

**CORRESPONDENCE FROM HIS BROTHER IN THE VALTELLINA  
TO COSIMO BERTI IN VICTORIA**

by

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*A typical farmhouse near Teglio in the Valtellina.*

Valtellina was an important source of Italian emigrants to Australia in the nineteenth century, but not very much has been written about this particular emigration. Some of the emigration contracts for Valtellinesi were drawn up in nearby Ticino, where many men worked seasonally as woodcutters. A list of some of those involved is to be found in G. Cheda's work, *L'emigrazione ticinese in Australia*. In the period before 1860 the ports of departure for emigrants from the area were in Germany, France, or England, not Italy, as one might expect. The agents for the shipping lines engaged in a very successful propaganda campaign in Ticino and it seems highly probable their influence extended into the nearby regions outside Switzerland.

The following letter has been made available by Mr John Berti, a member of the Historical Society. Mr Berti is a descendant of Cosimo Berti, born at Teglio in the province of Sondrio, Valtellina in 1841, the third son of Battista Berti and Domenica Valli.

The township of Teglio, 860 metres above sea level, has a population of about 1,000 inhabitants. A centre of government for the valley until 1620, it has some of Valtellina's most notable Renaissance buildings. It was annexed to the Swiss Grisons in 1528 but an anti-Swiss and anti-Protestant revolt took place in 1620 and on this occasion nearly all the Protestants of the area were massacred in the Church of St Ursula.

The letter is written by Cosimo's brother, Battista. Cosimo, like many others from Valtellina, emigrated to Australia in the era of the gold rushes. He sent large sums of money back to assist his family and to invest on his behalf. When he required the money at a later date, problems arose. The story is of a type commonly encountered in the correspondence of emigrants, especially in matters concerning the administration of parents' wills. The far-off relation has to combat difficulties in communication by mail, unfamiliarity with bureaucratic procedures, and the perception of family members that, as one writer put it, "the property of those who are absent belongs to those who are present." Where was the money invested? Could land bought and now occupied by other family members be sold? What did his uncle Paolo know about any transactions and why wouldn't he agree with Cosimo's brother's proposals? Scanning the letters and fragments of letters written to Cosimo between 1869 and 1893 one can get a clear idea of the frustration he experienced and the difficulties he faced. The picture becomes even more cloudy in 1893 when Cosimo's uncle dies. If space permits, we may return to this story in another issue.

The letter, like most of this type contains certain formulaic elements. "Vengo con questa mia" or "Vengo con queste due righe" is a standard beginning. "Addio (or "adio") e sono il tuo padre/ il tuo fratello" etc. is the usual conclusion. There is a similar formulaic "pull" regarding the contents of

letters, which encourages the writer to start by saying that everyone is in good health, even if this is later contradicted by news of death or illness, as in this case.

The clergy could have considerable influence in the villages of pre-industrial Italy and the letter also illustrates how the assistance of a parish priest could be invoked to help resolve family matters.

Battista's education was fairly rudimentary and at times he is uncertain as to where one word ends and another begins. So he joins the conjunction "e" with the following word, "elo" for "e lo"; "se non \_" becomes a single "senone"; he writes "mia" for "mi ha". Elsewhere he hypercorrects, inserting an h where none is required: "Vengo con questa mia ha farti la risposta."

There is in addition a pronounced dialectal character: ti is used for tu: "ese ti verrai a casa"; ga (=g'ha) is used for "ci ha"; "le partito" for "egli ... partito". Confusion between double and single consonants, typical of northern regions, is also evident: "tagliatti" for "tagliati", "tereno" for "terreno", "in soma" for "insomma" etc. Pronoun object order is reversed with respect to standard Italian: "lui il te dira". As is still colloquial practice in some regions today, the word "franchi" is used anachronistically for "lire".

My colleague Anna Rosa Gualtieri assisted me in checking the transcription, but there are some passages which, for the present at least, defy understanding as well as some gaps in the text caused by wear and tear. Lack of punctuation adds to the ambiguity of certain passages. I have used angled brackets < > to suggest readings where the text is incomplete otherwise dots ... where it is incomplete or not decipherable.

*Caro fratello*

*Teglio li 10 Agosto 1879*

*Vengo con questa mia ha farti la risposta dei saluti mandati dal Bartolo dello Bo... che le venuto in casa a farmi i tuoi graditi saluti lui ha fatto un felice viaggio nello stesso tempo mia consegnato una lira sterlina che ti col tuo favore gli ai dato di darmi.*

*Non potrei esprimermi con parole quanta ... la consolazione che ciai datta a noi tuoi fratelli ed alla tua cognata al sentire che grazia a Dio godi prospera salute come lo stesso grazia a quel Dio che mi d... la esistenza chi troviamo anche noi*

*tutti in famiglia il giorno 4 Febbraio la mia moglie ha avuto due figli eper disgrazia i ghia tagliatti da d'essa il dottore a pezzi per cui ti lascio considerare che disgrazia ... stata per noi ela mglie ti dico che per farla guarire la me costato assai ma adesso la comincia a stare discretamente ma le stato come far risuscitare un morto eppure colla gran regola le risuscitata da morte a vita.*

*Caro il mio prediletto con sommo dispiacere devo dirti che abbiamo un anno digrande carestia di tutti li generi tanto la vendemmia se fusse roba da seminare non sarebbe abbastanza per la semenza in soma primo il freddo dopo il troppo caldo esutto e fra tutto l'anno verr... ad essere molto miserabile ecarestioso.*

*E riguardo dei tuoi denari telo gi... detto di tener da conto di quella lettera che loro dicono che o terra o denari iga tanto da pagarti elo stesso dicono anche adesso ecirca a 1200 franchi ho io nella tua parte tanto in tereno che anno comperato dopo che sei via ti perche se ti vuoi li tuoi dinari anche loro i vuol la terra che anno comperato in tua parte dopo che sei andato via fino al tuo arrivo e con questo ricaveranno il denaro da darti in somma il galgin sele venuto a trovarti le partito i primi di Giugno lui il te dira il tutto come stiamo noi e cosa dice loro per li tuoi denari.*

*Io (?) in casa li 3000 franchi che ti ai mandati non lio conosciuti eloro dicono che li a<n>no adoperati in unione ede tanto che go descu<s>so loro ime dice lui il vegne a casa che da n<oi> il perdera nulla del fatto suo ese ti verrai a casa io alla tua presenza gli diro cosa nea f<at>to eti con quella lettera firmata dalle sue mani campando morendo tutti dice loro la suddetta lettera la ga forza col pagare, ...nulla a farla vidimare da un notajo dopo ga forza come un documento ele lettere che ai mandato li denari li o io eli conservo p<er> maggior regola, di piu se il zio Paolo mu<o>re prima che ti vieni lui il le sa cosa il nea fatto senon... una bestia puo lasciare una qualche distinzione riguardo alli tuoi denari edio sera mio impegno a dirlo al Sig.re Paroco di parlarli di farli memoria di questi sudetti denari perche li 3000 man<dati> del 68 lia tenuti lui che del 1870 io gleli o domandati io sevoleva darmeli elui adetto ...voleva tenegli lui perch... gliai mand<dati>...elui la de darteli.*

*E del resto io non posso ne menarli ne butarli siamo ... anche noi tutti ..... e di farti un assegno come ti vorrai ile fa nemeno a ... vuol dire chese ne moriro uno di allora le cose dovranno poi giustarle per forza del resto io facio il possibile per ti e per noi ma non posso mai convincerti di nulla.*

*Io non posso far altro che ringraziarti del favore che il ti miai mandato eaugurarti salute e fortuna enoi tutti in famiglia ti salutiamo di vero cuore eli miei 3 figli ti mandano un bacio d'amore colla speranza di vedersi presto per il mal che noi ti vogliamo vorrei che al piu presto sarebbe possibile abbracciarsi nel seno della famiglia*

*addio e sono il tuo fratello Berti Battista  
emi saluterai tutti due i Liat*

My dear brother  
Teglio, August 10th, 1879

I write you this letter in reply to the greetings you sent me with Bartolo ... who came to my house to bring your most welcome greetings. He had a good journey. At the same time he gave me the one pound sterling which you were kind enough to give him to give me.

I couldn't express in words how much consolation you gave to us your brothers and to your sister-in-law when we heard that thanks to God you are enjoying good health as do all of us in the family too thanks to the God who gives us life on February 4th my wife had two children and unfortunately they were cut out by the doctor in pieces so I let you imagine what a disaster it was for us and my wife. Believe me it cost a lot of money to make her recover but now she is beginning to be quite well but it was like resuscitating a dead person just the same with a great effort she was brought back from death to life.

My dearest brother with great sorrow I must tell you that we are having a year of great scarcity of all produce so much so that if the harvest were to be sown there wouldn't be enough seed to sow. All in all first the cold then too much dry heat and the year will turn out one of wretchedness and scarcity.

And with regard to your money I have already said to you to keep that letter where they say that

either in land or money they have so much to give you and they say the same now and I have about 1200 lire for your share in land which they bought after you left because if you want your money they want the land they bought for your share after you left until your arrival and with this they will get the money they have to give you. In brief, Galgin is coming to see you he left at the beginning of June and he will tell you how we are and what they say about your money.

I didn't see at my house(?) the 3000 lire you sent and they say they used them in association and I discussed it with them a lot and they say when he comes home he won't lose any of his property with us and if you come home I will ask them in your presence what they have done and you, with that letter signed by him, whatever happens you will tell them that the letter has legal force ... it costs nothing to have it validated by a notary and afterwards it has force as a legal document as do the letters you sent. I have the money and am keeping it to be on the safe side. Furthermore if Uncle Paolo should die before you come, he knows what he has done with it. If he's not an animal he can leave some clarification about your money and I undertake to tell the parish priest to speak to him and to remind him about the above-mentioned money because he kept the 3000 lire of 1868 and in 1870 I asked him if he would give them to me and he said he would keep them because you sent them to him and he had to give them to you and besides I can't withdraw the money or throw it away we are all ... and make you a cheque as I would like to. It means that if I die one day then matters will have to be settled besides I am doing everything possible for you and us but I can't ever convince you of anything.

I can do no more than thank you for the present you sent me and wish you good health and fortune and all of us in the family send you our love and my three sons send you a loving kiss in the hope of seeing each other soon and for all that we care hope that it will be possible to embrace each other once more within the bosom of the family.

Goodbye I remain your brother Battista Berti  
Send my regards to the two Liats