

Anon
Sante Caserio

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front of the sun. It was his last greeting to the ideal that had been the only joy and love of his short life

Notes

translated by Barbara Stefanelli

(1) P. Gori, Sante Caserio, in *The Torch*, London, 18/06/1895, in *Opere*, IX (*Pagine di vagabondaggio*).

(2) Filippo Turati (1857-1932) founded the Italian Socialist Party following the split in the Workers party during the Congress of Genoa in 1892, which also gave birth to the Italian Communist Party.

(3) Fillippo Turati, *Il loro duello. L'uccisione di Carnot*, in *Critica Sociale*, 01/07/1894.

(4) Information drawn from Ernesto Cipriani, Sante Caserio. Testimonianze, in *Il Libertario*, Milano.

ing. When a judge pronounces a death sentence, he has listened to the defence, thought carefully, discussed, considered all the options and observed all the rules. You, a twenty-year old boy, you stood as prosecutor, judge and hangman.

Caserio – If there exists a superior law that forbids murdering, why don't you respect it? I'm only twenty-years old, the age decided by governments to enlist soldiers taken from the houses of poor people so that they go and kill their brothers...

Judge – You did not only kill the leader of the nation but also the best husband and father.

Caserio – Fathers? They are killed in thousands by poverty and hard work! Wasn't Vaillant a father? Didn't he have a partner and a child? Didn't Henry leave a mother and a brother? Did you show mercy to them?

It took 20 minutes for the jury to decide about Caserio's death sentence. When the judge announced that Caserio would be guillotined and that the latter had the right to appeal within three days, Caserio smiled and shrugged. Then, walking to come back to his cell, he shouted: 'Be brave comrades! Always long live anarchy!'.

As he went to the scaffold on August 16 1894, in the morning, Caserio had an instinctive thrill of rebellion, the rebellion of life that cannot surrender to death, and he screamed 'Voeri no!' (I don't want!). But he soon recovered, stared at the hangman with a defiant look and shouted 'Long live anarchy!' in

24th June 1894, the President of the French Republic Sadi Carnot reached the end of his life in Lyon under the blows of a young Italian anarchist, Sante Caserio.

The killing made a tremendous impact in France as well as in Italy and all over Europe. Though Umberto I and Crispi showed their execration and grief, people attacked a number of Italian shops in Lyons and in other French towns, and in Paris they even demanded to go to war against Italy. A ship of Italian emigrants on their way to America was compelled to avoid all French ports, while many fugitives terrified of reprisals started flocking into Turin.

But Caserio's attack had no nationalistic intent whatsoever. On the contrary, it was planned by its author as an act of solidarity towards his French comrades Vaillant and Henry who had been struck down by that State.

Caserio's attack should be reconstructed meticulously as it is quite significant, and reveals some interesting customs and psychological aspects of the anarchist movement.

Caserio – No, I'm alone and I came here to carry out my act of justice.

Judge – But anarchists were plotting to vindicate Ravachol, Vaillant and Henry. President Carnot decided not to modify the sentence pronounced against your vile predecessors by twelve citizens, members of the jury, who acted in full conscience. For this reason, after Henry's death, the president, his wife and children received many threatening letters. Isn't it true that the bosses whom you obeyed wrote these letters?

Caserio – Anarchists don't have bosses. I decided about my act by myself and I carried it out freely by myself.

Judge – There is however an incident that the jury and the public have to take into account: after Carnot's death, a picture of Ravachol was sent to the Eliseo with this address: 'To Carnot's widow'. And on the back was written: 'He has been vindicated in the best way'. If you are not the agent of those who sent this picture, do you have the courage to repudiate them?

Caserio – I have the courage to not repudiate them: I don't repudiate acts or people; it is enough for me to sincerely assure you that I was the only person who prepared this attack and carried it out.

Judge – Your interrogation ends here. A simple consideration must be made: you repudiate human laws and this is your business; but you also defy the superior law that forbids murder-

you the hospitality of well-being and therefore we no longer feel we are in debt to you. If any debt remains unpaid, it is a sacred debt of hatred, revenge and massacre; and don't deceive yourself, we are going to pay the bill one of these days...

Afterwards Caserio gives a very detailed account of his attack against president Carnot.

Judge – You are an anarchist, you cultivate the idea of destroying society and you are a sworn enemy of all leaders of State, be it republic or autocracy.

Caserio – They are one and the same thing.

Judge – You approved Henry's act with one exception, which I expose with your own words: 'Instead of throwing his bomb into a café, he would have better thrown it into the den of some fat bourgeois family'.

Caserio – That's true, that's what I said.

Judge – One day you said: 'Poor Vaillant, they killed him but he didn't kill anybody'. And you added: 'When my time comes, I will hit an important person and I will not be stopped by the thought of my mother, of life, of anything'. Didn't you say that you would have attacked the Pope and the King if you had come back to Italy?

Caserio, smiling – Oh, not at the same time, they never go out together.

Judge – Aren't you the agent of some anarchist plot?

Introduction

This is the story of Sante Caserio, a young Italian anarchist who emigrated to France so as not to be arrested as a deserter. There he stabbed and killed Sadi Carnot, the French president of the Republic, during a public celebration in honour of the latter in 1894.

Why are we remembering Caserio one hundred and sixteen years after his death, which he faced on the scaffold after the killing of the president? There is more than one reason. First of all, we should never forget the acts of rebellion of the past, especially as they are often neglected by official historians or presented in the worst possible light. Secondly, the great importance of Caserio's action is still valid even if it belongs to a quite different context than ours: Caserio, twenty-years old, the shy and diligent worker coming from a little village in the north of Italy, struck the very core of political power, the most prestigious symbol of French bourgeois society. Thirdly, Caserio's act represents an excellent example to all anarchists who are fighting against the system in order to destroy it. We are not saying that the killing of whatever president of the republic is recommended (consider, in fact, that a new president would be immediately elected), we are just saying that

propaganda by the deed is often more important than a million words. Discussion is necessary and worthwhile, of course, but translating the latter into actions is also necessary. This is true today as well as it was in Caserio's time, when working class living conditions were thoroughly miserable in Europe, whereas the great political powers wasted huge amounts of money in colonisation campaigns. A large number of attacks against the capitalist and imperialist establishment broke out all over Europe, but it was mainly in France that anarchists made some bourgeois blood flow. French anarchism, being deprived of the powerful anti-monarchist incentive that on the contrary had characterized Italian and Spanish anarchism, led to a series of attacks against bourgeois society and the institutions of the French republic.

On December 9 1893 August Vaillant threw an explosive device full of nails into the Chambre des Députés, injuring many people. Vaillant, a very conscious rebel, but not a killer, was sentenced to death on January 10 1894 and guillotined on February 5. President Carnot refused to show any mercy, in spite of a petition in favour of the condemned and a plea from his daughter. Vaillant went to the scaffold shouting an hurrah for anarchy and announcing his death would be avenged. Seven days later, Emile Henry, another anarchist, launched a deadly explosive device, which he had made himself, into Café Terminus at Gare St Lazare. One person died and several others were injured. On May 21 1894 Henry also went to the scaffold. A number of explosions occurred between these two epi-

loit and judge us wouldn't have all that arrogance.

Judge – Another memorial should have stopped you: June 24 is the anniversary of the Solferino battle, when Italian and French blood joined together in the battlefields of Lombardia...

Caserio – That was not in the interest of proletarians but to obey Bonaparte and Savoia's orders. The former was finally covered with disgrace whereas the latter took advantage of the heroic patience of Italian workers until they were swallowed and swept away by the same swirl.

Judge – Was the anarchist idea so strong and exclusive in you that it made you forget that you, ungrateful man, were giving nothing more than revenge and pain to France, the country that had offered you the hospitality of work?

Caserio – As for my action, it had been well decided and carefully thought out, and nothing could have changed or cancelled it. As for the hospitality of work, Mr Judge, you are among those who enjoy the benefits of others' work without deserving it. On the contrary I'm among those who suffer only humiliation and troubles from work and without being guilty of that. When you concede us what you call the hospitality of work, you let us survive while bestowing on us your magnanimity, and for this reason you want our gratitude. When, compelled by need, we sell our fatigue and sweat on usury, and assure you security, life and joy in exchange of a bit of bread and a kick in the belly, we are well aware that we are giving

Judge – You left your boss on the 23rd out of the blue and you asked to be paid. You had about thirty francs.

Caserio – More or less.

Judge – You left Viala's place at eleven and went to your comrade Saurel to ask him for anarchist Laborie from Montpellier's address. Then you bought a knife.

Caserio – I bought it at a shop in Rue des Casernes and I paid five francs for it.

At this point Caserio is required to describe in detail his journey from Cette to Lyons and the episode of the attack. He talks about the many villages he crossed: 'I spotted the site of the Gendarmerie Nationale in almost all the villages I visited. Poor little houses were all around and people on the threshold were chatting or smoking, or they played bowls in the street'.

Judge – Didn't the sight of these pacific people and of the little villages stop you from carrying on your impious project?

Caserio – Oh! The slaves that fall asleep under their own yoke and under blows and daily humiliation and find consolation in a game of bowls or cards on Sundays do not stir anything other than contempt in me. It is thanks to them that governors enjoy impunity in their oppression and the bosses are allowed to exploit. If people gathered together in order to learn, to discuss, to understand each other and to prepare themselves for small demands instead of drowning their sorrows and their little money in wine, beer and games, those who govern, ex-

sodes, not all were of anarchist origin but all terrified the capital. The Parliament suggested the introduction of special laws against anarchists, as had occurred in other European countries, but the series of attacks did not stop. On the contrary it was about to strike the peak of the political pyramid: on June 24 1894, one month after Henry's death, the president of the French republic Sadi Carnot reached the end of his life in Lyon under Caserio's blows.

It was the revenge of the oppressed against the ruling class of exploiters, the sudden urge to destroy the bourgeois system based on injustice and corruption and to replace it with a new society without servants and bosses, poor and rich, armies and prisons.

Caserio, a poor and semi-literate young worker, was one of the many oppressed, but unlike many others he was also aware that the ruling class was made up of criminals whose hands were covered in blood, poor people's blood. He decided not to be a passive spectator of the suffering inflicted on the proletarians; as an anarchist, he dedicated his short life to spreading the anarchist ideal among people and putting it into action each time the occasion arose. In this sense Caserio is still an outstanding example to anyone who claims to be anarchist.

the translator

Caserio – This is exactly what I thought and it is the only reason why I moved. I love living with comrades who are intelligent, aware and active.

Judge – You certainly met your comrade Lacroix in Cette.

Caserio – I already warned you that I would give the court any information about things, facts and circumstances concerning myself but that I would always refuse to do the job of the police and serve your prosecution mania, mentioning names and facts that are certainly extraneous to my attack and to this trial, which is looking for revenge.

Judge – The authorities in Cette did not pay much attention to the regulation concerning foreigners. They did not care about asking you for your declaration even if they knew you were one of the most infamous anarchists and had become the centre of an activity that was to reveal what you are. Everybody went to visit you at the hospital, where you were temporarily admitted.

Caserio – What an exaggeration!

Judge – Your comrades used to visit you and bring you papers and the portraits of Ravachol, Pallas and of the anarchists from Chicago. Then you found a job at Mr and Mrs Viala's. It is said that an explosion broke out at their bakery while you were there.

Caserio – Rubbish! It was green wood, which was used to light the oven when there was nothing better.

Caserio – I have always thought that we poor people pay enough debts to the homeland and its rich people. And I resolved to leave one of these debts unpaid, especially as it went along with another, that of a stay in jail, which was confirmed by a sentence against me. Be the homeland defended by those who enjoy it! We only get poverty and contempt from the homeland and we are all too willing to forget it for a greater homeland that doesn't have hideous symbols of fratricidal flags, that doesn't have absurd borders, the greater homeland of the Earth where men can grow up free in the victories of progress and civilization.

Judge – You went to Switzerland and then to France and stopped first in Lyons. There your comrades welcomed you and put you up in Maria's house, a woman who is well known for being 'the anarchists' mother'. You soon got in touch with all the anarchists of the area but then you moved to Vienne. Why?

Caserio – Because I hoped to find better things to do.

Judge – Or maybe because you were pushed into doing so by Delahaye, ex associate of the *Père Peinard*, and by Faure, the barber with whom you had a friendship until the day of your abominable attack.

Caserio – That is not your business nor is it that of the court.

Judge – You moved from Vienne to Cette. Maybe you thought that Cette was a livelier centre of propaganda than Vienne?

SANTE CASERIO

Sante Caserio was born on December 8 1873 in the little village of Motta Visconti, near Milan, on the left bank of river Ticino. His family was very poor: his father, who died young, used to work as a boatman in the summer and as a woodsman in the winter. When he was ten, the boy left his family and moved to Milan in order to look for a job. He became a worker at 'Tre Marie' bakery, where he was remembered as a gentle boy and a hard worker. Though semi-literate he was very bright and when he ran into the anarchist world he became an anarchist himself. He made friends with lawyer Pietro Gori, director of the Milan newspaper '*L'amico del popolo*' (Friend of the People), which was often seized by the authorities. Gori remembers his young comrade from Motta Visconti in this way:

One morning in the winter I saw him near the Chamber of Labour in Milan, he was handing out propaganda pamphlets and bread to the unemployed workers. He had bought the pamphlets as well as the bread with his own savings. I never saw him even a bit drunk, which was quite unusual among poor people, and he also smoked very little. As concerns juvenile vices, he was a puritan. One night he scolded a few friends of his who were coming out of a brothel: 'How can you abuse

these poor women, buying their flesh and love?’ And as one of those guys, an opportunist, said: ‘At least we relieve a little of their misery with our money’, Caserio went in, gave one lira to one of the woman, who looked at him in wonder, and went away without speaking. One day I asked him: ‘You’re a nice young boy, why don’t you make love?’. ‘I used to’, he answered, ‘but since I married the anarchist idea I’ve stopped going around with women, and now I’d like to find a partner for life, as I would like her to be’. He rented a flat where he used to give hospitality at night to all the homeless comrades in Milan. It was a real campsite, whereas he was at work at the bakery all night. (1)

Gori’s interesting report is strengthened by a testimony that is above suspicion: that of Filippo Turati. (2) Soon after Carnot’s killing, Turati wrote a courageous article in ‘*Critica Sociale*’ (Social Critic) where, among other things, he dissociated himself from the general and conventional feeling of grief and made it clear that Carnot was ‘the man whose name is strictly associated with the greatest bourgeois and militarist republic, the alliance between France, the Pope and the tsar, the massacres of Fourmies and Pas de Calais, etc’.

Turati also talks about the young assailant:

We knew Caserio in Milan, when he used to take part in our meetings and contrast our views along with some other anarchists. But he was not as insolent and arrogant as some of his

Caserio – These are useless questions and a waste of time. I don’t know any of the people you mention and even if I did I wouldn’t tell you.

Judge – The investigation established that you were in touch with them and police have provided full evidence of that.

Caserio – Then be content with your police, I’m disgusted with them.

Judge – The police do their job.

Caserio – I know, but it is not my job.

Judge – Do you want to deny that you had your beard shaved by your comrade Faure in Cette?

Caserio – Did you want me to have my beard shaved by a baker?

Judge – And is it not true that at the Café du Garde in Cette you were in the exclusive company of anarchists?

Caserio – It is true, I have never been in the VIP society, and I can imagine how they would welcome me. But it is silly to claim that there were only anarchists at the Café du Gard. I well remember playing billiards with one of the many cops who went there to spy without being aware that they were the ones that were most spied on.

Judge – First you disregarded your family and then your homeland. You left Italy right when you had to pay your sacred debt to her, by becoming a soldier.

Did you become anarchist after the trial of Amilcare Cipriani and the other anarchists held at the court of Assizes in Rome following the riots in Saint Cross Square in Jerusalem on May 1?

Caserio – I was already anarchist but that shameful spectacle of class inequality made my faith stronger and stirred up my first desires for revenge.

Judge – Then the lawyer Gori's conferences...

Caserio – I had been anarchist for a long time when I met Gori, whom you tried to get involved in this trial. His conferences were public and quite crowded, and there I learned good things that the schools of the system forget to teach us.

Judge – Yes, you learned to disregard the suggestions of your poor mother and brother as they tried everything they could to get you away from your wicked doctrines. First you got angry with them and then you repudiated your family completely.

Caserio – This is not true! Today I love and venerate my mother as I used to do when I was a child, and my affection for all my relatives is as it was before. Only I didn't feel like accepting their superstitious yoke; I simply spotted, beyond the little family united by little interests, a greater family, humanity, to whom I felt I had to give all of myself.

The judge, who still wants to confirm his theory of conspiracy and therefore tries to wring some useful contradictions from the defendant, reads out the names of several anarchists from Milan and asks Caserio if he knows them.

comrades. On the contrary he was gentle, thoughtful and silent, he was known as an affectionate boy and a very hard worker. His nature was deeply rooted in feelings of duty and sacrifice. The fact that he had been a very religious teenager confirms our opinion: he was not religious any more, but still devout. (3)

The main feature of Caserio's character was his devotion to the anarchist ideal. He had been constantly worried about doing his duty properly and acting coherently with his ideas. On the one hand, as a little boy, he had found a response to his need of faith, spirituality and maybe even poetry in the Catholic doctrine; on the other, as an adult, he found in the anarchist movement the family that he missed so soon and in his comrades the people to whom he could give his great love.

The chronicles describe him as a blonde, slim boy of average height, with blue eyes and quite an intelligent face: 'his upper lip was shaded by some blonde teenage hair, his eyes looked clever, his mouth was pink and fresh'. He first went around with the anarchist group of Porta Romana, then he himself created a group at Porta Genova, where they had a cubbyhole as a meeting place and even a red and black flag on which was written: 'Anarchist-communist group a pee', which means 'broke'. (4)

He was arrested for the first time in April 1892 for handing out the pamphlet *Giorgio e Silvio*, an antimilitarist dialogue,

to the soldiers of Santa Prassede barracks in Milan. He was sentenced but soon released. At the age of nineteen he was called up to join the army. He fled to Switzerland to avoid being enlisted and was condemned as a deserter. He stayed in Lugano, where he found a job for a few weeks and also took part in a strike (August 1893). Later he moved to Lausanne, then to Geneva and finally to Lyons. In that town a strong anarchist tradition was still alive and Caserio met other comrades but kept in touch with the Italian groups and received anarchist papers from Cette (today called Sete), a sea town south of Montpellier where many Italian workers lived.

In June 1894, having heard that the president of the Republic would be in Lyons to inaugurate the Exposition, he decided to kill him. It was Saturday June 23, Caserio worked as usual at the Viala Bakery in Cette until 10am. Following a quarrel deliberately aroused with his boss, Caserio suddenly gave in his resignation and picked up twenty francs. One hour and a half later he bought a dagger for five francs from a local gun dealer who, lying, told him it was an authentic piece from Toledo. At 1pm he went to the Café du Garde, had a look at the newspaper *Intransigeant* and said to everybody that he was going to Lyons. Nobody paid attention to this, especially as Lyons was far from Cette and a journey until there appeared quite unlikely. But Caserio was determined to strike the main representative of the oppressors in France and at the same time he wanted to avenge his comrades Vaillant and Henry.

mother did her best to provide you with an education. You attended the primary school in Motta Visconti but without particular success. You were not so smart at school. You never won any prizes. I am not telling you off for that, I am just bringing to light a circumstance that can be useful to the impartiality of judgement. You were not so successful at school...

Caserio – I'm the first to regret that. If I had had a good education I would have been a stronger and better man and I would have given the anarchist ideal much more than my poor life.

Judge – Is it not true that on the occasion of religious marches in Motta Vosconti you used to represent San Giovanni Battista?

Caserio – They can make children do anything because the latter do not have the slightest idea of what they are playing. Children do silly things but they don't know what they are doing.

Judge – There is nothing in your past, however, that can testify that you would become a murderer. In his speech on 24th president Carnot expressed his satisfaction about the fact that 'in France there is now one and only one party in which all hearts beat in unison'. In his generous heart of president of the Republic he forgot that there is still a party that does not want to be disarmed, the anarchy party, and that a member of this party was ready to lay an ambush at the door of the hall in order to assassinate him. You, a representative of anarchist delinquency, were at the door of the hall.

Judge - They say that you used to live as an ascetic? And that you had a sacred fear of women. I don't think this is correct, once you were admitted to hospital in Milan following an illness that definitively proves the legend of your chastity wrong. As concerns your health, French law only punishes people when they have full awareness of the crimes they are accused of and can therefore be considered responsible for the latter. Have you ever suffered mental disturbances? Have you always been in full possession of your mental faculties? Have you ever been mad?

Caserio – No, I declare I'm absolutely responsible.

Judge – Is not it true that your uncle died completely mad?

Caserio – I knew two of my uncles, they were not at all mad.

Judge – Your father suffered epileptic fits. One day he saw his brother being brutalised by three German soldiers during the Austrian occupation and he was extremely horrified and shocked about that. He never got over it, but it seems he was not mad.

Caserio – He was not mad, even if fear made him become epileptic. He always worked, he spent all his life on the sea and he never showed the slightest sign of mental disturbance.

Judge – You claim you are perfectly sane in a letter dated July 25, and this is also proved by your report of the attack, which you carried out with full awareness, and by the firm and precise responses you gave during the interrogation. Your poor

At 3pm Caserio was at the station, took the train to Montbasin and from there he caught the train to Montpellier. Waiting for the train to Avignon he went to visit a friend, Laborie. He then caught the train to Avignon, stopped at Tarascon and changed class so as to be sure to arrive in Lyons in time for his plan. In that first-class coach the passengers looked with deep mistrust at the badly dressed and awkward stranger.

In Avignon Caserio, who had been working all the previous night, fell asleep on a bench inside the station. He had enough time to reach Lyons but the price of the ticket, eleven francs and thirty cents, was beyond his means: he had only twelve francs. Had he bought the ticket to Lyons he wouldn't have been able to buy any food. He then resolved to go to Vienne, nine francs and eighty cents, so that he could buy a piece of bread and calm his hunger. Once in Vienne, he bought *Le Lyon Republicain*, cut the page containing the president's day programme and wrapped it around his dagger. Then he paid a visit to a comrade, a barber, and had his hair cut. Finally he left Vienne and walked towards Lyons in the rain. When he arrived close to the town, he came across a bus adorned with tricolour flags full of people going to see the president. Caserio only knew one spot in Lyons, Place de la Guillotière, and went there to orientate himself. The streets were all well lit as the president was at the Chamber of Commerce for a banquet. Such a scene, made by illuminations, parties, processions and music gave rise to the most hostile feelings in the young anar-

chist. At a certain point, Caserio, walking through the crowd, ran into a blocked road: the presidential procession would go right there to get to the theatre for a gala show. Caserio was on the wrong side though, as he had read that the president would go by carriage and be sitting on the right side, whereas Caserio was on the left side of the road. He found it difficult but in the end he slipped behind a wagon and got to the other side, where he gained a second row place among the throng. At around 9pm the crowd started jostling around and two horsemen of the republican guard passed, followed by some other regiments. As the Marseillaise suddenly began to play the president's coach, escorted by two further horsemen on either side, came forward behind the last regiment. The president, who was with the major and two generals, greeted the crowd. At that very moment Caserio sprang out, broke through the first row, jumped on to the footboard and stabbed Sadi Carnot. Many people thought that a man was making a plea, as they only saw the paper that covered the dagger and did not realize that the president had fallen down into his coach and was wounded to death. Caserio still had time to find a way through the crowd, but instead he ran in front of the coach shouting: 'Long live Anarchy! Long live the Revolution!'. Quickly the horsemen grabbed him and pulled him away from the anger of the crowd while the president's coach ran towards the palace of prefecture. There the president died not long after midnight.

This sequence of events, which has been reconstructed here

following the detailed and truthful version given by Caserio himself during the investigation and trial, proves that the young anarchist acted by himself without any help from anyone. His attack was an individual action made by one single man aiming to strike one single victim. During the trial the prosecutor tried to put forward the hypothesis of a conspiracy, but Caserio's long walk from Vienne to Lyons, undertaken at the risk of missing that tragic meeting, is the unquestionable proof that no project had been planned in advance by the young man, nor, as a logical consequence, by his supposed accomplices. The only thing Caserio had planned before was the acceptance of his death: this was also his great strength.

THE TRIAL started on August 2 1894 in Lyons and lasted eight days. The young anarchist was questioned by judge De Breuillac during the first day of the trial.

Judge – Caserio, you were born in 1873. Your father was a boatman from Motta Visconti and died in 1887. Your family still reside in Motta; one of your brothers is an innkeeper, another is a servant and a third is a boatman. As a young boy you were a good honest worker. No one would have imagined what was to happen with you. As many other young men of your age you were lively, smart and impulsive. They also say that you used to have a sulky expression.

Caserio, getting up with a lazy attitude and smiling, interrupts – This is not true, Mr Judge.