lead them astray. But he was not one of those.

"An attempt has been made to portray him as having fallen under Severino Di Giovanni's evil spell. Nothing could be further from the truth. Paulino Scarfó had a mind of his own, impervious to everything around him unless it related to his beliefs, which were the only thing he was fighting for. There was nothing absolute in him: everything has to pass through the sieve of argument in which he was highly adept. He lived and died in complete harmony with the anarchist ideal."

PAULINO SCARFÓ'S TRIAL

Less than 24 hours had passed since his arrest when Paulino Scarfó, having been referred to a court martial, was produced before his judges. That was at a few minutes after 11.00 pm on 30 January.

A Lieutenant Labori was appointed as his defence counsel and visited his cell to put certain advice and defence plans to him, only to encounter a stubborn refusal that he found incomprehensible:

"For God's sake defend yourself!" – the defence counsel erupted.

"I will tell the whole truth and I will tell the court all that I know. I want them to get on with shooting me without delay."

"But you have a duty to defend yourself to save your life. It can be argued that you are still only a boy, a victim of anarchist books and of the unhealthy influence of leaders devoid of conscience or morality..."

And Scarfó interjected:

"Listen, lieutenant, if you want to do me a favour, do not defend me. Get this trial over as quickly as possible. And let them get on with killing me."⁵

To reach the courtroom from his cell, Paulino Scarfó too had to pass through the usual ranks of onlookers. He was accompanied by a squad of gaolers under the command of Captain Matarrese. He is tall and thin. With prominent cheekbones, thick black hair, dark eyes. He walks with hands tied behind his back and every so often has to toss his head to rid himself of a stray quiff falling over his eyes. His eyes are calm and he looks straight ahead at all the rubber-neckers. However his gaze carries none of the defiance and vigour of Severino Di Giovanni. His eyes are serene, tranquil. His eyes are somewhat weary from the emotion of the day's events and from lack of sleep. The court martial is ready. It questions the witnesses and the accused is brought before each of them for identification. When his turn comes, he seems calm. His face is impassive. Only the sunken eyes tell that he has not slept for a long time.

Paulino Orlando Scarfó, born in Buenos Aires on 13 September 1909, replies calmly and in curt, determined terms to the questions from the chairman of the court.

The chairman offers a short summary of the background to this trial before proceeding to the interrogation.

"At the time in question, in whose company were you?"

"Antonio Ruiz (Scarfó refers to Marquez as Ruiz) and Braulio Rojas."

"What were you doing at the time?"

"Making our way to Burzaco station."

"How far were you from the house when you realised that the police were up ahead?"

"Quite some distance."

"And you realised right away that they were the police?"

"Yes. We had sighted several officers and a few soldiers too, I think. One of the policemen called out to the comrades to halt."

"And what did you do?"

"We opened fire."

"How long did the shooting last?"

"A few minutes. We fired four or five shots. The police fired rather more."

"What weapon did you use?"

"A Colt .45 pistol."

"And your comrades?"

"Different."

"Did you see your comrades fall?"

"I saw both of them felled."

"Did you also see them die?"

"I saw one of them die."

"Did you see any of the police fall?"

"I saw nothing of the sort."

"Did you know that one police officer has died?"

"Yes."

"And how did you find this out?"

"I was told later, when I was arrested."

The exchange between the chairman and the accused was curt, as dry as we have reported it. Scarfó answered the questions quickly, without any hint of doubt.

The coldness with which the accused admits having fired and thereby hands himself up to the execution picket at the age of twenty two leaves the court plainly bewildered.

The chairman asks the other judges if they have any further questions to put to him.

Judge Lieutenant Colonel Moyano, turning to the accused, asks:

"When you were called upon to halt what did you do?"

"We refused."

"In what manner?"

"By opening fire."

"Who was shooting?"

"My comrades and I."

"And why were you shooting?"

"We wanted to defend ourselves in that we knew that if we fell into police hands we

would face martial law."

"If you were honest men, why would you have had any such fear?"

"Because we knew whom we were dealing with. We were anarchists sought by the police who were accusing us of being highwaymen and terrorists."

"Have you faced trial before?"

"Never."

"For what purpose did you amass an arsenal in the house ... hunting or target practice?"

"We had the weapons because we knew we should have to use them sooner or later."

"And why would you have to use them?"

"You know very well the uses that are made of guns."

"But in which circumstances would you have to use them?"

"To defend ourselves should the need arise."

"But in that house there were more guns than inhabitants. Why so many?"

"A precautionary measure. In case they might be needed for use in a revolution."

"Who was the main tenant of the house?"

"Severino Di Giovanni."

The questioning carried on in this dry style and Paulino Scarfó related with a coolness that startled the judges how the money raised from the raid on the cashier at Obras Sanitarias – upwards of two hundred thousand pesetas – were used to purchase machinery and everything that was needed to set up a press on which to turn out propaganda newspapers to replace the ones that the dictatorship had shut down. The first issue was due for publication within days. When the questioning turned to the matter of his sister, whom the court was trying to represent as an accomplice, Paulino Scarfó strenuously defended her.

"Your sister: was she aware of the criminal activities of the tenants in the house?"

"No. I manipulated América."

"Is there no way in which she might have worked something out?"

"No. América knew only what I told her."

"Why did you have fulminate of mercury capsules in the house?"

"For experimental purposes. We also had bottles of other explosives. And we had a car standing by to free my brother Alessandro and a comrade who had been arrested. We would have used the bombs..."

"What bombs?"

"Smoke bombs. To create confusion. I think that you employ them in warfare."

"Who was the expert?"

"We all were..."

"Was Braulio Rojas as specialist in anything?"

"He was a builder."

"And Marquez?"

"He was a driver."

"And who was your leader? Who was the master-mind?"

"All of us."

"And when it came to the bombs, who was it?"

"I had a smattering..."

"Did you carry out trials?"

"No."

"When you ran into the police, where were you bound?"

"I was on my way to my sister's house."

"And why were you moving?"

"There had been a new development."

"What?"

"Severino Di Giovanni was arrested."

At 5.30 am the court took a half hour recess and when it resumed the accused had a slight smile on his lips, knowing that it was now the turn of the military prosecutor to deliver his indictment. The prosecutor, the very same who had acted in the Severino Di Giovanni trial the previous night, reiterated the same argument: Paulino Scarfó was caught red-handed attacking police officers and state officials and therefore fell under the remit of Article 3 of the 6 September 1930 military ordinance requiring the imposition of the death penalty.

A defence counsel of the calibre of Franco would have had the wit to show that the charge alleged against Scarfó was not premeditated but police-provoked and that there was no proof to show that Paulino Scarfó had fired a shot. But on one hand the accused's own confession had unhesitatingly and insistently stated that he and his comrades had fired upon the besiegers: on the other, the ineptitude made up of the fear and self-effacement that were the very essence of Lieutenant Labori's make-up led him to stammer that the accused, whose defence he ought have been mounting at that tragic juncture, was a wayward youth displaying the physical characteristics of degenerative inferiority and he closed by asking the judges to show clemency.

Scarfó, who had been following the defence argument without batting an eyelid and with a slight smile playing on his lips, turned to his counsel once he had completed his plea and exclaimed:

"Thanks for the eulogy. Everyone should have characteristics of his own."

And when the chairman asked him to stand and state if he had anything to say in his own defence "whilst affording all due respect to this court", he stood up and uttered these words:

"The actions in which we were obliged to participate have their justification. We were forced to open fire on the police in defence of our lives. I reckon that there is nothing else for me to say. I am not about to launch into an exposition of my ideals here because I hold that there is no need. Nor is this the most appropriate place."

A rather telling silence ensued before the chairman recomposed himself and pressed

him:

"Have you anything else to say?"

"No, there is nothing else that I wish to say."

Paulino Scarfó was then led back to his cell and at 8.15 am the court completed its deliberations and sentenced him to death.

The defence counsel then appealed to the Army and Navy Council which rejected the appeal and President Uriburu signed the execution warrant.

"IN CHAPEL"

At 5.00 am on 31 January the verdict sentencing him to die by firing squad was read to Severino Di Giovanni by the military prosecutor, in the presence of the chairman of the court that had passed it and of numerous onlookers. The accused was brought into the courtroom under the usual escort, his hands bound behind his back and stood in the centre of the room. He listened with the liveliest attention as the sentence was read out. As the prosecutor was reading, he cited the name of the defence counsel at which Di Giovanni's eyes flashed and his body jerked. And once the reading was over he said not one word and lowered his eyes.

Then he was taken away to death row, to "the chapel" where he was to pass the last 24 hours of his life.

In answer to a question he stated that he wanted to see his wife, their children and América Scarfó: his loved ones. He asked for newspapers and a change of clothes. He had a coffee and was shaved by the prison barber.

What happened around Severino Di Giovanni that day went beyond the wildest imagining. Not until the night was well advanced was the wife whom he had asked to see, brought to him. During that day, however, he spent several hours in the company of América Scarfó who loved him and whom he loved and who understood the strength of his belief, together with his eldest daughter. And the police gazettes regaled the ruling classes – that crowd of rubberneckers and Jesuits – with the minutest details of what passed between them, recording their tenderness in the solemn face of death, to condemnation from the squalid moral cowardice of idlers swathed in a climate of lynch law.

The entire spectrum of bigwigs who had feared him so while he was living and at large paraded past his cell. Now they were eager to run their obscene, depraved victors' gaze over the condemned man, keen to discern in his face and in his words the demeanour and discomfiture of the beaten man driven to despair. Interior minister Sanchez Sorondo filed passed, looked him over and moved on. The thug Garibotto, head of the 'Social Order' bureau questioned him in hope of catching him in an unguarded and loquacious moment. Other police officers – Inspectors Vaccaro, Bazan etc. – did their best to get him to talk.

"Were you behind the Consulate attack?"

"Yes."

"Why did you do it?"

"I wanted to bump off fascism's representative. Regrettably, innocent people suffered."

"Did you plant the bomb on board the steamship *Apipe*?"

"Yes."

"And at Santiago's home!"

"Ditto."

"Were you involved in other attacks?"

"Who knows?"

"Had you accomplices?"

"Yes."

"And who were they?"

"Bah!"

And he laughed – the reporter writes – There is no way of knowing if he was being serious or toying with the police. And so on it went all day long, all that night up until the final hour when he dried up, turned his back on them and announced:

"Leave me be. Leave me to enjoy this last hour in peace."

The Jesuits Enrico Cataldi and M. Clavell missed no opportunity to talk to him ... and try to convert him. To their invitations Di Giovanni replied that he had no need of their comfort and that they should go. But they insisted. A sort of argument erupted in which América Scarfó too was involved. She scandalised the Jesuits by stating that "If he ever existed, Christ was an illiterate ragamuffin, whereas Brahma enjoyed a superior education."

Finally, at 3.00 am – two hours before execution – Di Giovanni replied to Clavell's persistent badgering:

"Clear off. I have no need of comfort. I am an anarchist. I do not believe in God. My children have already offered me comfort."

And as he was on his way to the execution site, Fr Cataldi made one last effort to convert him, so much so that, confronted by his emphatic refusal, the priest could not help exclaiming: "Sacrament." Even on the threshold of death, the Jesuit, disappointed at having failed in his efforts, said quietly to somebody near to him:

"He's a cynic. Even at the eleventh hour he has shown that he is a cynic. And now may God forgive him."

The disappointment was evident in the priest's words – the reporter notes.

At around 11.00 pm his wife and children arrived, staying with him until around midnight, along with América Scarfó. When they left, Severino Di Giovanni stood in the centre of his cell watching the final departure of his loved ones until the shutting of the door robbed him of the sight.

After a few minutes of reflection he requested an chance to say goodbye to Paulino Scarfó. This was granted. In the presence, as ever, of gaolers, they greeted one another and swapped affectionate words of encouragement.

"Tomorrow" – Paulino stated – "I'll go the same way as you. I would rather have 'exited' right now with you!"

"Twenty four hours do not amount to much" – said a smiling Severino.

And with a smile on their lips they said their farewells, shaking each other's manacled hand.

It was almost 4.00 am when Severino asked for his injury to be treated. The medics arrived, removing the bandages, bathing the wound and wrapping it. The patient cracked jokes.

"Get a move on or you're going to be late."

And then, turning to one of the warders, he said:

"You know, this 'justice' of yours is a queer fish. Affording me medical treatment now and killing me within the hour."

After treatment, he felt better... After a few minutes the two gaolers arrived with the irons for the condemned man's feet and hands. The Italian priest seized his opportunity to make one last overture, but Severino was incorrigible. A handshake was offered and the condemned man replied:

"Leave me in peace. Why would I want to shake your hand? Go away. Can you not see that I have no need of your comforts, that I have no fear of death?"

The blows of the gaolers upon the irons echoed through the prison where the sleepless inmates shuddered ...

EXECUTION

It was a public spectacle. Respectable folk turned out as if for a party. Even the relatives of young Berardone were allowed in to slake their thirst for revenge on a man whom the government, without any shadow of proof, had identified as the killer of their young daughter. Artists looking for rare sensations, army officers, the curious, the authorities, journalists – a real gala audience.

Outside, on the streets, the crowds were so large that traffic was halted. By order of the government, troops garrisoned the precincts of the Penitentiary.

This is how the reporter for *L'Italia del Popolo* describes the execution of Severino Di Giovanni:

The final preparations were being seen to as your reporter took up his position.

The execution was carried out in the yard between the governor's office and the garage. There is a small grassy area there where the execution squad had placed the chair for Salvato used at a distance of six metres.

A platoon of prison warders takes up position in front of a crowd made up of journalists, officials and servicemen. Watches in hand, they are talking quietly.

Di Giovanni is close by now. He has been placed in the garage, the gate of which is screened by an awning. Lest the offender catch sight of the preparations.

Eight troopers commanded by a sergeant arrive. And take up position. The prison photographer focuses on the chair in which Severino is to be shot. His will be the

last photograph taken of the scene.

The military come and go. Brief, snappy orders. Spoken quietly.

Daybreak. Atop the walls are the silhouetted figures of guards marching back and forth with synchronised steps.

The clerk of the court martial arrives, with several officials in tow.

At 4.55 am he says: "Produce the prisoner."

Severino Di Giovanni stirs behind the garage curtain. The awning lifts and the condemned man appears, flanked by two troopers and followed by the governor, Dr Vinas, by the Italian priest and several other people.

Di Giovanni is wearing the fresh clothes he had requested on Saturday. The irons force him to shuffle forward with his hands crossed in front of him. His head is held high. Finding himself in the open air he takes a deep breath. He is calm. Freshly shaven, his eyes at their liveliest, his jacket is open at the chest, his thick hair swept back, his face truly impressive.

On reaching the middle of the yard, he is ordered to stop. The clerk has to read out the sentence. The previous day's formalities are repeated. As the clerk reads, Severino, head held high, looks at the sky where the stars are about to disappear as the light of dawn spreads all around.

He stands motionless, his lips tight together, throughout the reading of the sentence. When the clerk says: "And Severino Di Giovanni is hereby sentenced to the death penalty", the convict raises his hands to mop his face. A slight sweat runs down his cheeks.

But once the clerk finishes, Severino says in a perfectly calm voice:

"Very well."

A grave-like silence reigns in the courtyard. No one stirs. It might even be said that everybody's quickened heartbeats could be heard.

The condemned man adds:

"Is that it, Colonel?"

"That's it."

It seems that he has something to say. Everybody listens attentively. He shifts the heavy irons, inclines his head and says:

"Excuse me, Lieutenant Colonel, but ... may I say something?"

Only to be told:

"You may not speak ... Forwards!"

"I wanted to ask you to convey my apologies to Lieutenant Franco and my best wishes."

And off he shuffles again. He shakes his head as if to scatter the thoughts milling in his head and walks on, still looking up at the sky, displaying a truly impressive serenity.

As he draws near to the grassy area there is a step. The irons at his ankles will not allow him to climb it. Twice his feet slip on the damp grass. Whereupon the

two troopers escorting him try to help by holding him by the arms. He declines the offer.

"Thank you, but no need. I'll hop."

And leaning his elbows on the soldiers' hands he gives a little hop. And lands on the grass. He frees himself from the troopers and makes the last few steps to the death chair, unaided. On reaching it, he sits down slowly, nonchalantly. Once ensconced there, he settles his shoulders and head on the back of the chair. Smiling in a satisfied way as if he had just completed a long march and had finally reached his resting-place.

Smiling he looks around him at the final preparations.

The firing squad takes up position facing the convict and six metres away. A trooper behind him strides forward. Tying him to the chair-back lest he fall to the ground, once dead. Indifferent, Severino allows him to get on with it.

The trooper then goes to tie on a blindfold.

The condemned man abruptly turns his head:

"I want no blindfold."

The trooper insists.

"I told you I want no blindfold. It makes no difference."

And he makes a move as if to say, blindfold or no blindfold, I'm going to die.

At a signal from his superiors, the trooper withdraws and the condemned man returns to scanning the scene.

At this point the prison photographer takes the final snapshot. The magnesium flash forces him to shut his eyes momentarily. Severino soon recovers and raises his head even higher.

And smiles.

The sergeant commanding the firing squad is ordered to proceed with the shooting. Four troopers kneel and four others remain standing.

Day breaks.

The onlookers' faces are flushed with colour. No one stirs. No one breathes. The scene is impressive.

At this point Severino Di Giovanni, using the full power of his lungs, shouts out his last thought in a ringing voice:

"Long live Anarchy!"

He shouted this in perfect Italian, muscles straining and head held higher, if anything.

A shudder passes through the lines of onlookers. But another voice soon calls out:

"Ready! Take aim!"

There is the sinister rattle of rifles. Eight rifles are aimed at the man in the chair gazing at the sky with the full magnetic force of his strange light coloured eyes.

A sword seeps downwards.

"Fire!"

A dry, violent volley. Most people are staring at the ground. Others have their eyes shut.

A tremendous scream tears through the silence: it is the final farewell from the prison inmates to their colleague.

Severino slumps with a small cry of pain and helplessness.

His head falls heavily on to his chest. His weight snaps the rope binding him to the chair. He swings around and tumbles to the left, on to the grass.

A huge pool of blood on the chair. The grass is stained red.

On the grass he is still twitching. Even with his chest riddled with bullets, he does not die straight away. The sergeant walks over and delivers the coup de grace. Precise and effective. One shudder and the body lies motionless. It is 5.10 am.

Dr Cirio, the prison physician, the prison governor and a few others go over to the body. The physician registers death and issues the certificate.

Two men remove the irons from the corpse. They remove and then replace his slippers. Subordinates wash the blood from the chair. A hand-cart arrives. The corpse is carried over to a Public Assistance ambulance where there is a white pine coffin. The corpse is placed in that. And the van promptly pulls out, bound for La Chacarita.

It is over.

Ashen, pallid faces quit the prison. Drawing a deep breath as they reach the Via Las Heras outside.

Severino Di Giovanni has paid his debts. A ghastly price to pay. Society convicted him of homicide and killed him. Such are life's contradictions.

Tomorrow ... or rather, later today, the scene will be replayed with Paulino Scarfó.

Severino Di Giovanni was buried in La Chacarita in Grave No 12, Plot 1, Row 17. Yesterday afternoon the grave was literally covered in flowers.

Questioned as to the source of the floral tributes, the care-takers were unable to offer any details as to who paid this final tribute to the execution victim. Given the numbers of them, the likelihood is that several people left the flowers.

Then, that afternoon, given that so many people were arriving to goggle at the grave, Police Headquarters decides to post a sentry near the grave day and night.

PAULINO SCARFÓ MURDERED

Scarfó had scarcely returned from his visit to Severino Di Giovanni when, at 3.00 am on 1 February, two troopers arrived to pick him up and take him to the courtroom to hear the regulation reading of the verdict. Prosecuting council Lieutenant Colonel Goldney who had, the previous night, had the pleasure of personally reading-out the sentence passed on Severino Di Giovanni, did not think that he was up to attending in

person. Even the chairman of the court martial was not present. Did some vestige of human shame leave them too embarrassed to stand before the young man who awaited death with such quiet fortitude and persisted in rejecting every means of saving himself that was offered to him?

The reading of the verdict was done by the captain clerk of the court in the presence of high-ranking officers, police employees, prison officials, journalists and lots of rubberneckers. Scarfó is pale and has a growth of beard and his thick locks are dishevelled: with great self assurance he strides through the crowds with indifference. When the reading is over he gives a slight shrug of the shoulders – as if the whole thing had nothing to do with him.

On his return to his cell the Jesuits sent packing by Di Giovanni accost him but he shoos them away in annoyance.

At 5.00 am he is taken down to the "chapel" – to the very same cell so lately vacated by Severino Di Giovanni on his way to his execution – where he will live out the last 24 hours of his life.

During the day he receives a visit from his sister América who offers him comforting words all the more effective in that she shares his beliefs and his life of struggle: and from his brother Antonio, and a brother-in-law. He refuses to see his mother who is pulling out all the stops outside in order to get the government to commute his sentence:

"No, I don't want to." – he responds to his brothers' insistence – "Why make her suffer any more than she is? ... Tell her that my last thought is with her and ask her to forgive me for the pain inflicted upon her..."

Is there any truth in the story that Dr Vinas – the governor of the National Penitentiary – led Scarfó's relations to believe that if he would only sign a plea for clemency he might well find his life spared? It does not appear unlikely, if one thinks of the insistence with which the chairman and Judge Moyano asked him whether he too had fired his weapon. Had they meant to offer him a means of playing down his own responsibility? Or was Vinas merely hinting at one last desperate attempt to disarm the anarchist pride of this lad who awaited death with indifference of a man used to danger, to the bewilderment even of the savagery of his executioners?

Paulino remained unmoved by such insistence and by the tears of his brother and brother-in-law:

"Come on now, no more tears. This situation is not going to be remedied with weeping. Then again, if I do not care about dying, why should you be so bothered by it?"

"Why not sue for clemency? If only you would put your signature to this letter..."

"An anarchist never seeks forgiveness." – Paulino replies – "If you want to do something for me, go tell these gentlemen to bring forward the time of execution. I am rather weary of wearing handcuffs. I need the rest."

Up until 12.20 am he stays with his sister América, an intelligent, cultivated

comrade, who understands and admires him and who, even in the midst of the tragedy surrounding her for the past three days, has displayed a genuinely heroic sangfroid. As she leaves the prison, with a police escort, she strides forwards firmly and with confidence. With only a twinkle in her eyes.

Pressed by the usual Jesuit pair, Paulino Scarfó is obliged to snap at them. But it is only when Dr Vinas tells them that there is no point in their insisting any further that they leave.

"He has refused to confess" – one of them mumbles on his way out – "And demonstrated a cynicism that defies description."

That night he asked to say goodbye to his defence counsel. When Lieutenant Labori arrived, he jumped to his feet and, looking him in the eye said:

"Look, before I go to my death I should like to clear something up with you. In your defence plea you said that I was abnormal, just a lad, other stuff of that sort. I thank you, but let me tell you now that you are completely mistaken. If you did not have the gumption or the determination to defend me properly, you could have said nothing. But by what right do you sit in judgement of me like this? What do you know of my life and my way of thinking? Now, since you did not know it before, let me tell you that I am man of ideas and that I am dying for my belief. I only hope that you may do as much when the time comes."

An embarrassing situation. Lieutenant Labori saw fit to beat a retreat. The condemned man was beside himself and someone who was there tried to calm him and reassure him. And earned the harsh retort:

"I need no one's compassion ... I sneer at your pity. Leave me in peace."

When the time came, he said his goodbyes to Dr Vinas. The sinister hammer blows as the irons were fitted announced to the other inmates that the mournful process was being set in motion.

Only officials attended the execution. Even the press was excluded. The previous day's mess had been enough for them all. Outside, three thousand waited in the street for the sound of the lethal volley.

The procedures were the same as those employed for Di Giovanni. Scarfó listened as the sentence was read out by Lieutenant Colonel Goldney himself, without batting an eyelash, gazing calmly at the prosecutor.

Once the reading of the sentence was over he was ordered over to the chair. With absolute calm, he asked: "What?" And looked around him. He spotted the chair set up on the grass, smiled and shuffled over. He too had trouble climbing the step: the warders helped him up.

Standing in front of the chair he looked it over for a moment and then sat down, trying to make himself comfortable. He leant back against the back-rest and waited.

A trooper came up and bound him to the chair lest the corpse fall off. The same trooper made to blindfold him but the condemned man fended him off.

"I want no blindfold."

In view of this wish, the trooper did not persist.

A picket of prison warders lined up six metres from the death chair. Four standing and four kneeling. Like the previous day, the prison photographer took his snapshot.

Paulino started in the flash from the magnesium. Striking almost a stance of defiance. Looking straight at the picket with head held high.

"Good night, gentlemen..."

And then, louder:

"Long live Anarchy!"

The officer ordered:

"Take aim!"

The metallic clatter of rifles.

A volley echoing mournfully. And a wild scream. The inmates echoing, as they had the day before: "Long live Anarchy!"

The officer stepped forward and fired the coup de grace.

It was 5.20 am.

CREOLE JUSTICE

Our correspondent writes us: "with the deaths of these four comrades – Severino Di Giovanni, Juan Marquez, Braulio Rojas and Paulino Scarfó, Argentinean militant anarchism has lost one of its most effective reserves of energy. To be sure, there will be no shortage of people who will try to deny that the work they accomplished or merely initiated holds any idealistic value because instead of living within the parameters of the established order, they went to ground in an ongoing revolt against all lawful and moral institutions. Their work has been greatly debated among the comrades in these parts, and still is: but the most recent events, the heroism with which they fought in their lifetime and with which they blithely faced their judges and butchers has banished all of the shadows that the evil arts of treachery had long been striving to cast upon their names and their actions. Confronted with the startling spectacle of their utter disinterest, their leonine courage in the face of danger and their adamant belief, they must now cast aside their unhealthy suspicion, hatred and rancour and acknowledge a sacrifice that could not be outdone."

The bestial savagery of the dictatorship itself registered the martyrdom of the victims through the truculence of its hacks and its Philistines' impudent lust for vengeance.

Lieutenant Franco, first and then Lieutenant Labori had offered the dictatorship a face-saving way out: if Severino Di Giovanni had been a common criminal, he ought to have been tried before the Assizes: and if Paulino Scarfó had been a wayward youth condemned by the stigma of degeneracy rather than by men, then his place was in a hospital.

But the dictatorship of 6 September had dismissed these. Against Severino Di Giovanni – the rebel anarchist – years of seditious propaganda had seen the dense clouds of lynch law gather in the skies above the capital, seething with fury at the

killing of the young Berardone girl – which was manifestly police handiwork. The dictatorship craved Severino Di Giovanni's blood and wanted to signal its first success since the coup d'état with a solemn act of vengeance.

On the very evening that he was arrested, the police gazettes stoked the legend of lynch law and by the following day the capital's yellow press was filled with screeds singing the praises of "Creole justice": "As in the time of the revolution" – it wrote – "the echo of gunfire spread quickly down the Via Callao. The many members of the public travelling along that great artery and adjacent streets at that hour soon learnt of what had happened. They had found Severino Di Giovanni! The police had given chase and he had defended himself with his revolver. There was an extraordinary surge of curiosity. The public searched or waited for further news with a certain sporting complacency ... When it was learned that Di Giovanni had killed a young girl and a police officer and wounded another officer, this collective expectancy was transformed in a flash into outrage and was made manifest. The public wanted to do its own justice. Take justice into its own hands. It wanted to lynch the criminal. It sought justice. Creole justice."⁶

There was no hint of this craving for 'creole justice' in any newspapers less in thrall to the regime: and even if there had been, they would have been the result of the aberration of that financial aristocracy that swarms through the most elegant arteries of any capital city on a sultry summer's day, the abject aristocracy that showed up for Severino Di Giovanni's execution in their finery as if they were going to a party. The great fear that his name had for years stricken into their hearts turned into a savage, bestial hate when they learned that he had at last been rendered harmless: and the execution on 1 February was a lynching anyhow. A lynching carried out by the fascist, Creole, braided aristocracy rather than by the populace which displayed its own feelings a few hours later by laying flowers upon the rebel's grave.

As for Paulino Scarfó – what is it about the destiny of man that ensures that every crucial moment brings forth the man who fills it entirely with his exceptional qualities? It appears that a life-line was tossed to Paulino Scarfó more than once. After the ignominious spectacle of the Severino Di Giovanni lynching, carried out in public like some act of public vengeance by the ruling caste, clemency for Scarfó – and his banishment for life to Ushuaia would in any case have precluded his ever again threatening the established order – would have suited the dictatorship psychologically.

Paulino Scarfó spurned it with the stubbornness that reveals the whole grandeur of his mind: "The anarchist does not sue for clemency!" He refused to do the regime this service. He opted instead to die with his comrades, smiling at death and singing the praises of Anarchy.

A final gauntlet thrown down to a social organisation comparable with the nightmarish fears stricken into it.

"Abetted by a ferocious newspaper campaign" – our correspondent closes – "the

Argentinean police which, for all its misadventures persists in looking upon itself as 'the world's finest' does all it can to make capital out of these events. The bourgeoisie helps it by showering it with noisy tokens of its gratitude and overblown praise. And it seizes its chance to make mass arrests of all who have had any dealings, near or far, with the revolutionary movement. There is no way of knowing how many people have been arrested. They include nearly all of the comrades who managed to escape earlier swoops. And anybody falling into police hands now can be sure that he will be accused of complicity with the Di Giovanni 'gang', which is a promise of the inevitable tortures to follow. The ruling class and the government of the dictatorship number these arrests and the ravages of the execution squads as resounding victories and revel in the glory of it all ... But they delude themselves if they imagine that it is all over with the deaths of four heroes whom the mass of the disinherited, in their heart of hearts, mourn and admire. For every drop of blood spilled, for every echoing moan extracted from the victims of torture in the dungeons, an avenger will arise, worthy of his predecessors, fearless and bold. The blood of martyrs and heroes has never brought forth any harvest other than revolt."

Source : *L'Adunata dei Refrattari*,
Special commemorative edition of Saturday 28 March 1931



Paulo Scarfó



Severino di Giovanni

LETTER FROM AMÉRICA SCARFÓ

Yes, it was comrade Mario Cortucci who gave our Burzaco address to the police. I talked with him personally and also have a letter of his in which he confesses the truth about the matter. But how can anyone who has witnessed the atrocities the police are capable of, brand this unfortunate comrade an informer? Cortucci was a victim of the police who resorted to every means of torture to obtain from him the desired information that brought about the catastrophe of Burzaco. Cortucci resisted for ten days. Beaten to the point of death under the weight of unheard tortures he gave up. Perhaps a stronger type might have resisted without revealing anything, but not everyone has the strength of a hero. I only have a great sense of pity for Mario Cortucci who has been sentenced to a penitentiary for life, by the Argentinian justice, and I believe that the thought of the harm he caused will only aggravate his sufferings.

It is impossible to relate the tragedy which I lived through from January 29th to February 2nd, 1930. I believe that those who persisted [perished] in the fight were more fortunate than those who survived it, for the former at least escaped the terrible tortures inflicted on my companion and on my brother. Not satisfied with having them in their claws and knowing most certainly that they would undergo the death penalty, the bestial police force made them go through the inflictions of the torture chamber. But the temperament of the two men was as of steel, and couldn't be bent. Yes, Severino Di Giovanni and Paulino Scarfó remained calm to the end, a living example of courage and stoicism.

The morning our house at Burzaco was assaulted comrades Marquez and Roja were murdered. My brother was captured and so brutally beaten by the police that his facial features were deformed. Later they tried to pass this deformation as a birth-mark because they wanted to bring up the traditional "stigma of degeneracy." But the worst happened in jail, where Severino and Paulino, before and after the sentence, were subjected to the atrocious tortures of which comrade Recchi gave a faithful description in the written account of his personal experience "*The Chair*," "*The Whip*," and "*The Triangle*."

When I went to see Severino, he had around his neck the evident marks of the rope, clotted blood at his wrists, bleeding gums and signs of contusion all over his face. A pair of wooden pliers had been used to pull and squeeze his tongue and lighted cigars were used to burn it. During his examination, lighted cigars were thrust in his nose and ears, his testicles were squeezed and incisions made under nails in the presence of the commissioners Florio and Garibotto of the ORDEN SOCIAL (Department of Justice) and under the direction of Dr. Vinas, warden of the prison, the same one who out of his perfidy kicked Severino's body after the execution. And my brother underwent the same ordeal.

When I learned that Severino was sentenced to die, I began to scream that they should let me see him for the last time until they consented. I found him very calm and with a lucid mind. He told me that he was greatly touched by the news that a little girl

had been killed in the shooting preceding his arrest, and that the thought of his own children had given him a moment of profound emotion. His lawyer had called for a fire-arm expert report to show that Di Giovanni hadn't killed the child, but the tribunal of course refused it. The courage shown by his young lawyer, Lieutenant Franco, also impressed Severino immensely. As a matter of fact it required great courage for an officer of the army to sincerely fulfill his task. Keeping up his dignity of a man against the imposition of his superiors. I had occasion to see Lieutenant Franco after his return from exile to which he was forced on account of his defence of Severino, and he told me how much the latter's personality and pure ideas had impressed him. He hasn't as yet been reinstated to duty because he refuses to sign a request for a pardon on the ground that he has nothing to regret for his work of defence.

During the hours I remained with Severino, under the continuous guard of a multitude of officials and curious idlers anxious to catch a moment of weakness on our part, we both remained perfectly calm. We naturally had our hearts in turmoil but there was no crying, and pathetic scenes were purposely avoided. I was trying to console his last hours of life and he succeeded in disappointing those who expected to find a humiliated and defeated enemy. As I saw him, he appeared like the personification of the ideal that does not surrender.

Our conversation was interrupted many times. An officer of the army started a discussion with Severino about one of Lombroso's books, only to find out that he was discussing very calmly and using good judgement consequently he remarked: "I thought I would find here a man in spiritual annihilation." To which Severino answered: "I love life, but I don't complain of my fate – for it reaffirms, in one way, the reasons of my life. To die like this is a way of rendering life more intense." To the priest who from time to time was trying his works on him, when he once tried to caress his forehead Severino retorted with an amused gesture: "Do not soil my forehead."

When the hour of separation came I embraced him. And while I was assuring him that I would always remember him, He said: "Do not grieve. Live your life. I only ask you to be so good a mother to my children as you have been so far."

* * *

I was only allowed five minutes with my brother Paulino – my life friend, companion and confidant. Commissioner Florio, the most cynical of his torturers, was standing guard.

When I saw him with a disfigured face I asked whether he had been hurt, and he smilingly replied: "This is nothing." The torturing had been so painful that he was wishing nothing else but to be executed – and thus put an end to his sufferings. I tried to console him, assuring him that it was of great pride to me, to know, that he, my brother, knew how to die like a man. He answered that this was understood. As for mother, he was asking that she be spared the painful ordeal of seeing his physical condition. "She would die of it." he said. "If I could only see her without her noticing me," he added. "Here, give her my last kiss."

Then he said he was hurt by mother asking for clemency on his behalf. When my other brother and a brother-in-law asked him to sign a request for a pardon, he staunchly refused, saying. "An Anarchist never asks for clemency." He died as he lived. Proud of his ideal to which he happily was dedicating his death – as he had dedicated to it – his life.

[América Scarfó]

Source: *Man!* Vol. 1 No. 3 March 1933.

(Footnotes)

1 *L'Italia del Popolo*, 31 January 1931.

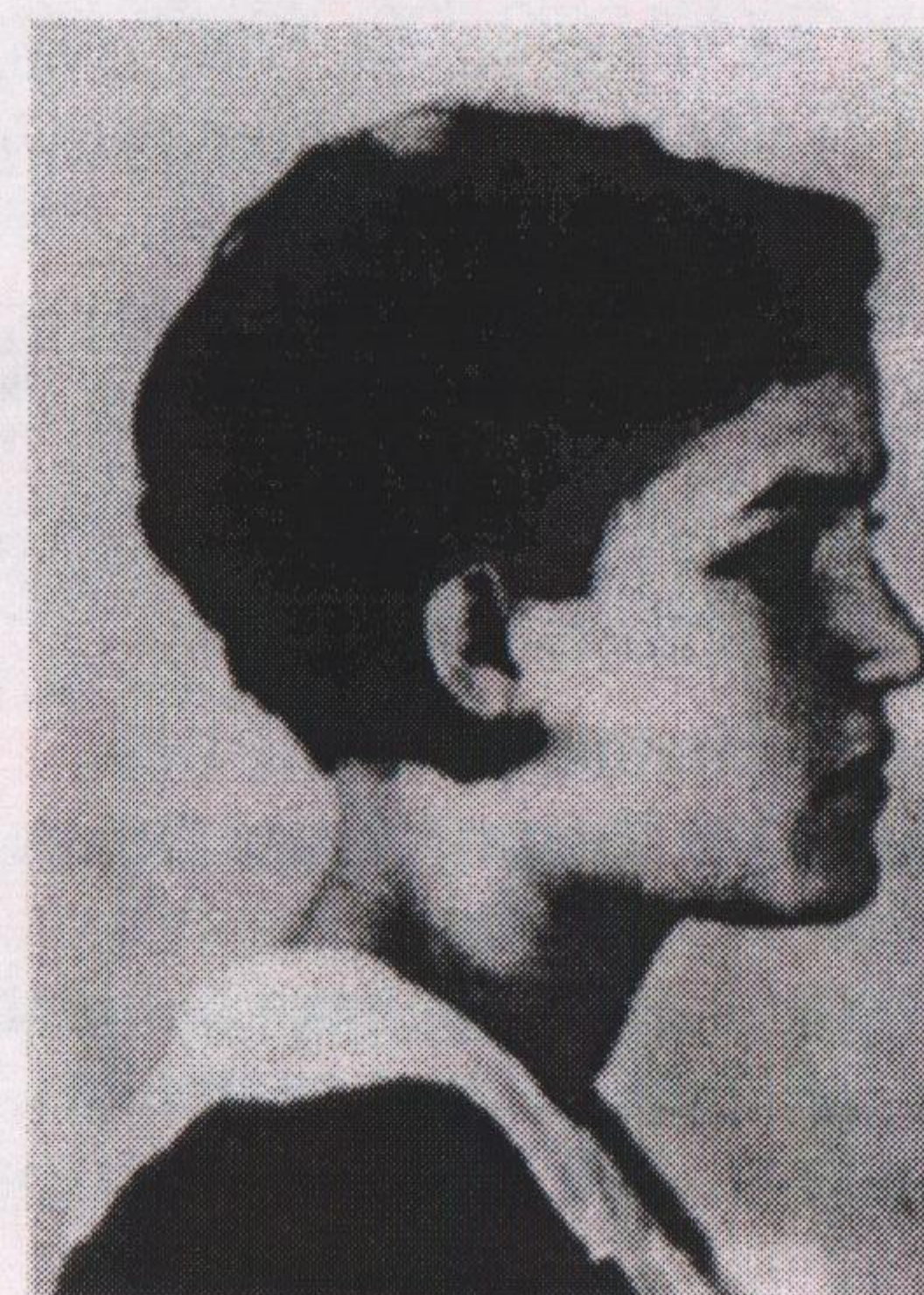
2 In a letter carried by *L'Adunata dei Refrattari* on 29 March 1930, Severino Di Giovanni not only denied killing comrade Agostino Cremonesi in Rosario on 21 January 1930 (he had only respect and affection for him) but articulated serious suspicions that Cremonesi might have been murdered by the police themselves. Comrade Catilina expressed the same suspicions in *La Protesta* of 3 April 1930.

3 *El Ideal*, 6 February 1931

4 *L'Italia del Popolo*, 30 January 1931

5 *L'Italia del Popolo*, 1 February 1931

6 *Ultima Hora*, 30 January 1931. The same edition of this rag describes the attacks on 20 January as having been ordered from Montevideo by fugitives.



AMÉRICA SCARFÓ



SEVERINO DI GIOVANNI
(1901 - 1931)

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