

Lucia: A Venetian Life in the Age of Napoleon

excerpt . Rome

In the winter of 1786, Andrea Memmo, the Venetian ambassador to the Papal States, was visiting Naples with his daughters Lucia and Paolina during the Carnival season, when he received a dispatch from Venice that he had been waiting for anxiously. Alvisè Mocenigo, the only son of one of the wealthiest and most powerful families of the Venetian Republic, agreed to marry Memmo's oldest daughter, fifteen-year-old Lucia.

Memmo was an experienced diplomat and he knew this letter was only the first step in what promised to be a long and difficult negotiation. Alvisè's personal commitment was no guarantee that the proposal would actually go through, for he was on very bad terms with his father, Sebastiano, and did not get on much better with the rest of his family, whose approval of the marriage contract was indispensable. The Mocenigo elders were irked by Alvisè's marital freelancing. Moreover, they did not favour the prospect of an attachment to the declining house of the Memmos, which had been among the founding families of the Venetian Republic back in the eighth century, but whose finances and political power had been waning for some generations. Still, Memmo felt Alvisè's letter was a promising start, and he was confident in his judgement that the twenty-six-year-old scion of Casa Mocenigo was a son-in-law worth an honest struggle. "For some time now he has shown real promise," he had explained to his closest friends, "and as I flatter myself of foreseeing the future, I know my daughter will be well taken care of." [1] The wisest course, he had concluded, was to cultivate Alvisè directly, encouraging him to correspond with Lucia over the heads of the surly Mocenigos (it was Memmo who had convinced Alvisè to go ahead and declare himself for Lucia). Meanwhile, he was going to exercise the full panoply of his diplomatic skills in an effort to bring Alvisè's family over to his side; marrying Lucia off without the consent of the Mocenigos in a clandestine ceremony was out of the question.

The small travelling household in Naples was already dizzy with excitement when Memmo, still clutching Alvisè's letter, summoned Lucia to his quarters. It was not clear to the rest of the family what the mysterious dispatch contained exactly, but it was plain to all that it must carry portentous news. Lucia entered her father's room anxious and short of breath. Thirteen-year-old Paolina followed, her eyes already swelling with tears of anticipation, while Madame Dupont, their beloved governess, stood discreetly in the background. After revealing with appropriate solemnity the content of the dispatch, Memmo read out a draft copy of the marriage contract. He then handed to Lucia a separate letter in which Alvisè, who was marrying for the second time, introduced himself to his young bride-to-be. He professed to remember Lucia from earlier days in Venice, though in truth he could only have had a vague recollection of her as a little girl. Lucia did not have any memory at all of Alvisè. Standing in her father's study, she must have struggled to conjure up an image towards which she could direct the rush of confusing emotions.

Alvisè's declaration called for an immediate reply. Memmo startled Lucia a second time by asking her to write to her future husband at once, and without his help. He would read the letter over, he assured her, but she had to set it down herself, letting her heart speak out and never forgetting to use her head. Lucia obediently retired to her room, and in her neat, elegant handwriting, penned her first letter to Alvisè, a letter so poignant yet also so thoughtful and mature that it deserves to be quoted in full:

"My most esteemed spouse, my good father having informed me of your favourable disposition towards me, and having told me of your worthy qualities, I will confess to you that in seeing myself so honoured by your letter, and having been informed that you have agreed to the marriage contract which my own father read to me at length, I felt such agitation in my heart that for a brief moment I even lost consciousness. And now that I am writing to you I am so troubled, my father not wishing to suggest even one convenient word to me, that I feel embarrassed to the point that I don't quite know how to express myself. I thank you very much for the kindness you have shown me, for the good impression you have formed of me and which I shall endeavour yet to improve by the proper exercise of my duties. I know my good fortune, as well I should, and I will strive to become worthy of it. I am certain that my father, and indeed my loving uncles, in carrying forth this marriage, have had my happiness in mind, which means that in you I shall find all that a spouse may desire. I do not have the strength to say more, except that I have no other will than that of my father's, nor do I wish to have one, just as in the future I will only wish to have yours." [2]

It would have been pleasant to linger in Naples—the seaside gaiety of this port-city so reminded the Memmos of Venice. They had been feted with lunches and dinners in the homes of the Neapolitan nobility, they had visited the porcelain factories at Capodimonte, gone out to Pozzuoli to view the antiquities, made a tour of the Catacombs and had walked through the magnificent stables of King Ferdinand IV, the primitive but jocular monarch known as Re Nasone, King Big Nose. On the night of the gran mascherata, “the great masquerade,” the King had spotted Lucia and Paolina in the packed crowd at Teatro San Carlo and had thrown handfuls of coloured confetti at them, giggling and clapping his hands when the two girls had thrown some back at him. Circumstances, however, had suddenly changed, and Memmo was anxious to return to Rome to push the deal on Lucia’s marriage forward before it lost momentum. Lucia, too, longed to be back in Rome, at the Venetian embassy in the Palazzo San Marco, among her things and in the company of her friends. Each additional day spent in Naples made her feel a little more unhinged. Her father had explained how complicated the negotiations might prove, going so far as to admit to Lucia that the deal was not yet sealed because of the opposition of the Mocenigos. With trepidation, she now wrote to Alvise beseeching him “to come to terms with your family before any official notice of our wedding is published . . . I must confess that I would be extremely mortified if your family did not acknowledge me as your very obedient and affectionate spouse.”[3]

Memmo drove out to the royal palace at Caserta to take formal leave of the King of Naples and his touchy Austrian wife, Queen Maria Carolina, as soon as it was convenient to do so without giving the impression of a rushed departure. Meanwhile he sent a small portrait of Lucia to Alvise. He had wanted to have a new miniature painted in Naples, but there was not enough time to arrange a sitting. So he sent an old one, of Lucia as a little girl, causing his daughter considerable discomfiture. “For heaven’s sake, don’t trust that picture,” she pleaded with Alvise. “My father had it painted years ago in order to take it with him to Constantinople. You might find me changed for the worse when you see me, and I wouldn’t want to suffer such disadvantage after a possibly favourable judgement on your part.”[4]

Finally, on 11 March, Memmo, Lucia, Paolina and Madame Dupont crammed their luggage in a rented carriage and headed north for Rome, leaving the hazy silhouette of Vesuvius behind them. “There I hope to receive your portrait, and there, I’m afraid, mine will be painted,” Lucia wrote spiritedly to Alvise in a note she dashed off before leaving.[5] She was already addressing him as her amatissimo sposo, her beloved spouse.

Although not yet sixteen, Lucia was already a young woman of uncommon poise. As the older of the two sisters she had taken on quite effortlessly some of the duties and responsibilities that would have been her mother’s as the wife of the ambassador. Five years had gone by since Elisabetta Piovene Memmo had died in Venice of a “gastro-rheumatic fever,” leaving her two young daughters, ten and eight, stunned with grief. Elisabetta had been ill for some time. She was a frail woman, who suffered nervous breakdowns and often took to her bed. She drank vinegar every morning for fear of putting on weight and developed what the doctors described as “a bilious temperament.”[6] When she died, Memmo was in Constantinople, serving as ambassador to the Porte. He sailed home utterly distraught, a widower with two young daughters to raise.

Lucia and Paolina’s education had been somewhat haphazard during his absence. The girls were taught basic reading and writing skills, they received piano and singing lessons, learnt a little French, but their schooling was unimaginative and perfunctory. Elisabetta became less reliable as her health declined, and the two sisters fell increasingly under the authority of their strict grandmother, Lucia Pisani Memmo, who lived upstairs from them at Ca’ Memmo, the family palazzo on the Grand Canal, and who was more interested in developing her granddaughters’ manners than their intellect.

Ambassador Memmo, a learned and widely read man with a considerable knowledge of history and philosophy and an abiding passion for architecture, embraced the opportunity to educate his daughters, in part because he had been an absent father. “My girls are still a little rough around the edges,” he confided to his friends, but under his care they would surely become “very beautiful and very educated.”[7] He did not want to stay in Venice after the death of his wife because it would only sharpen his misery. So he welcomed his appointment to the ambassadorship in Rome, where he moved with his daughters in 1783, at the age of fifty-four.

Life in the papal city offered Memmo a nice change of pace after his very active and distinguished career in the service of the Venetian Republic. He needed “distractions to preserve [his] health,” he claimed, and these he certainly found, throwing himself in the arms of lovers, young and old, and thanking his “amiable sluts” for breathing new life into his otherwise “moribund cock.” He also indulged in the pleasures of a good table. “My appetite thrives and I am an excellent companion at dinner.”[8]

Although he took his pleasures, he did not neglect his duties as a father. His best time, in Rome, was the one he spent in the company of Lucia and Paolina, who blossomed, he said, “thanks to their excellent French governess and to my own efforts.” His daughters were indeed much admired and Madame Dupont’s “unequalled vigilance” helped to preserve their innocence. “Perhaps even excessively,” quipped Memmo, the aging libertine, to Guglielmo Chiarabba, his agent back in Venice, “since it does not seem to me they have the slightest desire to be attractive to men.”[9]

In Lucia’s case, things were rapidly changing.

NOTES

[1] Andrea Memmo to Giulio Perini, Rome, 25 April 1786, ASF, Acquisti e doni 94, filza 146.

[2] Lucia to Alvisè, Naples, 21 February 1786, AdR Papers.

[3] Lucia to Alvisè, Naples, 28 February 1786, AdR Papers.

[4] Lucia to Alvisè, Naples, 7 March 1786, AdR Papers.

[5] Ibid.

[6] The medieval report signed by Professor Perlasca is in the Biblioteca Civica Correr di Venezia, Maoscritti, misc. IX, 1138. On the death of Lucia's mother, see *A Venetian Affair*, by Andrea di Robilant, New York: Knopf, 2003.

[7] Andrea Memmo to Giulio Perini, Rome, 30 April 1785, ASF, Acquisti e doni 94, filza 146.

[8] Andrea Memmo to Giulio Perini, Rome, 17 September 1783, ASF, Acquisti e doni 94, filza 146.

[9] Andrea Memmo to Guglielmo Chiarabba, Rome, 22 May 1784, AdR Papers.