

THE SECRET CHAMBER

An Episode in Shroud History

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"The history of the Holy Shroud, between periods of obscurity and periods of renown, is a story of voyages, of concealments, of flights and reappearances."

So begins an article by Mons. Barberis, "An Unpublished Chapter in the Recent History of the Holy Shroud", which appeared in *Sindon* #1, October 1959. In *Sindon* #9, Mons. Barberis published documents of the secret transfer of the Shroud to Montevergine in September 1938 and its return to Turin in October 1946. Some excerpts were mentioned in *Spectrum* #15, "An Extraordinary Exposition".

From the very beginning, the thread of flight and concealment weaves through the fabric of Shroud history, showing up conspicuously in the XVIth century. Controlling the Alpine passes to Italy, the duchy of Savoy suffered years of devastation during the wars between Francis I and the Emperor Charles V for the possession of the duchy of Milan. In 1536, when the French invaded Savoy, Duke Charles III took the Shroud and retreated to Turin, and when the French troops came to that city, the Savoys and the Shroud removed to Vercelli; when the French advanced toward Vercelli, the Duke transferred his capital to Nice, where the Shroud remained for seven years. In 1543, again fleeing the French, the Duke returned to Vercelli where in 1545 the Shroud was privately displayed for Maria of Aragon. In 1553, the French suddenly take and sack Vercelli; on this occasion, six enemy soldiers entered the Cathedral looking for the Shroud. The canon, Antonio Costa, obligingly made available to them all the valuable treasures, and in the meantime managed to hie the Shroud away and conceal it in his house.*

It is no wonder, then, that in 1578, "for the continuing tumult of the Huguenots" and the ever-present menace of France, Emanuel Philibert definitely removed his capital from Chambéry to Turin.

In the present article, Mons. Barberis describes the events of 1918, in which he was a participant.

*Full account of these movements in: "La S. Sindone Salvata a Vercelli", *Acts of Vercelli*, pp. 11-57 (1960); address delivered by Mons. Prof. Giuseppe Ferraris, Chief of the archdiocesan archives of Vercelli.

In the European conflagration of 1914-1919, aviation appeared for the first time among offensive weapons. Although far from the terrible blanket operations of recent experience, this innovation struck terror and the concept of indiscriminate warfare justified the fear. Since the buildings could not be hidden, the concern was to safeguard whatever in them was most precious.

Among the treasures of Turin, there was anxiety for the Most Holy Shroud, and the first to concern themselves about it were the King and the Cardinal-Archbishop of Turin. Without losing time, they made their decision: the holy treasure must be put in a safe place. His Majesty the King Vittorio Emanuele III posed only one condition: "Choose whatever place, do whatever work, but the Shroud does not leave the royal palace."

It was agreed that very few persons were to be directly involved in carrying out the operation, and all would be bound by secrecy. The nucleus of persons chosen included Monsignor Bosia, Grasso, Gili and Brusa, royal chaplains; Cav. Lavagno, Ing. Bastoni and Sig. Berta* for the royal House, and Canons Franco and Barberis for the Archdiocese. Workmen employed in the preparations never knew the purpose of the labor assigned to them.

The first task was to prepare a refuge for the Relic. On the southeast side of the royal palace, there is a stairway which, after serving the five floors of the palace, descends by a smaller stairway two floors below ground level. At the bottom of the stairs, on the right, there is a room measuring 2m x 4m. The height of the room was reduced to only 2.5m by a strong ceiling. On top of this, a layer of sand, accurately dried, was spread to a depth of one meter; over this, another meter of rubble was strewn.

Previously, the gas and water pipes and the electric wires had all been removed from the basement and the stairwell; afterwards, to illuminate the stairs and the chamber, there were only portable lamps connected to a long cable reaching from the upper floors. The cable was let down each time it was needed, and taken up again.

The walls and ceiling of the chamber were lined with green brocade shot with threads of gold. On the floor, stout blocks of wood support a big strongbox. This was of wood but lined inside and out with thick sheets of iron enameled in an olive-green tint. It is closed by two robust leaves with a complicated lock equipped with a secret combination. On each of the two leaves there is the large

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*Cav. = Cavaliere, lit. Knight; an honorary title. Ing. = Engineer. Sig., of course, abbreviates Signore. Ed.

gold monogram, V.E. [Vittorio Emanuele]. In fact, the King wanted the strongbox to be taken from his own apartments.

When all was ready, with the prescribed ceremonies the chest containing the Reliquary is removed from its place above the altar in the chapel of the Holy Shroud. All present proceed to an accurate examination of the chest and recognize the perfect integrity of the seals of the royal House and the Archbishop of Turin, affixed to the knots of the red silk ribbon with which the closing of the Reliquary was assured after the Exposition of 1898. The chest is wrapped in a thick cloth of asbestos carefully sewn around with asbestos thread.

When all was done, four priests, followed by the rest of the group, all devoutly chanting psalms, carry the precious burden to a nearby room in the royal palace. There a big chest made of tin plate was standing ready. The reliquary was set into it and the lid put on. A tinsmith, without knowing exactly what it was all about, hermetically sealed the lid by cold soldering, using only rosin, as acids were excluded to avoid the formation of harmful oxides.

Then the chest is tied, lengthwise and widthwise, with an ash-gray cotton ribbon, passing through pairs of bronze rings on the rims of the chest and the lid. Each knot is covered with red sealing wax, on which the seals of the royal House and those of the Archbishop of Turin are stamped. An inscription is attached with sealing wax:

SS. SINDON D.N.J.C. - HIC REPOSITA - PRID. ID. MAJ. MCMXVIII

Thus prepared, the chest is lifted by the priests and, again with prayers and psalms, it is carried through the royal apartments to the stairway and so down to the chamber.

The holy Relic was laid carefully in the strongbox. In reverent silence and with manifest emotion of all present, a *Pater, Ave et Gloria* were recited and a verse and the prayer from the liturgy of the Most Holy Shroud; and by a happy inspiration, these were followed by an invocation to the Holy Angels, now custodians of the little cubicle, once so lowly and now become so precious.

Signor Berta shuts the leaves of the strongbox, showing all present how to manipulate the various secret devices for closing and opening; then the two major keys and the lever for the gears are consigned to Mons. Bosia, the third key being given to Can. Franco.

All exit backwards from the chamber; the heavy entrance doors are locked and the keys entrusted to Mons. Bosia.

An accurate account of these proceedings was released in five copies dated 6 May 1918, and approved by all those who took part in the transfer of the Shroud to its hiding place.