The Last Years

All was not well with Tresca as he approached his sixtieth birthday on March 9, 1939. His health was generally poor. He was forty or fifty pounds overweight, his teeth were bad, his lungs weakened from emphysema due to more than forty years of smoking, and his face and chest occasionally hurt from injuries sustained in an automobile accident six years earlier. More pressing than his physical ailments, however, was the burden of *Il Martello*, which he described to his friend Alberto Meschi in France as a “real and very heavy cross . . . , a sponge that dries me out.” The newspaper had operated continually in the red since its revival in 1934. Subscriptions and circulation were both declining, in part because of the Poyntz affair, and in part because of the now indelible misperception that Margaret was bearing the cost of publication. Tresca had drawn no salary since 1934, and had even contributed more than $2,000 from his own savings. In July 1938, he filed a petition for bankruptcy, claiming assets of $98.24 in cash and liabilities of $4,420.24 in unpaid debts, some of which dated from 1918. Tresca’s only recourse was to publishing irregularly (only 36 issues in 1938) and to revert to a biweekly publication.

The Tresca Jubilee

To raise funds for *Il Martello* and bolster Tresca’s spirit, a number of his Italian friends and Herbert Solow organized a banquet to commemorate his sixtieth birthday and his forty years of activity. The “Tresca Jubilee” was held on April 14, 1939, at the Irving Plaza on 15th Street and Irving Place. The hall, which normally accommodated 500 people, had to be renovated to make room for the more than 800 guests expected. The walls were festooned with placards listing the prisons where Tresca had served time, the strikes he had led, and the defense campaigns he had organized. Sixteen union locals were represented by more than 100 labor officials. The famous individuals who attended came from every walk of American cultural and political life, including John F. Finerty, Isaac Schoor, Edmond Wilson, Dawn Powell, James Farrell, Anita Brenner, Paul Berlin, Benjamin Stollberg, Louis Gannet, Ludwig Lore, Eugene Lyons, Susanne LaFollette, Sidney Hook, Benjamin Gitlow, Max Eastman, and Harry Kelly. Scores of other well-known figures, unable
to attend, telegraphed their congratulations to Tresca, including John Dewey, John Dos Passos, Norman Thomas, Oswald Garrison Villard, Ernest Hemingway, Roger Baldwin, David Dubinsky, Margaret Sanger, Emma Goldman, and Leon Trotsky. Trotsky, grateful for Tresca’s recent effort, wrote: “Dear Comrade Tresca: In spite of all the profound differences which neither you nor I have the habitue to deny or attenuate, I hope you will permit me to express the deepest esteem for you, as for a man who is in every way a fighter. Your sixtieth birthday is being celebrated by your friends and I take the liberty of counting myself among them. I hope that your moral vigor and revolutionary ardor will be conserved for a long time to come.” Tresca’s thank-you note to Trotsky read: “You are right: ‘in spite of all the profound divergences,’ we do respect each other.”

Conspicuously absent at the Jubilee were important Italian radicals like Valenti, Quintiliano, Allegra, all of the communists, the syndicalists, the L’Adunatatisti, and most other anarchists. There was no better indication at this stage of his career that Americans were more appreciative of Tresca than the soversivisci, and he of them. As Tresca indicated to Meschi: “I live here closer to American elements than to our Italian elements; and, without exaggeration, close to the best American elements.” Nevertheless, while his estrangement from many old comrades was irreversible, Tresca was drawing closer to Italian trade union leaders than ever before, particularly Luigi Antonini.

Certainly by the late 1930s Tresca had “mellowed” to some degree, and his past feuds with figures like Antonini seemed less important in light of the terrible events taking place throughout the world. But Tresca’s rapprochement with Antonini and other labor leaders had tangible causes as well. Antonini had recently impressed Tresca by expressing his anti-Fascism more publicly than in the past. And thanks to Antonini, the Fascists’ monopoly on Italian radio broadcasting was finally broken. On November 23, 1940, at Antonini’s invitation, Tresca spoke for the first and only time on WEVD. In the past, Tresca had often sought opportunities to speak on radio, but had always been refused access. The explanation for denying him airtime echoed a familiar refrain: “You are too radical.” However, there was also a practical and self-serving aspect to Tresca’s increasingly cordial relations with labor leaders he had previously scorned. Antonini, Giovanni Sala, Serfino Romualdi, Louis Nelson, were among the few sources of revenue he could now tap to sustain Il Martello. The union leaders, in turn, welcomed Tresca as a valuable ally.

Recourse to union leaders for financial assistance was not intended solely for his own needs. Tresca was still an important benefactor for political refugees who needed money, visas, and other lifesaving aid. Tresca, for example, was serving as an advisor and fund-raiser for the New World Resettlement Fund for Spanish Refugees. As he wrote to Trotsky in August 1939, “the necessity of taking personal charge of the life of so many of my personal friends and comrades, refugees after the Spanish defeat, has put me at the point of exhaustion.” On his own initiative, Tresca badgered Antonini and other union leaders with requests—more like demands—to aid several Italian anti-Fascists who had fought in the Colonna Italiana and the Garibaldi Brigade, but who were now isolated and poverty stricken as exiles in France and Switzerland. Similarly, Tresca sought financial aid