

ARCHIVIO MADRI NIGRIZIA

PUBLICATION OF THE STUDIUM MADRI NIGRIZIA



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MARIA VIDALE

The “MAHDIA”

**The Experience of Suffering
Of our Sisters**

*“Central Africa is the most difficult and
trying mission in the world”.*

(Daniel Comboni, W. 5987)

*These pages,
written first in tears and blood,
are dedicated to*

Teresa and Concetta

Amalia and Eulalia

Maria and Fortunata

Caterina and Elisabetta



The Protagonists of the Experience of the Mahdia

are inserted here in the symbology of the *Mandala* by Sabina Ayres Queiroz.

From left to right starting at the lower level are Caterina Chincarini, Fortunata Quascè, Concetta Corsi, Elisabetta Venturini, Teresa Grigolini, Maria Caprini, Amalia Andreis and Eulalia Pesavento

This mandala was prepared in Fortaleza in 2009 by the Brazilian architect, Sabina Ayres Queiroz in collaboration with Sr. Gabriella Bottani. The mandala, **memorial of the Mahdia**, proposes as symbolic images the following:

- The **Heart**: love, fount of light, virtue, sentiments, will and knowledge.
- The **Cross**: union between heaven and earth, the unknown and the known, life and death, difficulty.
- The **Tree**: life which is regenerated and renewed, growth, maternity, roots...

About the colours, we can say the following: **Black** is associated with death, mystery, of the incomprehensible, regeneration, but also mourning and fear. **Brown** is associated with the earth, the home and maternity. **Red** is associated with love, the body, strength. **Purple** is associated with human love, idealism, wisdom. **Yellow** is associated with the sun, warmth, joy. **Gold** is associated with illumination, strength of life, spiritual growth.

The number 8 speaks to us of cosmic order and balance, of destiny, harmony, symmetry, of the eternal journey and of regeneration. In the bible, the number 8 is associated with the resurrection, the regeneration of a new creation. It is the number associated with the Lord Jesus, who was raised up on the eighth day.

The Circles: The external circle represents the tree; that is, the Tree of life, of knowledge of good and evil, under which the encounter with God takes place. (see Gen 18). The symbolism of the tree in this mandala, allows us to contemplate the roots of our spirituality, spiritual motherhood and the Plan for Regeneration from a feminine perspective. Spiritual and physical motherhood, mothers of the Comboni Family, of the Church of Sudan and ours...

The Circle of Light: surrounds the mandala and makes it luminous. It is the ray of light that shines from the *“cenacle of Apostles for Africa, a centre of light sending to the centre of Africa as many rays as are the missionaries who go out from it. These rays of light, bringing warmth as well as illumination, cannot but reveal the nature of the Centre from which they spread out.”* (W 2648)

The circle with the photos of the Sisters who lived the experience of the Mahdia: Their photos are placed on the sand which reminds us of the desert of Sudan where they spent their captivity. The colour of yellow gold mixed with black represents the luminous witness which their lives expressed, while reminding us, at the same time, of the shadows of the suffering and of marginalization which still surround the memory of these sisters of ours. These are shadows which, slowly, slowly, we are trying to enlighten with the light of truth.

The Circle of the Cross and the Heart: at the centre of the mandala, we see the pierced heart of the Good Shepherd in the life of these consecrated women: good shepherds who united their lives with that of Christ; grains of wheat fallen into the soil of the Sudan and who now, together with the sons and daughters of that land, produce fruit in abundance; seeds of life and of hope, wombs capable of generating life even in a context of death!

Presentation

*“I am the man [woman] familiar with misery
under the rod of his fury...*

I thought: ‘My lasting hope in Yahweh is lost.

*Bring to mind my misery and anguish; it is
wormwood and gall. My heart dwells on this con-
tinually and sinks within me.*

*This is what I shall keep in mind and so regain
some hope.*

Surely Yahweh’s mercies are not over.

It is good to wait in silence for Yahweh to save.”

(Lam. 3.1, 18-22, 26)

This prayer of lament and of hope lifted up to heaven by the Prophet Jeremiah is well tuned to the cry of our sisters and brothers who lived the tragic experience of the Mahdia.

The presentation of this new publication of *Archivio Madri Nigrizia* which allows us to enter more deeply into the experience of suffering of our sisters, in the light of the Paschal Mystery which we shall soon celebrate, is for me an occasion to rest in silence before the sacrifice which they lived, first as a group of Comboni Missionaries, but also as consecrated women, with significant consequences in their lives.

From their hearts, a desperate cry, like that of Jesus, *‘Father, why have you abandoned me?’* (Mk 15.34) rose up to heaven. But at the same time, it was also a prayer of trust, *‘... let your will be done’*. (Lc 22.42). Between these two cries, we can see the evolution of a mystical experience, of an immersion in the Paschal Mystery which carries within itself the contradictions of the lived experience of all creatures and of humanity itself.

The purpose of the present work, as we shall repeat in the introduction, is to allow the protagonists of this experience to speak for themselves as much as possible, each and every one of them and to try to place the experience they lived within the wider framework of the dramatic event of the Mahdia.

Without a doubt, this reading invites us to reread once more the other publications about our origins and the lives of our first sisters so as to prepare ourselves better to welcome “*the theological, charismatic and historical reflection on the group of Sisters who lived the events of the Mahdia.*” (AC, 2010, 16)

The wish that we make to each other is to meditate on this experience, allowing ourselves to be questioned about how we live the great and small events of our being women consecrated for the mission, fully participating in the tragedies and sufferings, sorrows and deaths of Peoples; tragedies in which we are also caught up ourselves. Which cry of prayer rises up from our hearts?

I shall allow the poetess, Alda Merini, a woman of today, tried and sensitive, to speak, because it seems to me that she is able to translate the feelings, the expectations, the certainties and the intuitions of our hearts of women in whom God dwells.

“I Jesus

*Have filled all the virigins of the earth,
I made them pregnant of my love
and in exchange they birthed me silence;
Hands (a multitude) outstretched towards my womb
which has generated nothing
except my obedience to the Mystery.
Loved and held in their hands, I gave up my spirit
in the awareness of God.
Those hands, however, helped to rise up.
They didn't relinquish my heart to death.
Womens' hands; hands burning my heart.
These hands, as flaming torches, burned my flesh.
Day after day they spurred me on to Calvary
for gratitude and love.
See what love is:
It draws you to the Cross
so that you give thanks to this succession of eyes,
of hands and of words loving you.
And my hands quiver resting
on the womb of these pure women
who glory at my death
and are ready to build with their flesh
the kingdom of heaven.”*

Sister Luzia Premoli,
General Superior

Rome, Holy week 2011

Introduction

After the publication of the preceding issues of *Archivio Madri Nigrizia*, requests to add a publication exclusively dedicated to the Mahdist revolution in the Sudan, or more precisely, what it meant for our sisters who were caught up in these events, have been many. This publication, therefore, will focus on this theme.

Naturally, we do not intend to present here the event in itself, that is, its origins, development and the events which followed the Islamic uprising and the subsequent establishment of a new local government which came about in the Sudan between 1881 and 1898. Such a presentation, given the specificity and complexity of the events, would be beyond our possibilities. We shall therefore limit ourselves to rereading that chapter of history from a particular point of view, that is, from the experience of the young Comboni Missionaries when they found themselves caught up among those who became protagonists of the event.

Precisely because this revolution was the result of the **Mahdia**, that is, a religious movement born out of the preaching of the young but very well established Muslim ‘*sayh*’ (spiritual guide), the experience that the missionaries were forced to live during the years of their imprisonment was particularly difficult, marked by suffering and, very often, dramatic. Indeed, it will reveal itself to have been, without a doubt, deeply traumatizing. This is true not only because they were foreigners and Christians, coming, therefore, from a completely different culture, but especially because they were women, and consecrated women.

In 1878, when the first group of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* reached the Sudan, the missionary activity of Muhammad Ahmad*, who would later be self defined as **the Mahdi**, that is, the one who is well-guided by God, was already fully operational.

Teresa Grigolini left us quite a precise description of him at the beginning of her *Memiors*¹:

*"[...] we sisters were at the mission station of el Obeid when we heard certain rumours from the Arabs. They were saying that on the island of Aba there had risen up, a new prophet about whom great marvels were told. They were saying that he was a great reformer of the Islamic religion and that he had come to conquer all the countries as far as Mecca."*²

It was said that he was a very great man who foretold the future, who performed miracles and was able to conquer all hearts. Indeed, all those who talked with him came away from him filled with enthusiasm. Therefore, in a few months, one witnessed masses of people flocking to him and returning with tales of marvel. In the meantime, he had gathered close to himself certain people well instructed in the Qur'an, gradually forming leaders who could help him to persuade the people that he was sent by God and by the prophet Muhammad to restore religion, subdue Christians and make them embrace the Islamic religion. (p. 1-2).

Such success of the future Mahdi could obviously not only be due to a great capacity for preaching and to his gift – highly recognized- as a leader of the masses. As an itinerant preacher, he had had the opportunity to approach many peoples who lived in the region, gaining their confidence and an understanding of their expectations.

In addition, the timing could not have been better. Only twenty years had passed since the Viceroy of Egypt, the khe-

¹ *In order to reduce the number of footnotes, there will be a **biographical index** of all the persons named in the text. Persons to be included in the index will be indicated by an asterisk following their name.

NB In citing these *Memoirs*, we are following the numbering of the original text which does not correspond to the numbering in AMN, 1(2000), in which they were published.

² *"The self proclaimed prophet,"* she wrote to Major Gozzi, *"revealed his intentions through various proclamations, the principal points of which were the following: to gain the Sudan for his cause, therefore march on Egypt and to rescue it from the domination of the Turks, false believers, and finally to establish in Mecca the millenary rule of the saints and convert the whole world."* (D. Gozzi, *Note alla Buona...*, p. 182)

dive, had pushed his military conquests forward up to the region of the equatorial lakes and had created a new state, which he had called Egyptian Sudan. This was a very strong and unacceptable imposition which had caused much tension because the North could never have recognized itself in the South and vice versa. In addition, the type of administration set up by the then government in Cairo only increased these tensions.

*“The Mission which the Mahdi attributed to himself”, Major Gozzi recognized, “was fundamentally religious and consisted in giving again to Islam the ancient rigidity of the faith and the cult, which the schisms and the long contact with the Europeans had rendered considerably more relaxed [...] nevertheless, even if his objective was purely religious, and even if [...] it had become, apparently, the gospel of his followers, the fanaticism evoked by him [...] had two general causes, in which both the political and social states of the region were involved and that is, **bad governance by the Egyptians and the abolition of slavery**”.*³

Now, if the Catholic Mission in the Sudan was not an accomplice to the bad governance of the Egyptians, even though it was seen to be allied to this government⁴, it did instead sustain with deep conviction and determination, the abolition of slavery.⁵ For this reason, and not only for the cause of evange-

³ D. Gozzi, p.168. See also Ballin, C. – *Cristo e il Mahdi*, p. 209-210. There is a very interesting consideration about the reactions evoked in the Sudan by the fact that the abolition of the slave trade was too rapid and too forced. See also the work of Delebecque – Giardini, *Gordon e il Dramma di Khartum*, Milan, 1940.

The same authors, in reference to Gordon and to Egyptian bad governance, write: *“The disgust for the way that Egypt governed in the Sudan turned his stomach; to him, deeply religious as he was, the Egyptian systems of administration seemed neither more nor less than the negation of God.”* (p. 48)

⁴ In his Historical report on the Vicariate of 15th of February 1870, Daniel Comboni wrote about how Ryllo himself, from 1847 had received from the Viceroy Muhammad Ali, *“a signed document protecting the missionaries from the authorities and heads of Sudan as far as the furthest boundaries of Egyptian rule.”* (W. 2032)

⁵ *“As for the abolition of the slave trade among the Nuba”, Comboni recognized in his letter to Cardinal Simeoni, “His excellency, Rauf Pascia, General Governor of the Sudan, has adopted, my advice to the letter; and within a year or less the total abolition of slavery in Nuba will be a fait accompli.”* (W. 6973)

lization, the Apostolic Vicariate of central Africa intended to block the spread of Islam in the remaining regions of the very vast territory of the diocese it had been entrusted. The Vicariate made no secret of its intentions, and, as we all know today, at that time the possibility of a dialogue between Christianity and Islam was still very unlikely to be taken into consideration.

For all these reasons, that is, for the fact that the European missionaries were active Christian sustainers of the abolition of the slave trade and protectors of the slaves who took refuge with them in their search for freedom, it was obvious that, in the case of a war being declared, the Catholic mission would be particularly targeted by the rebel followers of the Mahdi. On the other hand, since the Egyptian government maintained more than twenty battalions of regular troops in the Sudan, even if, as would be seen, they were not always trustworthy, the possibility of a revolt that would have been able to destabilize the government was not even being considered. ⁶ In fact, it would be surprise element, in addition to betrayal, that would play the more significant role in the final victory of the Mahdist forces.

There is still one more element in this story which merits our attention; that is, **martyrdom**. This is a possibility which all missionaries, men and women, are generally prepared for. It was precisely here, one can say, that the members of the Combonian mission, trapped in Kordofan during the revolution, were taken by surprise. The Mahdi, for what we understand, did not want them dead. He wanted them alive, and submitted to him. There is a particular aspect which must be underlined. When one must die for the faith, gender can seem indifferent.

⁶ *"In 1880, the discontent of the Sudanese regarding the Egyptian government was, even if universal, incoherent and without strength. The people had become used to the situation because they had never seen anything better. They were divided, as they had always been, in faithfulness to their tribes. In any case, they had nothing with which they could fight back, except swords and lances and they believed that nothing would have helped them against organized troops. Before rising up in a revolution, they needed someone who could guide them and a cause which would unite them. All of this would be provided by Muhammad Ahmad, the Mahdi."* (Theobald, A. B. – *The Mahdia: A History of the Anglo Egyptian Sudan, 1881-1899*, p. 26. In: Ballin, C., p. 214-215).

But it is not. This was the experience of our sisters when they found themselves women and slaves in a Muslim prison camp.

Therefore, the experience lived by Teresa, Concetta, Fortunata, Amalia, Maria, Eulalia, Elisabetta and Caterina was, at that time, extremely difficult to understand by those who had not lived it, or were not at least familiar with analogous situations. Even today, such an understanding does not come easily, even when the treatment reserved for women in many Muslim environments would have much to say.⁷ It is still possible however, to approach this experience in an attitude of listening. Indeed, we owe it to them, because now we know that they have much to say to us.

For this reason, in telling this story, we will allow, in as much as it is possible, the protagonists who lived these events personally, to speak for themselves.

Unfortunately, not much has remained in terms of written material, but there is at least something, as we have seen when we tried to reconstruct the personal story of each sister in previous issues. Their voices intertwine with each other and it will be important for us to return and listen to them with renewed attention.

Victims as they were of a 'horrible event', one would say today, that is, a story of human relationships which went from bad to worse, our first sisters, educated by our father to keep their gaze constantly fixed on Jesus Christ, will tell us an incredible story of solidarity, fraternal love and exquisite Christian charity. They will draw for us once more the image of the face of the true God; maternal, merciful, faithful.

*

* *

Some Guidelines regarding the Text: In order to keep the number of footnotes to a minimum, wherever possible we shall mention only the page number, on the original publication, of a text taken into consideration.

⁷ To be "a woman, white and Christian", and also unmarried, was the great challenge which was faced in recent times by **Annalisa Tonelli** during her stay as a volunteer among the Muslims of Somalia. (See, D'Attilia – Zanini, *Io Sono Nessuno...* pp. 55-56).

Where necessary, only spelling mistakes will be corrected to facilitate the understanding of the text.

In order to facilitate reading, letters which are too long will be transcribed and also broken down into smaller units.

In addition, taking into consideration the inevitable subjectivity of elements recorded by the protagonists after their liberation or after the end of the event of the Mahdia, especially with regards to the *Memoirs*, we will also report, where possible, letters or direct witnesses written and made available during the course of or closer to the events.

1.

The Proclamation of the Mahdia

Between the end of June and the beginning of July 1881, while the bishop of Khartoum was undertaking his last pastoral visit in the Vicariate, the already affirmed 'sayh', Muhammad who had opened a mosque and school which had already become popular on the island of Aba on the White Nile, communicated in writing to his followers, friends and supporters that the Prophet had appeared to him in a dream and had confirmed him to be the new Mahdi⁸ announced and awaited by his fellow Muslims.

"I had a prophetic revelation," he declared "and Al Faqih 'Isa was also present. The prophet- peace be upon Him- came and sat beside me and said to 'Isa: This 'sayh' of yours is the Mahdi[...]. Whoever does not believe in his Mahdia will renounce God and his messenger. He said this three times."...⁹

From this moment onwards, notes C. Ballin, Muhammad Ahmad no longer limited himself to being a simple itinerant preacher who had at heart the religious formation of faithful Muslims. Now he became conscious of being the Mahdi, and he intends to be so in the Sunnite way, that is, as a religious reformer.

In addition, the fact that he wished to found his own community helps us to understand that he does not think of limiting himself to preaching but that he is determined to apply the teachings of the prophet, and also his own practice, to the situation of the people. In other words, the new Mahdi proclaimed himself ready to assume also a political role in his country and to sustain, if necessary, a 'holy war' which would liberate the Sudan from foreign and corrupt domination of infidels.

⁸ The term was neither new nor unknown, given that it had begun to circulate in the seventh century, during the second Islamic civil war.

⁹ See, Ballin, C.- p. 263

The first Disputes

The letter containing the proclamation of the Mahdia arrived quickly also in the hands of Rauf* Pascia. Despite the fact that he was also Muslim, the then General Governor of the Sudan did not seem to appreciate this novelty and therefore, he reacted, according to Major Gozzi, by sending "*on the third of August the Kadi of the district of Kaua together with some ulema' (Muslim theologians) and ten soldiers to the island of Abba, where they intimidated the Mahdi to stop his underhand plotting and to submit himself to the laws of the governing authorities of the country*". The response of Muhammad Ahmad was, however, "*negative and arrogant*" (p. 182).

In other words, he would not recognize any authority as superior to his as the Mahdi.

A second attempt, equally useless, determined the decision of the Governor General to adopt at that point more intense measures. "*On the 11th of August*", Major Gozzi continues, "*two companies of soldiers took off on a steamboat of the government for the Island of Aba with the order to invite the Mahdi to submit and, in the event of his refusal, to take him prisoner by force and to conduct him to Khartoum.*"

The soldiers had not even disembarked when the Kadi of Kaua, with the excuse of attempting a different approach, found a way to warn the Mahdi of the danger he was in. It is difficult to know today exactly how things went. The fact remains that the men loyal to the Mahdi took advantage of the chaos of a disembarkment rendered difficult by the mud in order to attack the soldiers and massacre them. "*Of the 200 men who composed the two companies of soldiers*," concludes the Major, "*two thirds, including all the officials, died [...]. The followers of the Mahdi gained in this way 200 Remington guns, the first arms of the holy army*" (p. 183).

Evidently, the news of such an easy victory spread rapidly. Encouraged by this news, the population of Kaua, a transit area for cargo destined for Kordofan, rose up to massacre the

Map of the mahdist Sudan



Bayron Farwell, Prisoners of the Mahdi,
(London: Longmans, 1967), p. 2.

100 soldiers of the garrison, including in the new massacre several non Muslim merchants.¹⁰

The Bishop's Reading of these Facts

While this was happening on the banks of the Nile, south of Khartoum, Daniel Comboni was concluding his pastoral visit and returning home. The Bishop was ill and that last, disastrous visit of his certainly did nothing to lift his morale. Perhaps this explains, at least in part, the tone of the letter which he sent to Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti on the 13th of August 1881.

"At this point", he added after he had signed, "the Austrian Consul tells me that the Sudan has been swept up into a full blown rebellion, because of a self-styled prophet who says he has been sent by God to free the Sudan from the Turks and from Christian influence. For years he has been collecting taxes for himself, and on his side he has a great many of those who can no longer enrich themselves because they are unable to deal in slaves (and they are nine tenths of the indigenous), as well as those who pay the taxes. I saw this prophet in 1875 with other missionaries, the Mother Provincial and Virginia, when we went by steamer beyond Tura al Khadra in the land of Cavala [...].

The day before yesterday, Rauf Pascha sent a steamer with 200 soldiers and one cannon to capture them, and (the Consul says), they were all killed. Now Rauf Pasha himself wants to set out with good vigourous troops. We shall see. At the house, nothing is known as yet, but by the evening it will be common knowledge. I alone was informed. Rejoice! We will go to heaven all the sooner! Long live Jesus!" (W. 6942).

¹⁰ This is the version of facts, from the military point of view, according to Major Gozzi, supported also by Licurgo Santoni in his *Alto Egitto e Nubia...*, p. 113. C Ballin, instead, on the basis of other sources presents a different view. The substance of the facts, however, remains unchanged. (cf pp. 226- 227).

Meaningful Strategy of the Mudir of el Obeid

The new expedition planned by Rauf Pascia, mentioned by Daniel Comboni in the letter above, was put into effect, at the end of this same month of August 1881. It consisted in an expedition of no less than 1,000 regular infantry, 750 *basci-bo-zuks*¹¹ and 200 Arab volunteers on horseback.

In contrast to what the Bishop had said, Rauf Pascia did not leave with the armed column. Command of the operation, in fact, was entrusted to Mohammad Said, Governor of Kordofan and resident of El- Obeid.

Gathered at Kaua on the 30th of August, the troops moved the next day to reach the Mahdi, who, with about 400 followers was going towards the Taggale Mountains to position themselves. At this point, if things really went like this, something strange happened: *“For eleven days,”* noted Major Gozzi, *“the column of government troops always found themselves at a day’s distance from the rebels, without making any attempt to reach them, almost escorting them until they reached safety. When the rebels had gained Jebel (Mount) Umm Talha, the Pascia returned with his troops to El Obeid. He reached there on September 25th, sending the others to their respective residences.”* (p. 184).

“I was not sure that it was the Mahdi,” Mahuammad said justifying himself afterwards, but not all believed him. The rumour that began to circulate was, in fact, that he allowed himself to be corrupted by the gold of the rich slave traders who wished victory for the Mahdi.

C. Ballin’s version is again different, but carries the same epilogue. At the same time, he adds some important information. After the 25th of September, *“the followers of the Mahdi went deeper into Kordofan and, after having defeated the chief of Gabal al-Garadah [...], they arrived at Gabal Qadir on October 31st, and were welcomed with great feasting by the King of the zone, Nasir”*... (p. 229).

¹¹ *“These are mercenaries [...], composed of adventurers from all the oriental countries, undisciplined, greedy people present in those regions”.* (Gozzi, D., p. 168)

The Situation of the Catholic Mission

“Monsignor died. The death of Monsignor was like a bolt of lightning for the mission. It presented itself before us and we saw everything dark...”

(Elisabetta Venturini)

The strategic deployment of the Mahdi and of his body of volunteers in the direction of Kordofan was taking place at a very difficult moment for the Catholic Church in the Sudan because of the sudden and unexpected death of its bishop. Those responsible for the mission were most concerned about the problem of succession.

Now, despite the fact that Daniel Comboni had given his opinion, perhaps more than once¹² about who could be counted upon, at least initially, for the direction of the Vicariate in the event of his death, the person given the task of leadership, while awaiting a successor, was, in fact, Fr. Giovanni Losi*.

Fr. Losi had been transferred to El-Obeid only some weeks earlier in order to substitute the superior, Fr. G. Battista Fracaro who had left with the bishop. Fr. Losi felt that he could exercise his new and temporary role from Kordofan itself. This decision was very imprudent because, as we shall see, El Obeid would be revealed to be the least suitable and most dangerous place from which to face the ‘holy war’ already decided upon by the Mahdi.

¹² *“Even today, if I could appoint a Vicar General in my absence,”* he wrote for example on 12th of February 1881 to Fr. Sembianti, *“the only and most able one one would be Fr. Bonomi.”* (W. 6460)

The Framework of the Vicariate as the Bishop had Redesigned it

After the pastoral visit of Daniel Comboni, which began on the 6th of April 1881 and concluded at the end of the following July, the ecclesial communities already established, apart from that of Khartoum, were three, with another one projected: **Delen** in the Nuba Mountains, and two in Kordofan, that is, **El-Obeid** and **Malbes**.

In El-Obeid, capital of the Kordofan about 160 kilometres from Delen, the bishop had already changed the members of the original community, establishing a resident Parish priest, Fr. Antonio Dobale*, in the colony of Malbes. Alongside him to assist were two sisters: Sr. Concetta Corsi e Maria Rosa Colpo.

It seemed that an important stage of the **Plan** had been realized. This had been possible due to the new members who had arrived in the Sudan with the last caravan guided by Daniel Comboni himself. Instead, once again, sister death did not permit this to last long. Towards the end of September, in fact, in the space of a few days, Fr. Antonio and Sr. Maria Rosa died.¹³ Concetta Corsi could not remain at Malbes alone and so returned to El-Obeid *‘for some time’*. Unfortunately, the events which followed immediately afterwards, did not allow for the re-opening of Malbes.

Therefore, there were two mission stations which, in the autumn of 1881, with the advance of the forces of the Mahdi, found themselves in the danger zone.

Before the year had terminated, there had been some transfers of personnel, as Fr. Paolo Rossignoli would recall later, even if inaccurately in his *‘Dodici Anni di Prigionia in Mezzo ai Dervisci del Sudan’* (1898).

“In July of that year, 1881”, we read in fact, “Fr. Giovanni Losi was recalled from Jebel Nuba, to be the superior of the mission in el Obeid [...]. I was recalled in December of the same year. There were five sisters working with us, Teresa Gregorini [read Grigolini] general superior [in reality she was the provincial], Concetta Corsi, Elisabetta Venturini, Caterina Chincer-

¹³ See, AMN, 10(2005)39–61.

inin [Chincarini], *Maria* (*I don't remember the surname*) *in addition to an indigenous sister educated in Rome* [that is, in Verona] *and who was called Sr. Fortunata.*" (p. 25).

Apart from some mistakes in the diaries and memoirs of the protagonists there are also some omissions. What Fr. Paolo did not remember was that his place in Delen was occupied by Fr. Josef Ohrwalder.

Therefore, the composition of the communities was as follows:

At El Obeid:	Fr. Giovanni Losi	Teresa Grigolini
	Fr. Paolo Rossignoli	Concetta Corsi
	Isidoro Locatelli	Caterina Chincarini
		Elisabetta Venturini
		Fortunata Quasce
At Delen:	Fr. Luigi Bonomi	Amalia Andreis
	Fr. Josef Ohrwalder	Eulalia Pesavento
	Gabriele Mariani	Maria Caprini
	Giuseppe Regnotto	

*"We are few, it is true, for an extension of the Vicariate," Sr. Amalia Andreis commented while writing to her father on the 3rd of December 1881, "but we should not get discouraged or get lost in useless thoughts. Instead, we should work as much as we can for the greater glory of God. The Lord is the Master of the vineyard and He will recompense his workers according to their efforts and their labour, not according to the product, because little or much that it may be, it is all His grace."*¹⁴

¹⁴ See, AMN 4(2002)85.

2.

Talk of War

“I cannot begin to tell you how upset I am about the sad gossip that has spread about me. At some time or another, you will come to hear about it, but don’t allow it to sadden you. Death is a sacrifice which we have to make to God; as our Saviour suffered death, and death on a Cross for the glory of the Divine Father and for the salvation of our souls, so we too have to be resigned to that great step and make with love that sacrifice”.....

(Amalia Andreis, to her father)

Very probably, the newspapers had published also in Europe the news of another massacre at the hands of the Mahdist forces on the 9th of December 1881 in the area of Fashoda in South Sudan. Worried, the parents of Amalia Andreis enquired with those responsible for the mission, or with Amalia herself, about how the real situation was. Her answer however, as we can see from the lines quoted above¹⁵, could not have been very reassuring for who, far away, was anxiously waiting and fearing the worst.

In any case, in the Vicariate, the personnel of the mission was not seriously worried about what could or might happen.

“Even when Monsignor was in El Obeid, we used to speak about the Mahdi,” Elisabetta Venturini recalls, in her *‘Dieci Anni di Prigionia’*¹⁶, *“and we could see that he was a little troubled, but we could not believe that the Mahdi would be capable of doing much.”* Fr. Ohrwalder strengthens this view; *‘At Delen, we used to receive little news, and this rather confused, about the Dervishes.’* (p. 43).

¹⁵ See, AMN 4(2002) 94.

¹⁶ See, ACR A/32/19/1. Sr. Elisabetta Venturini *I Miei dieci Anni di Prigionia sotto Le Tende del Mahdi*. See, AMN 19(2011).

It is a fact that, especially at Delen, the common interest of the missionaries was still focused on the new foundation which Daniel Comboni had planned for them on the Nuba Mountains.

¹⁷ Amalia Andreis, in her letter of January 13th 1882, already quoted, goes on to say: *“Now there are only two fathers on each station. If someone else were to come, perhaps we could open a station on the Golfan Mountains which are about a day’s distance from here and which can be seen.”*

Teresa Grigolini also writes to her brother on the following 2nd of February telling him that they were making *“great preparations for an expedition”*, that is to the Golfan Mountains because, *“according to the projects and plans made, there we have to found the strongest Station in Africa. Therefore, a good part of the personnel will be transferred to that house which was explored by our Monsignor whom we miss too much.”*¹⁸

The Last visit of the Provincial Superior to Delen

Sr. Teresa Grigolini was finally able to leave El Obeid on the 12th of February 1882, accompanied by Fr. Luigi Bonomi, superior of the mission of Delen, to undertake the visit to the sisters’ community which Daniel Comboni himself had planned for her the previous autumn.¹⁹ Even if, we can imagine, the original purpose, of the visit had now changed, Teresa in fact would have needed to go to Jebel Nuba to visit the new foundation. The Provincial Superior did not want to renounce this. So, Fr. Luigi Bonomi had persuaded her to wait for a better opportunity to arise because he did not feel that it was prudent for her to face the journey alone.

“Today our Father Superior, Fr. Luigi Bonomi is leaving for El-Obeid”, Amalia Andreis had written to her father on the 10th of January 1882, *“to take provisions. I hope that it won’t be*

¹⁷ See, W. 6971-73: Comboni to Simeoni. Khartoum, 29th August 1881.

¹⁸ AMN, 12(2006)118. The project of a new foundation, however, in which the deceased Bishop Comboni had also gained the support of Rauf Pascia (see, W. 7213) had been suspended by the Holy See until further notice (see, APF LD, vol. 378(1882)63: Simeoni to Sembianti, 3rd February, 1882.

¹⁹ See, W.7117: Comboni to Simeoni, Khartoum, 24th September, 1881.

long until he can bring the reverend Mother Teresa Grigolini. I don't know if she will stay or if she will come only for a few days for a visit"...

*"On the 17th", Amalia confirms the following month, "our Father Superior returned from El-Obeid and he brought here the Reverend Mother Teresa Grigolini: therefore, we are very happy. She is well and she sends you her greetings. She will stay here for some days. I can't describe to you how happy and content we are"*²⁰.

War Approaches

While Teresa was still in Delen, Luigi Bonomi was preparing a letter, dated March 17th 1982, it is an interesting letter for the rector in Verona. It is an interesting letter, because it helps us to understand what could have been, if the plan had been realized and what, instead, unfortunately happened. In the letter we read:

"Here, we can thank the Lord for health and everything else. In view of founding a new station, we had gather here, since the visit of the deceased Monsignor Comboni, a great number of Africans from the other Stations [...].

We went back to visit a number of the mountains already previously visited and also some others, and to our surprise, we found a place, about five hours from here, which even though now uninhabited, would be the best place for a new Station.

As soon as we would like to go, the Nubans from all the surrounding mountains, who are waiting for the right moment to retake that mountain which was already theirs in the past, would arrive. Even the European Inspector on the slave trade [Roversi] who lives in Delen, would have his room there with [...] government soldiers [...].*

In these days, a great expedition of Giallabi from Kordofan together with the Baggara, more or less 100 rifles and 200 cavalry invaded destroyed and burned other mountains in Nuba, about a day's distance from here. They destroyed more than 600 houses, carried away the grain and captured about 80 Africans to sell as slaves.

²⁰ AMN 4(2002)93; 102.

However, the above mentioned inspector took them by surprise with about 80 soldiers marched on them, caught them by surprise and defeated them.”²¹

A ‘General Movement’ which ‘does not Augur Well’

For the moment, that last raid carried out by the Giallaba on the Nuba Mountains, had been interrupted and rendered useless by the quick intervention of Roversi, the inspector of the slave trade who had a room in Delen who had confronted the Slavers and forced them to return the booty and free the prisoners. Justifiably worried, Fr. Luigi Bonomi had convinced Sr. Teresa Grigolini to wait for an opportune moment to face the journey back to El Obeid.

“In this journey”, she wrote to Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti on April 16th 1882, “I was accompanied by two of our boys and two soldiers from the cavalry. Fr. Luigi felt it was not prudent for me to travel only with the boys and that I should wait until there was the chance of these two soldiers travelling because of the revolt which, more or less, reigns in the Sudan. Precisely on the road that we had travelled, two days previously, thirty soldiers going towards Jebel Nuba were intercepted and had to return to Obeid. We passed freely though without meeting anyone.

But to tell you the truth, this general movement does not seem to augur well. At a short distance from here in the desert, several safe boxes of government money were stolen. This money had been collected as tax and it was being transported to the ‘muderia’ of Obeid. The soldiers who were guarding it say they were unable to fight off the attackers. In addition, at Gebel Dair, about three or four day’s journey from here, there is a Dervish chief loyal to the revolution who has gathered a great number of Arabs who do not want to pay taxes to the government, and a good number of Baggara (a nomadic tribe). It is said that he is awaiting the right moment to attack the city of El Obeid and to steal from the government treasury. We agree that for the most part, these are rumours [...], but there is also some truth”.²²

²¹ ACR, A/26/12/13: Bonomi to Sembianti. Delen, 17th March 1882.

²² AMN, 12(2006)128.

Last Pause of Serenity

On the 9th of April 1882, Easter Sunday, Fortunata Quaschè made her religious profession in the beautiful church in El Obeid. It was a day of great feast for a goal reached; of nostalgia for the fact that Daniel Comboni was no longer and, especially, a day overshadowed by worries for the near future which appeared threatening.

“In the days preceding the solemnity”, Fr. Giovanni Losi, the Superior, had written later, “we could hear continuous drum beating in the city as the armed forces of the Giallaba gathered and departed to make war on an already famous Dervish who boasts of being sent by God to bring back rigour to the religion of Muhammad and destroy all the sects who are contrary, especially Christianity. He has already managed to gather followers and also to put to flight more than once the government troops. Now from Khartoum, Kordofan and Darfur, there is a general effort to capture him and finish it; something which will not be very easy for the soldiers of the Sudan”...²³.

Truly, not only had the confrontation which had taken place on the 30th of May 1882 close to Lake Birket, about 65 kilometres from El Obeid, not been easy, but it had also resulted in a great massacre of the government troops. It was such a significant victory for the Mahdi that it was considered the official beginning of his ‘religious’ government. In fact, *“he began to apply his moral law; punishment by lashes, for women who uncovered their heads, for those who insult another believer, or who speak with a woman without being related to her, or who smoke or use tobacco or drink wine or neglect prayer, etc.”²⁴*

In particular, a centre was founded, called ‘*Bayt al Mal*’ [Treasury] for the administration of the spoils of war. It represented a common fund to be distributed according to the needs.

²³ ANNALI, 29(1882)19-20.

²⁴ Ballin, C., p. 231. The comments of Josef Ohrwalder on all these laws established by the Mahdi, who, while he was occupied with war, *“did not forget religious things wishing first and foremost to be a religious reformer”* are also interesting. (p. 51).

“Later things became more serious”...

“When we went out of the house for business, or to walk with the children, they began insulting us and throwing stones, etc.”...

(Elisabetta Venturini)

“In the meantime, months passed,” continued Sr. Elisabetta in her Diary, “and things became increasingly worse. Fr. Losi was a tranquil saint, saying that the Arabs were incapable of anything [...]. We sisters were a little afraid because they used to throw stones at the wall of our house in such a way that we had to retreat to our rooms. One day we went out to ask news from people who knew us. On the road, the soldiers mistreated us. We came home rather frightened”... (pp. 15-17).

If this was how things were in El-Obeid, how were they then in Delen?

Without letters from the sisters, Teresa Grigolini was tormented by anxiety. After the news brought, towards the end of May by the messenger who had finally been able to return from Nuba because he dressed as a ‘Muslim priest’²⁵, they had heard nothing else. *“This,”* Teresa confided to Fr. Sembianti on the 28th of June 1882, *“causes us great sorrow.”* And she added:

“There is no need for me to inform you about the state in which we find ourselves, because I know that the Reverend Father Superior from here keeps you informed about everything. I can only tell you that we are experiencing great affliction. I think you will have understood from Father the plan to take us all to Khartoum as soon as possible. You cannot believe, Reverend Father, how sorrowful this departure is for me. But, on the other hand, we can no longer stay here. Every day things get worse. The city can offer us no security [...]. Thank goodness we are in good health. We are making prep-

²⁵ ANNALI 30(1882)9. The idea of the disguise was devised by the authorities of El Obeid after four or five messengers, sent to Nuba, never came back.

arations for the journey which I foresee will be disastrous because of the rain”...²⁶.

The Uncertainties of Giovanni Losi

“We are in full retreat [...]”, Giovanni Losi had written two days earlier, “The city is held by the rebels who are besieging it [...]. Already last week, I wrote to the Austrian Consul so that he may intercede from the government an escort so as to be able to withdraw all the personnel from El Obeid and Nuba to Khartoum. The Mudir told me to wait for a while”...²⁷

“We are in an unspeakable bustle:”, he informs ten days later, “We have prepared all the luggage for re-entry to Khartoum and have agreed about camels, but the government [...] is not willing to give us soldiers to accompany us [...]: Truly, here, without communication from town to town, the contradictory nature of the news is an agony. One cannot be sure of anything. The Sisters are the most courageous. They are provoking me to leave, even to the disgrace of the government”...²⁸

The ‘Government’ to which Fr. Losi was referring was that of Muhammad Said, recently nominated Governor General of Kordofan. It was an unhappy nomination, according to Major Gozzi, because it had provoked the reaction foreseeable due to what had happened previously, of “Elias Pascia”²⁹ who was both extremely rich and influential [...]. It was a great error which irritated terribly Elias Pascia and all the chiefs loyal to him, who, for revenge, wrote secretly to the Mahdi inviting him to march on El Obeid, promising him that they would pass over to his side with armed weapons from the government, of which they had the command”. (cf p.196)

²⁶ AMN 12(2006)133.

²⁷ ACR, A/27/17/17: Losi to Sembianti. El Obeid, 26th June 1882.

²⁸ ACR, A/27/17/18: Losi to Sembianti. El Obeid, 6th July 1882.

²⁹ “Here there are millionaires,” Comboni wrote on May 17th 1881, “who enriched themselves by stealing slaves from their homes. One of these [...] who, for his merits as a slave trader was actually made Pasha seven years ago, because he helped the government in its conquest of Darfur, is called Elias Pascia. He has a thousand slaves in his employ”... (W. 6729).

We don't know how much the personnel of the mission knew about this, or whether Teresa Grigolini had only intuited something, when she insisted on leaving the city at all costs while there was still time. Both Josef Ohrwalder and Paolo Rosignoli refer to this in their Memoirs, but they mention neither when nor how they came to know about it.

On his part, the Mahdi was waiting only to prepare his attack on El-Obeid. He was sure now that the capital of Kordofan would be his. Therefore, he called together his faithful and distributed among them the money which had been taken from the Treasury and then told all of them to gather at Kaba at the beginning of the month of September.

An Attempt at defence and Resistance

“Once the plan of the Mahdi came to be known in El-Obeid, the Mudir [Governor] took the best opportunity for opposition and, considering that it would be impossible for him to defend the extensive perimeter of the city with the forces he had, decided to construct on the South East area, a fortified camp. The polygonal wall of this camp followed the streets linking with the parapets of the houses of the perimeter and placing the walls in a state of defence”...³⁰

This was the fortress to which Teresa Grigolini made reference in her memoirs and from which the building of the Catholic mission remained outside. In fact, on page 5 one reads:

“I went to the Superior and told him: Father, don't you see how far things have gone? We alone are outside of the fortress. What shall we do here? He told me there was nothing to worry about, but if we were afraid, then we should go too”.

³⁰ Gozzi, D., p. 197.

It was an answer which was a bit careless and hasty, one would say, but probably Fr. Losi was still hoping for the arrival of the personnel from Delen. According to the last news they had received, in fact, they were just awaiting the possibility to undertake the journey to El-Obeid, from where they would have left all together for Khartoum.

Unfortunately, it was a useless expectation because “*the Reverend Superior, Fr. Losi*”, wrote Luigi Bonomi later, “*intended to send us the order to leave the place with the Government’s order for the withdrawal of the above mentioned soldiers.*”

This order never arrived, neither for us nor for them. The messengers were killed on the way. We received only the counter order of Fr. Losi himself who believed that every danger was now over.”³¹

At that point, Fr. Luigi Bonomi knew that in case of emergency, he would have to act “*as circumstances dictated*”, as Fr. Losi himself had arranged.³² And, if it were not advisable to pass through El-Obeid, the only way left for them to leave would be to escape towards Fashoda...

³¹ *La Nigrizia* 3(1883)77: Bonomi to Canossa. From the Camp, January 1st 1883.

³² “*I have received a letter from Fr. Losi,*” Fr. Sembianti confirmed in a letter to Fr. Giulianelli, “*in which he tells me about the revolutions in the Kordofan and to have given orders to Fr. Luigi to withdraw with all the personnel to El Obeid, an order, which after three days, he suspended thinking danger had ceased. Instead, he told Fr. Luigi to act according to circumstances and to whatever news they would hear*”... (ACR, A/28/25/30: Verona, June 10th 1882).

3.

Events at Delen

*“Here begins what we call our **Way of the Cross**. Only the grace of He who preceded us on the same way, like a meek Lamb, could inspire in us a little patience”...*

(Luigi Bonomi).

What really happened at Delen that autumn of 1882 was written for the first time by Luigi Bonomi and Josef Ohrwalder, on two consecutive days, for Giovanni Dichtl who was in Khartoum.

Some days later, on January 1st 1883, both of them also began to write a long and exhaustive report, no doubt the best, for Luigi di Canossa. It was signed by Luigi Bonomi in his capacity as Superior. Since this latter is already well known, due to the fact that it was published almost in its entirety by *Nigrizia* in May 1883, we report here, in order to recall the facts, the summary of Fr. Ohrwalder to Fr. Giovanni, his lifelong friend. He wrote:

*“Feast of St. Stephen December 26th 1882
From the camp of the Dervishes of El-Obeid*

Dear Giovanni

I don't know when I last wrote to you. I think it is a long time since you heard from me. I make no excuse, for the circumstances did not permit me [...]; In the meantime, what shall I write? First and foremost, I am well, something which is not easy in this situation. In reality, they wanted to behead us.

2nd I, and all the others with me, was in such a state for three months that there was little hope for us. Now, I will tell you in brief everything that happened to us. To tell you about all our suffering will not come easily.

From the month of May there was no peace in Nuba. Every day there were quarrels and fights and day and night we had to be on our guard. At the beginning, we were threatened by an external enemy, but ultimately also by a part of Delen, and this was the cause of our imprisonment. The rebels in Delen had

killed two soldiers and feared revenge. So, they went to call the soldiers of the Dervishes who appeared the same night. I will not write more in detail about the conduct of the Captain and the soldiers, especially at the moment when they were all in agreement to flee from Delen towards Fashoda.

Everything was ready. We took our children and the few things we could carry with us and gathered at the Barracks from where we were to leave all together. But as soon as we arrived there, no one wanted to hear talk of leaving because during the night, the scribe of the Mufattesc, a certain Halil Effen-di, had passed to the enemy side, and in agreement with the captain, had betrayed us: What could we do! We returned to our quarters where we found a desolate situation because during our brief absence, the Nubans had stolen everything that could be useful for them and destroyed the rest. Then the captain with 80 soldiers and the Muffatesc, the so called protestant captain from Bologna, handed over the arms in front of 20 or 30 people, at least 10 of whom were just boys, armed with spears. Shame!

As evening fell, they went with Fr. Luigi to Mak Dinar, the messenger of the Dervishes, to see what would become of us. They received the following response: become Muslims and everything will be all right. Otherwise, hand over everything. We agreed that we would hand over everything and then we would be free to return to our own countries and this was granted.

The same evening, we handed over the arms and the next day, the enemy entered our zeriba (shelter) and took away everything that the Nubans had left. Our children were taken away, the altars of the church were destroyed and we were left only with what we were wearing and a change of clothes.

On the 17th of September, we were led away from Delen and we had little to hope from these 30 robbers. At Singiokai, the second Station, they took away everything we had, except for what we were wearing. They were always looking for money, but they never found any. A rumour had spread that we had twenty safe boxes of thalers. They searched everywhere, in great fury, but in vain. We had nothing but 100 thalers and these were well hidden. Let me spare you the details of all the threats and promises made throughout the journey in order to make us apostatize: the lord will be good enough to judge us in merit.

On the 27th of September, we arrived in the camp of the dervishes and we had already been visited twice and robbed of eve-

rything we had. They even tore the veils from the Sisters' heads. They wanted to take even their dresses, but our prayers prevented this. They took away my jacket, so I had to present myself to the Dervish in shirt and trousers. We arrived at the house of the Mahdi exhausted and we were led to him immediately.

The Mahdi – Said – Dervish, as they call him, is a man of more or less my height, reddish brown and who wears a white turban and a colourfully decorated Arab style tunic [...], This is the sign which all the followers of the Mahdi wear. We, for example, can only wear a white giallabia, because we don't recognize him as the Mahdi. The Mahdi, according to his doctrine, is the prophet who precedes Christ in order to make the whole world Islamic. Then, Christ himself will descend from heaven and will unite with the Mahdi to declare before all the people that he is a prophet, but not son of God. On his face, there is always a sweet and radiant smile, and for the rest, he is not very bad.³³

First of all, he asked us if we would like to embrace the religion of Muhammad, which is the best of all. He read us a certain book, etc., but our answer was no. At that point he withdrew with his Counsellor to decide upon our fate. Then he returned, and once again, he tempted us to embrace Islam. Later he took us to the Caliph [Abdullahi*] where all delinquents are imprisoned. We were constantly guarded, in part to save us from fanatics and in part so that we could not escape. Towards evening, Giorgi Stambulie*³⁴ appeared and told us that if we did not renounce our faith, the next morning we would be beheaded. But our response remained the same: No, we would accept whatever death rather than renounce our religion.

That night we confessed and we prepared for the great grace. Soon, we fell asleep exhausted. I slept so well until the break

³³ The Mahdi, who was always polite and controlled whenever he met personally with the missionaries, allowed his subordinates, however, to use other methods much less respectful and civil, especially towards the Sisters, in order to convince the prisoners to surrender.

³⁴ The Mahdi, who knew about the old friendship which had existed in the past between Giorgi Stambulieh and the Catholic mission, seems to have decided, according to the letter quoted above, to use him as a mediator to induce the prisoners to convert. According to Luigi Bonomi, instead, it was the missionaries who asked he, ex procurator of the mission, to intervene on their behalf with the Mahdi (see, ACR, A/32/1/1: Bonomi to Dichtl. From the Camp, close to El Obeid, December 25th 1882).

of dawn. The light of dawn shone so brightly that it made me recall the star that appeared to the Magi. Happily, I put all my hope in the grace of God, and while our guards were still sleeping, we exchanged words of comfort and consolation and of trust in the Lord.

*Around seven o'clock, the Caliph of the Mahdi appeared and asked each of us individually if we wished to die or to embrace Islam. After asking the first, he withdrew, and we perceived ourselves to be close to the great moment. But nothing happened until midday, when we were led by 18 men armed with lances out to the camp where the Mahdi was conducting a parade of his soldiers. There were approximately 20,000 lancers. As we passed through their ranks, they threatened us shouting "**kill these dogs**". We thought we had reached the moment of our death.*

The Mahdi was mounted on a camel and behind him, there was a child shading him with a parasole. It was unbearably hot and therefore he was flanked by many slaves who were fanning him. When he looked at us, he addressed us and asked us if we were well. Then he said, "I will repatriate you". So we returned not happier than we had gone, because we still doubted our decapitation. That evening, the Mahdi allowed us to recover at the home of Mr. Giorgi St., where we still remain.

I will spare you the details of the life of privation and misery which we have led over the past two and a half months. We all suffer from fever and dysentery. We are without clothes, full of lice and sleep on the bare earth. Three of us have died: Sr. Eulalia on the 27th of October, Gabriele on the 31st of October and Sr. Amalia on the 7th of November.

We could still recover and now we are well. We have made several attempts to gain permission to leave. All have been in vain. Only God knows what still awaits us. I have no more paper, even though I would still like to write for you more interesting things. The level of fanaticism is extreme. There are approximately 100,000 people camped around El-Obeid and the city of El-Obeid is itself on its knees.

Farewell, dear Giovanni. I send you every good wish for your feast day. Pray for me. Send this letter to my relatives.

Yours, Giuseppe"³⁵

³⁵ ACR, A/32/6/1: Ohrwalder to Dichtl. El Obeid, December 26th 1882.

A 'Blessed' Death

For the readers of *Nigrizia*, the deaths of Sr. Eulalia Pesavento, Brother Gabriele Mariani and Sr. Amalia Andreis, were announced through the publication of the letter of Fr. Luigi Bonomi written on the 25th of December 1882 and from which at least the indispensable could be learned.³⁶ Following this, however, in the same issue, the magazine published almost in its entirety, the long report signed by Luigi Bonomi and addressed to Luigi di Canossa.

Now, in one of the points that had been censured, the following was written:

"More can be said: The news that we would hear about what they, especially the Caliph, were planning for us, was intended to instil great fear in us, and especially in the sisters. They were saying that they did not want to maintain us, but that they would separate us and isolate us from each other, giving us to one household or another as slaves. This especially grieved the sisters who knew well where they were going to end up.

*No one can imagine the terrible perplexity in which these chosen souls found themselves. The Lord, however, provided the remedy by making each of them so seriously ill that, in a short time they were almost spent."*³⁷

In such a context, faced with the threat of being separated and therefore divided among the harems of the Emirs, it is more than understandable that the three young missionaries would invoke death as their liberation. For, it was clear to everyone quite quickly that the Mahdi had no intention of letting the prisoners die for their faith.

In fact, rereading the witness given by the protagonists, it is not difficult to see that, right from the first confrontation with the personnel of the Catholic Church, the Mahdi and his counsellors give the impression of being in no hurry. If he had

³⁶ See, *La Nigrizia*, 3(1883)73- 76.

³⁷ Copy of the original in, APF Afr. C., vol. 9(1881-1885)604-616. See, G. Ohrwald, p. 82.

wanted them dead, he would have beheaded them after the second interrogation, during which it was evident that no one intended to abandon their own Creed to embrace that of Muhammad.

However, when he becomes aware that three of them had not resisted the mistreatment and the privations imposed upon them in order to weaken them and break their will, the Mahdi decided to use also the mediation of Giorgi Stambulieh in order to get his way. This mediation was not interpreted by all the prisoners in the same way. However, as we shall see later, it revealed itself to be decisive for their survival.

An Understandable Discretion

Since there were still six Comboni Sisters imprisoned by the rebels, one can understand why the editors of *Nigrizia* omitted those details which might cause more worry to their families who were already tried by the lack of direct news. On the other hand, as Francesco Sogaro, successor of Daniel Comboni since the 22nd of September 1882, himself explained to *Propaganda Fide*, it was only on the 2nd of April 1883 that he actually received ‘by an unknown hand’³⁸ that pack of correspondence which had arbitrarily been held by Giegler* Pascia.

For this reason, the letters which Luigi Bonimi had managed to send from the Camp of El Obeid at the end of January 1883, only reached Verona on the following May 12th. Since, however, the Apostolic Vicar had acted rapidly in sending the contents by telegraph to the Bishop of Verona, the families of the three missionaries who had died were immediately informed. On the

³⁸ AP SC Afr. C., vol 9(1881-1885)652: Sogaro to Simeoni. Cairo, April 4th 1883. “Giegler Pascia, the then interim Governor General of the country” [...], we read in the text of the doctoral thesis of M. Zaccaria, “even though he had been in possession of five letters from the missionaries, written between the 25th of December 1882 and the 29th of January 1883, for some time, preferred to keep their arrival secret. At the beginning of April, however, Giegler had left the Sudan for six months leave and one of his secretaries, having seen among the correspondence which had not yet been dispatched this important pack of letters, informed the Italian Vice Consul of their existence. The reaction of Legnani was swift and justifiably resentful”... (p. 28).

8th of April 1883, in fact, Fr. Sembianti addressed the following communication to the father of Amalia:

“It is with the deepest sorrow that I carry out my duty of giving you this news, which you may already have heard at Ronco, where the most reverend di Canossa, who received it before me by telegraph from Cairo, communicated it to me.

Mr. Luigi... your dearest daughter, the wonderful Sr. Amalia... has passed away to receive the crown merited by her with the generous sacrifice of her life which she had already made with all her heart for the conversion of Nigrizia, and by the example and sanctity of her life!... We do not yet know when, and in which circumstances, her death came about. It is only mentioned that she died, and together with her, so did Sr. Venturini Elisabetta from Raldon³⁹, as a result of illness, and not in circumstances related to the war. We have no way of knowing at the moment what these circumstances were, but as soon as we know I shall immediately inform you.

The death of this excellent sister is a great sorrow for the Reverend Superior, and also for me, even though I did not know Sr. Amalia personally but only through her letters, and so how much more sorrow for her father and the members of her family?

May the religious sentiments which we all have in our souls be of great comfort and help to you. The Reverend superior here, who knew well the heart and spirit of Sr. Amalia, envies the beautiful place which, without fault, her blessed soul went to occupy in heaven [...].

Whenever you come to Verona, please come to see me. Please convey my greetings and those of the Reverend Mother to all the family.”⁴⁰

³⁹ Since in fact it was Eulalia Pesavento who had died, and not Elisabetta Venturini, one hopes that the family of the latter did not receive notification of her death. We do not know however, because nothing has been found, when the parents of Sr. Eulalia received news of her death.

⁴⁰ APMR, VI/Pp/1/3- 332: Sembianti to Luigi Andreis. Verona, April 8th 1883.

A ‘Crown’ Truly Merited

*“Pope Leone XIII [...] had asked Sr. Amalia Andreis **if she was not afraid of death.** At her response that **she would be happy to die even immediately for the love of Christ and the Africans,** He still remembers the impression it made on him and he confirmed to me his admiration.”*

(Daniel Comboni, October 1880)

In whispers, to tell the truth, but with a certain insistence, the opinion began to spread in the Congregation, that the ‘*well merited crown*’ received by Amalia Andreis, as Fr. Sembianti had written to the family, was in reality the crown of martyrdom.

Not of blood, admitted Ermenegilda Morelli in her unpublished notes,⁴¹ but no doubt of will; a will manifested more than once orally (see W. 6139), but also in writing.⁴²

The reason then for this voice being in a certain manner, even if not fully,⁴³ suffocated can be found in the third letter of Luigi Bonomi which arrived at Verona on the 12th of May 1883.

It will be better to speak of this letter and of its content at a later stage as it is part of the story of the community of El-Obeid.

⁴¹ See, APMR, VI/Pp/2/4- 681: Notes on Amalia Andreis. Verona, November 18th 1942.

⁴² It is sufficient to reread for this the letter of Amalia herself, published in *AMN*, 4(2002).

⁴³ See, *Raggio*, 1(1938)5-8; 2(1938)7-8.

4.

The Surrender of El Obeid

“On the feast of Saint Augustine, August 28th, we took refuge within the enclosure of the government.”

(Elisabetta Venturini)

The date seems reliable. Over the whole month of August 1882, in fact, the Mahdi was gathering with his followers around El Obeid.

At the same time, the invitation of the authorities to take refuge in the fortress, which had been specially prepared, became more insistent. Teresa Grigolini, in the end, managed to convince Fr. Giovanni Losi to follow this advice, but, as she herself recalls in her *Memoirs* (see p. 5), it was already very late and all the available accommodation had been taken. The problem was resolved, however, thanks to the availability of Marietta Maragase*, for the sisters and of two or three Syrian Catholics for the male personnel.

The atmosphere which dominated the city was one of great tension.

At the beginning of September, Major Gozzi noted, not less than 100,000 Mahdists were ready at Kaba. From that location, where the Mahdi had arrived on the 4th, *“he sent orders to the inhabitants of El-Obeid to close their homes and join him and he assured them that when the city had been taken, all their possessions would be respected. Those inhabitants who had remained outside the fortress immediately obeyed this order, but after the city was taken, their belongings were confiscated and sold and the amount collected for them was put into the common treasury.”* (p. 198).

While the inhabitants outside the fortress surrendered without any difficulty, those inside the fortress had no intention of doing the same. The Mahdi then, given that the Governor did not accept to negotiate with his messengers, gave orders for the

city to be attacked at dawn on the 8th of September 1882. *“They advanced together with their lances prepared,”* remembers Teresa, *“but as soon as they reached within firing distance, the canon began to fire and so did the gunners”* ... (p. 7).

“It was on this occasion,” noted Major Gozzi, that *“The Mahdi, finally convinced of the uselessness of his lances against the effects of the long range of the Remingtons, changed his mind [...] about not using the arms of the Infidels, among which there were about 4,000 Remingtons, and he also transported from Gebel Gadir, two canons and all the rifles captured in previous victories.* (p. 199)

“We had already given ourselves up for lost, but the battle did not last but a couple of hours and then everything went silent”...⁴⁴

Around 9 or 10 that morning, in fact, seeing the massacre that the arms was provoking in their ranks, The Mahdists had received the order to retreat. It was such a disorderly retreat that, some days later, as Teresa also recorded in her memoirs, (see p. 7), those responsible for the defence of El Obeid regretted not having followed them and defeated them once and for all. They had lost a great opportunity which would not present itself again.

After four days in fact, advised by Elias Pascia who knew that the Egyptian soldiers in El Obeid were short of provisions, the Mahdi decided to change tactics. Instead of engaging in a new battle which he feared might be lost, he prepared to besiege the city, blocking the exit of its inhabitants, and forcing them, sooner or later, to surrender due to hunger. Both the soldiers and the civilians, including the personnel of the mission, had taken advantage of the ceasefire to return to their homes and take whatever they possibly could. But that ceasefire had been so brief, while the siege would become endless....

⁴⁴ In this letter of September 15th 1882 addressed to Calisto Legnani, Teresa Grigolini graphically describes the events of the 8th of September and their consequences (See, AMN, 12(2006)145-148.

The Horrors of a City Besieged

None of the other protagonists could describe better, at this point, how the capital of Kordofan was reduced during the siege which preceded the surrender. In her *Memoirs*, Teresa Grigolini writes:

“The Mahdi knew well that there was a shortage of food in the fortress so he decided to establish the siege [...]. The poor, who were very many, soon finished their provisions and who could help them? [...]. These, therefore were the first to die of hunger. So many people had gathered inside the fortress that the streets were full of mats and clothes and children dying of hunger, skeletons, who as soon as they extended their hand to ask for charity died on the spot in that position [...].

I forgot to say that the Arabs who had died on the day of the battle remained there unburied and they were close to us. You can imagine the stench that rose up after three or four days. At this point, there were more dead bodies every day. To tell the truth, there were many sufferings, but this we could bear no longer and there was no solution [...], The stench of the dead was an unbelievable martyrdom from which it was impossible to escape”... (pp. 8-10).

“Sometimes we went out dressed as Arabs to look for some poor creature to baptize”...

The account of Teresa continues: *“From the beginning, with so many people amassed there, it was not long before scurvy began to appear. What a horrible illness this is. Certain wine coloured spots appear on the body and all the joints begin to ache, the gums detach from the teeth and one’s sweat produces a terrible smell. Sometimes we went out dressed as Arabs to look for some poor creature to baptize, but there was so much rubbish and waste that we had to quickly return inside as we could not breathe. What pen could describe the miseries we saw on those streets”... (p. 11).*

Our Companions from Delen were Outside, at a Short Distance from Us

“In the meantime, we who were inside heard that our companions from Delen were outside, at a short distance from us, having come down from Delen with the camp of the Mahdi.” (Elisabetta Venturini)

“Until the date of my last letter mentioned above, December 19th 1882, we could have no communication or news from those inside”, Luigi Bonomi informed on December 25th of December, “except for vague rumours without any sure foundation, even if we are only one kilometre from the city and two kilometres from their house[...].

A few days ago, Giorgi could send a servant inside and once she came back out, she brought us their news as she had taken our news to them”.⁴⁵

According to Teresa Grigolini, the servant of Giorgi Stambulieh had felt it was not prudent for her to enter the fortress herself. She sent, however, Teresa writes in her memoirs, “a boy who had known us before”. This boy “came to tell us in secret that our companions from Gebel Nuba were in the camp of the Mahdi and they were very poor.” (p. 23)

“All of them suffered from dysentery, etc. and had no strength to stand on their feet [...]” added Elisabetta Venturini in her diary. “We can just imagine the pitiful state in which they arrived after so many tribulations. The Superior, Fr. Losi, wanted to help them, but he didn’t know how. Luckily there was with us a certain African, Marietta Combatti [...], being very courageous⁴⁶, she offered to bring us some money. The blacks were not watched like the whites, so she could do it very well [...]. During the night she jumped over the wall of the enclosure without being noticed; and the following day she returned to us happy about her success. For a while with the help of the little money they fared a little better. However, because of much tribulation, they were so battered that three of them died [...].*

⁴⁵ *La Nigrizia* 3(1883)74.

⁴⁶ *Combatti* was the nickname which Marietta Maragase was given because of her courage.

These three hadn't the honor of a bloody martyrdom, but I believe their merit is perhaps even greater." (p. 25 - 26)

"The feast of the Immaculate Conception was nearing"

continued Elisabetta, *"and we were all ready for the renewal of the holy vows. Fr. Losi, the superior, aware of the dangers in which we lived, thought it appropriate to suggest a day to day renewal or no longer than eight or fifteen days. We did as he suggested."*⁴⁷ *At that time Fr. Losi was sick with scurvy and was gradually getting worse; there wasn't any more hope of healing [...]. He knew very well that he had only a few days to live and was happy to die. However, the greatest pain for him was to leave us in such terrible conditions. He encouraged us and invited us to be strong and pray much [...]. The day he died, December 28th, early in the morning he called us all and asked to be dressed with the priestly robes as if he had to celebrate. Then Fr. Paolo Rosignoli* celebrated the Holy Mass in the same hovel [...]. After Mass he received the Anointing of the Sick while fully conscious. A little later he summoned us again, asked our forgiveness, blessed us and then said to Father, now it is time to recommend my soul and in full consciousness on the bare earth he gave up his spirit"...* (pp. 26 - 28).

"You can just imagine the state of our souls," Teresa Grigolini wrote, "The poor man could do nothing for us when he was alive, but for us, just his shadow was already a comfort. Now there was nothing. It was all over. We had no more tears left to shed as we thought of our utter abandonment in the circumstances in which we found ourselves"... (p. 15).

⁴⁷ This intuition of Fr. Losi was a little strange. Why deprive the sisters of their bond with the Congregation at such a difficult time? Did he perhaps see the remote possibility of 'saving' them with the celebration of matrimony? In the case of Teresa Grigolini, however, it was clear that the religious were released from their vows. *"Now coming to the topic of the matrimony contracted by the then superior and Brother Giuseppe Regnotto"*, Francesco Sogaro will explain later to *Propaganda Fide*, *"neither one nor the other were bound by vows. In the case of the first, the sister had made three yearly vows which had expired in 1882 when they became prisoners and no longer renewed them"* [AP SC Afr.C., vol. 10(1886-1892) 901, 16th Jan.1892)].

The Fall of El-Obeid

“In the end, the government had to surrender on the 21st of January 1883, the feast of St. Agnes. It could not resist any more. It was a memorable day for us”...

(Elisabetta Venturini)

The 21st of January, to be precise, was not the exact date of the surrender of El-Obeid. That date, marked by Bettina, who was not always precise with regard to dates, was probably, instead, the day on which the Mahdi wanted to know personally the new prisoners.

From the available sources, we can, however, establish that the city received an ultimatum on the 16th of January 1883. *“Already in December the besieged were reduced to miserable conditions,”* Major Gozzi noted, and he pointed out that the garrison was already *“very reduced in number[...] due to death, desertion, wounded and scurvy”*. So, *“there was only a small number of inhabitants in the fortress”*, among whom were *“the Greek and Syrian merchants, the Catholic missionaries and the Sisters [...] some officials and a few hundred soldiers reduced to skeletons by fasting, destitution, and all kinds of sufferings”*. (p. 219)

The Mahdi who knew what the situation was, proposed surrender on the 16th of January 1883, sending a copy of the same letter to all the authorities concerned. The replies, it seems, were not all of the same opinion. Rather than surrender, the Governor was prepared to blow himself and the city up by setting fire to the arms depot.⁴⁸ However, since the officials, who had their families with them, refused to obey, the act of surrender was sent to the Mahdi on the 18th of January. This was a victory, which reinforced his conviction of being invincible and induced him to conquer also Khartoum so that he could *“put into action his immeasurable plans for the reform of Islam and the submission of the world to the Muslims.”*⁴⁹

⁴⁸ See, Slatin, R., p. 252.

⁴⁹ Gozzi, D., p. 220.

Occupation of the City

“Then the demons of hell were under the walls. We could see the wood of their lances approaching. At an agreed sign, the doors of the fortress were opened and the devils entered without killing anyone, except the governors of the city.”⁵⁰

It was the 19th of January 1883. While the Mahdi was together with the deposed authorities, his followers were invading the city.

“Entering inside like furious wild beasts [some Mahdists], took the boys and the girls we had with us leaving us not even one”, Elisabetta Venturini recalls. “And instantly they went to the father and the brother, threatening and frightening them at the same time, that if they did not become Moslems they would have their heads chopped off. Intimidated and greatly scared, right away they renounced their religion without the least resistance.”⁵¹ Since we were at a short distance from them, we heard that they had become Moslems. We hardly believed it and didn’t even want to believe it, but it was true”... (pp. 29 – 30).

While Teresa, in her *Memoirs*, does not mention this fact, Elisabetta Venturini adds that, after having pronounced the formula of Muslim faith, both Rosignoli and Locatelli went to them together with those ‘horrible people’ in order to convince them to do the same. Then she continues,

“Suddenly the Arabs accompanying the two, realized that we had reproached them [...]. Then they turned to us in or-

⁵⁰ The information which we find on page 25 of the memoirs of Teresa Grigolini is not exact, in the sense that while the Governor of Kordofan and the *Mudir* of the city of El Obeid were indeed killed by the Mahdi, it did not happen on that day (see, Gozzi, p. 220).

⁵¹ *“... with deep sorrow in my soul and in my heart, “confirmed Monsignor Sogaro on the 4th of April 1883, writing to Cardinal Simeoni, “I have to inform you that the priest Rosignoli and Isisoro Locatelli [...] have embraced Islam [...] I must however also add, to put this serious defection into context, that they were in such a sorrowful state, weakened in spirit, body and soul.” [APF SC Afr. C., vol. 9(1881–1885)651-655].*

der that we too say the formula⁵². By the grace of God we all were strong [...]. Finding us so strong they became furious and turned against us beating, slapping and scornfully hitting us with blows of every kind, and this in greater measure against the superior because they believed that should she give in, the others would too. Then, they momentarily left us alone [...]. To us they said they'd come back and kill us if we did not want to become Moslems. We remained there alone with no human support. We were five: Sr. Teresa Grigolini who was the superior, Sr. Concetta Corsi, Sr. Caterina Chincarini, Sr. Fortunata Quaschè who was African, and Sr. Elisabetta Venturini"... (pp. 30-31).

In the Presence of the Mahdi

"Mohammed Ahmed is so zealous about his religious mission to bring the whole world to Islam that anyone who falls into his hands can find no escape except to accept his divine mission and embrace Islam as he understands it."

(F. Sogaro to the newspapers, June 1884)

As the *Memoirs* of Teresa have been published and can be consulted by those who wish to do so, we shall listen here once more to Elisabetta who is the only one to recall this first encounter with the Mahdi.

"Waiting for our destiny, we put ourselves in the hands of Divine Providence knowing that after a while they would be back. Then we started fervently to pray [...].

They were not long in coming back, and bolder than before, they questioned us anew and finding us still determined, hastily rushed at us like many demons; they tore away our clothes, pulled off our veils and inflicted upon us all sorts of brutality.

Then they threw us out with a rabble following us and, since due to our lack of strength we weren't walking as fast as they expected, they kept flogging us, after all the suffering we

⁵² "I Witness that there is no God except Allah, I witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God and that Muhamad Ahmad is the Mahdi of God and the successor of his Messenger" (see Ballin, C., p. 490).

had undergone the whole day long [...]. They took us before the Mahdi in the presence of I do not know how many thousands of people [...].

Seeing us dressed in shabby clothes and so battered as a result of the day's overexertion [...], the Mahdi, moved by compassion, made us sit on the ground in front of him; then with much coyness and affectation, he questioned us anew one by one and promised us many things, should we renounce our religion and take up the one of Mohammed [...].

While he was speaking, all that multitude of people listened in profound silence. Finally, after so many cajoleries and promises, finding us as strong as before, he told us that God may forgive us for now and we shall see the truth later"... (pp. 32-33).

The Encounter with the Survivors of Delen

According to other witnesses⁵³, the Mahdi would have tried more than once, perhaps encouraged by the defection of Rosignoli and Locatelli, to convince also the sisters to become Muslims. When he understood, however, that they would not yield, he decided to take his time and, for the moment, permit that the prisoners be reunited with the survivors from Delen.⁵⁴ Indeed, he did more than that. He gave each of them five thalers⁵⁵ so that they could provide themselves with some donkeys for the journey. It was actually a very short journey, but "*on foot*

⁵³ See, *La Nigrizia* 5(1885)137: report of Luigi Bonomi to Monsignor Sogaro.

⁵⁴ "*With the fall of El-Obeid,*" major Gozzi confirms, "*the missionaries and the sisters were reunited with those who had come from Delen and were already in the camp of the Mahdi and who throughout the previous months had been continually threatened and had suffered every kind of humiliation and brutal persecution*" (p. 220). A little earlier, on page 176 the same author notes, "*It is recent the heroism of Fr. Luigi Bonomi from Verona, who, naked, exhausted, brutally dragged through the scrublands of Kordofan by the hordes of the Mahdi, saw many, many times the glitter of the saber that had to chop off his head; yet, with indomitable Italian virtue, that imposed respect even to the barbarians, never indulged in a pronouncement that, even virtually did not bind him to an obligation of any kind, would lessen the dignity of his character and of his faith*".

⁵⁵ That help, according to what Francesco Sogaro wrote to *Propaganda Fide*, on August 23rd 1884, was requested by Luigi Bonomi himself since they had been stripped of everything they had [see, AP SC Afr. C., vol 9(1881-1885)979].

we could not arrive,” explains Teresa Grigolini, “as we were all sick. After a thorough inspection, we could mount and set off towards the desert where our companions were”... (p. 29).

“It was around dusk when they led us to our people and on the way we were not mistreated. On our arrival, they entrusted us to Fr. Luigi Bonomi [...]. It seemed like a dream⁵⁶ to be all together again after so many hardships, yet thanks to God it was true [...].

Incredible to see the state in which we found them too, poor souls; impossible to believe without seeing with one’s own eyes”... (p. 34).

Organization of Community Life

Giorgi Stambulieh, since he had some influence over the prisoners, was able to assign them a space a little bigger than the hut they had before, Elisabetta remembers: *“All together in the same hovel, we could not even stretch for lack of sufficient space.” (p. 35)*

So, with the construction of *“two dordor (rooms), one for the fathers and the other for the Sisters, and a recuba (shelter) which served as a dining room and everything else” (p. 36)*, the situation could be said to have improved considerably. *“Each one of us with an angareb [folding bed] to sleep in, slowly we became ourselves again as before. Both the little food to cook and the cleaning was done by us [...].*

We lived community life: praying together, etc. Every week we went to confession, but not to holy Mass and communion because we lacked the necessary things. Everything was taken from us, not even a book was left to us that could help us a little. We prayed a lot relying on what we knew by rote.” (pp. 36- 37)

“We passed the day praying,” Teresa confirms in her Memoirs, “and telling each other about the events of the past... [But] what would become of us? (p. 30).

⁵⁶ *“We celebrated our sad reunion”, wrote Josef Ohrwalder in his Memoirs (p 91).*

*“Last night I heard a soldier who escaped from El Obeid a month ago”. Fr. Leone Hanriot wrote to Fr. Sembianti on the 3rd of September 1883, “He said that he had seen Fr. Paolo and Isidoro in a dordor, and the others a short distance away divided by a hedge. He saw white women and 3 or 4 African servants. He used to buy the heads of cows that had been killed and to sell the tongues to the missionaries.”*⁵⁷

The First Attempt at Ransom

“Things remained like this for almost a year,” Teresa recalls in the third edition of her Memoirs. “Stambulieh took care of us and our lives passed in suffering and in prayer and in great trepidation as we thought about the future”... ⁵⁸*.*

Together with them, no doubt, the fathers and sisters in Khartoum and in Verona were also worried. Francesco Sogaro, the successor of Daniel Comboni and the new Apostolic Vicar, had managed to reach Khartoum on March 6th 1883. His first concern, *La Nigrizia* informed, was “to know how the missionaries and the sisters of Delen and El-Obeid were. In less than a month, he had sent, with great expense, three messengers from Khartoum to El-Obeid to the camp of the rebels to bring comfort and instructions to the prisoners and to parley with the false prophet in order to obtain their freedom”... ⁵⁹.

“At the beginning of April,” we read, in fact, in the Memoirs of Fr. Ohrwalder, “a man came from Chartum with letters from the Austrian Consul, Hansal [...]. On opening the parcel, we found a long and well written letter for the Mahdi [...]. Hansal was begging the Mahdi to allow us to go free, offering him whatever price he wished for our ransom”... (p. 103).

⁵⁷ ACR, A/27/6/23.

⁵⁸ APMR, VI/G/2/3–803, p. 12.

⁵⁹ *La Nigrizia*, 3(1883)68.

That letter which the protagonists had considered “*conceived in the best way possible*” was in fact presented to the Mahdi, but unfortunately, in vain. In fact, he demonstrated his satisfaction, but he also added that ransom, which was permitted at the time of the prophet, was no longer foreseen, because he had abolished it.

The messenger of whom Ohrwalder speaks had left Khartoum in February and had been sent by the Consul Hansal, on the request of the superior of the mission, Fr. Leone Hanriot.⁶⁰ According to *La Nigrizia*, “*The Apostolic Vicar, Monsignor Sogaro, on arrival in Khartoum, sent other four messengers to parley with the Mahdi about the ransom of the prisoners, offering up to 500 thalers for each one and more still if requested. But not even one of these returned to report on the results of the negotiations.*”⁶¹

Evidently worried, Francesco Sogaro informed Luigi di Canossa that on the 22nd of March he had sent another messenger “*with a note hidden inside the bisciarino [...], a stick with a similar form of a sceptre, which is carried at all times by the Arabs.*” He explained that “*in the note, addressed to Fr. Bonomi, he had written: Let me know what we can do to save you and we shall do whatever it takes. If you yourselves con enter into negotiations with the Mahdi I commit myself to collecting any sum necessary.*”⁶²

⁶⁰ “*From El-Obeid and Nuba, there is nothing certain*” [...]. Hanriot wrote to Sembianti on February 15th 1883. “*Hansal has written directly to the Mahdi pleading with him to let them come to Khartoum [...]. On my part I had already got someone to write to the Mahdi. But Hansal believes that, as Consul, he will have more authority than me. We will probably send two messengers with the same letters.*” (ACR, A/27/6/10)

⁶¹ *La Nigrizia*, 4(1883)105.

⁶² *La Nigrizia* of June 1883, in fact, published an extract from a letter written by Francesco Sogaro addressed to Luigi di Canossa, on March 9th 1883, which stated: “*Prudence does not allow me to publish at the moment what has been done and what is being done for their liberation. We can only say that we will not hesitate to assume any amount of debt, if with this we can ransom our suffering confreres, not only because they are Christians, but they are our fellow men [...]. They will not deny us the ransom fee [...]. From now, this humble writer, in name also of his confreres, and in the name of those unfortunate prisoners, pray and implore the charity of all newspapers equally to use their columns to save them from death*”... (p. 69).

The letter of Francesco Sogaro continued as follows: *“I have come to know that they are cared for by a certain Stambulieh, a Christian merchant who, out of fear, became a Muslim and now enjoys a certain influence with the Mahdi. But when this unfortunate man will not want, or not be able to maintain 13 people, as ours number, then who will provide for them? [...] and there is no hope for any offensive from the Government before September.”*⁶³

The Return of the Messengers

Considering that he would not be able to remain in Khartoum until September, the Apostolic Vicar had left the capital of Sudan and reached Cairo, where, without a doubt he would be better informed on the development of the revolution, in the month of June, 1883. Here, he received a letter from the superior of Khartoum in which he could read:

“Monsignor,

Finally four Arabs arrived three days ago and they are staying with Elias Gaimi [...]. They did not bring any letter because now everyone is afraid of writing after a letter written by Stambulieh in Italian [...] was discovered by the Mahdi, who decreed to have Stambulieh strangled and did not revoke the sentence until he had understood the translation and was convinced that there was nothing compromising in the contents.

Giorgi Stambulieh spoke with the Mahdi about the ransom of the church personnel at a price [...] and the Mahdi replied that he would think about it. Our messenger awaited the results of the reflection of the Mahdi, but in the end he ran out of patience and [...] he left. This is the reason it took him so long to return to Khartoum.

What I have come to know is that after El Obeid was taken,

⁶³ ACR, A 38/48/6: Sogaro to Canossa. Khartoum, March 24th 1883. At this point, it is right to highlight, as M. Zaccaria does in his doctoral thesis, (see, pp. 25- 25) that also Calisto Legnani, Italian consular agent based in Khartoum, worked actively for the liberation of the personnel of the mission, as is proved by his correspondence in this regard with the Italian Embassy in Cairo.

none of the Church personnel died. He saw quite often one of the church personnel tall and thin with a little beard and another, short with broad shoulders and a thick beard [...].

*They say that they saw at least three Sisters [...] and that none of these people were chained at the feet, and that the sisters had not been sold. They add that the Mahdi has prohibited, on pain of death by strangulation, abusing or striking them and that, instead, the Arabs were to admire and imitate them because, even though **Infidels**, they remained firm in their false beliefs, while the Arabs had so little **faith** in him.*

It seems that the Mahdi has few followers now, either because it is the time for sowing, or because [...] the Arabs lost many brothers in war without having received any recompense.

So we can only hope in providence and in the prudence and the tactics of the English who have left at the command of 10,000 men armed with Remingtons and two sets of canons and a few hundred cavalry at the beginning of August [...].

I write, Monsignor, without any comment”...⁶⁴.

The Disastrous Attempt of the ‘Great Army’

“The cabinet of S. Giacomo, for its own hidden ends, was opposed to peace being brought to the Sudan by Egypt, insisting that this region should be left abandoned to its own destiny [...]. Not being able to stop Egypt going on [...]it wished that peace be brought about under the direction of English officials.”⁶⁵

The prisoners were informed about this decision, perhaps in order to obtain from them some information that might be precious. On June 21st 1883, Fr. Ohrwalder still recalls in his Memoirs, “*a man appeared in our narrow hut asking of we were missionaries. Encouraged by our repeated assurances, he took out a small note which was well hidden in his trousers and*

⁶⁴ ACR, A/2/7/2: Hanriot to Sogaro. Khartoum, July 20th 1883, original in French.

⁶⁵ Gozzi, D., p. 215.

handed it over to F. Bonomi, who opened it anxiously and read the few lines, happily surprised. They were enough to give us new spirit. The note was signed by Marcopolo Bey, secretary of the Governor of Khartoum, who, charged by General Hicks, informed us that after the rainy season, a great army would arrive in Khartoum to overthrow the Mahdi. We kissed that filthy piece of paper and we prayed for the blessing of God who had sent such consoling news.” (p. 108)

So, in the following month of August, as Fr. Leone Hariot had stated in his above mentioned letter, all the forces of the Government were gathered in Khartoum preparing for the expedition to Kordofan. The Commander in Chief of the whole operation was confirmed as general William Hicks of the British military. He had begun his career in India and later participated in the Anglo Abyssinian war (1867) and he had the disadvantage of not knowing the Sudan well enough.⁶⁶

The departure from Khartoum took place under his responsibility on the 19th of September 1883. It was a little too late, Major Gozzi noted, to have water assured both for the men and also for the animals (p. 238). For that reason, among many others, *“that great mass of Muslims guided by a greater Christian cosmopolitan state organized only very basically, lacking in technical personnel and special services, promised nothing but defeat.”* (p. 240)

Fr. Leone Hanriot, in his letter to Fr. Sembianti on September 11th 1883, stated much the same when he wrote:

“Before yesterday, at six in the morning, the troops of the expedition for Kordofan were moving towards Omdurman close

⁶⁶ Messedaglia*, G. B. who was *“made a proposal to stand by the side of the new commander of the Egyptian army, General Hicks, in the capacity of Information officer [...]. Refused the proposal. The reasons for this refusal are expressed in a letter which Messedaglia wrote on August 26th 1883 to a relative. He writes, “The khedive, or more precisely, the English, nominate an English colonel Head of the State of Sudan. He is a man who knows neither the language nor the country and since you would teach me, the strategy depends on the topography and to the perfect knowledge of the locations, he will not be able to lead the movement with any probability of success”... (Messedaglia, L., Uomini d’Africa, Messedaglia Bey e gli altri collaboratori italiani di Gordon. Bologna, 1935, p. 278, in Delebecque-Giardini, pp. 58–59).*

to Khartoum [...] ten thousand men, 8,000 infantry and 2,000 cavalry with 6,000 men mounted on camels to carry ammunition and provisions, without counting fifteen canons including Crupp and machine guns.

One hundred armoured cavalry formed the front guard. The infantry advanced [...]. The Basci Bazuks formed the rear guard [...]. Two guides were at the head of the army which was powerful for this country. The English think they can make it from Omdurman to Duem in twelve days. Then, after resting for a few days at Duem, they plan to move from there to El-Obeid in fifteen days. The calculation is that for the 9th of October they will be at El-Obeid, if they are not attacked on the way. But the army will not always be able to go in this order because some places are full of thorns four metres high and huge trees and tall grass.

If the Arabs attack them by surprise in any of those places they will manage to exterminate that army”...⁶⁷.

On their part, the prisoners followed, with understandable anxiety, the movements of the army, which they knew had started out and which seemed to them inexplicably too slow.

“In the meantime, we had heard of the great expedition,” Teresa Grigolini confirms in her *Memoirs*, “that the Egyptian government and the English had sent for the liberation of the Sudan. But it was so slow. Such a long time had passed that we lost patience and hope. The expedition was captained by the Governor of the Sudan and an Englishman [...]. But those leading the way were two Muslim khabir (guides). The expedition was, at least it can be said, powerful; horses, camels, people, soldiers, baggage and, most of all, water. In all of that stretch, water could not be found. Imagine in one and a half months what needs those people will have. It has to be pointed out too that, as soon as they entered the desert, 15,000 Arabs, captained by a son of Elias Pascia, the richest man in the Sudan, cut off their way and destroyed their telegraph lines [...] in such a way that they could not return.”... (pp. 33 – 34).

⁶⁷ ACR, A/27/6/24: Hanriot to Sembianti, September 11th 1883.

Constantly informed about the expedition and about the slow pace at which that army was moving, the Mahdi had all the time to follow, indeed even to determine, every movement they made, thanks above all to those fake deserters whom he himself had encouraged to offer themselves as guides in the most difficult areas.⁶⁸ The result was that the decisive battle took place, strangely, in the midst of woods close to Kazgil. It seems that the Mahdi and his Counsellors had planned it to happen exactly like this.

The battle began on the 3rd of November and lasted for three days, during which time, the government troops had no access to food or water.

“We poor devils were all in prayer,” Sr. Teresa remembers, “because the result of that expedition meant life or death for us”. (p. 35)

But, unfortunately, *“the obstacle of the trees, camels falling, the sudden attack of the enemy, extreme exhaustion, the accumulation of dead bodies, the discouragement which derives from the lack of directives and contradictory orders, ignorance of the terrain, the impossibility of distributing food in that confusion, and especially thirst [...], all contributed to separate that army into dispersed groups, disordered and shapeless which, finding themselves surrounded, fought riotously no longer to win but to defend their lives”...⁶⁹.*

Unfortunately, on the fifth of November, only 50 or 60 men from the expedition were still alive and General Hicks himself counted among the dead. It was a definitive defeat, at least for the moment, which convinced even the Governor of Darfur, Slatin*, to surrender to the Mahdi and embrace Islam.

⁶⁸ *“After the first marches,” Major Gozzi informs, “a group of Baggara, well mounted, presented themselves to Hicks Pascha, passing themselves off as deserters from the Mahdi, and asking to fight with the Egyptians. The General accepted their order, and later, driven by need, imprudently engaged them as guides, taking advantage of their knowledge of the area. A few days before the catastrophe, these Baggara disappeared.” (p. 243)*

⁶⁹ Gozzi, D., p. 249.

“So at the end of 1883,” Major Gozzi concluded, “the whole country to the west of the Nile found itself under the control of the Mahdi.” (p. 252)

How great our Sorrow!

“From this event we could understand how long our imprisonment would be. We were broken hearted [...] For some days we all took ill, but then we continued our daily lifestyle, resigning ourselves to the will of God.”

(Teresa Grigolini, p. 35)

The *Memoirs* of Teresa and Elisabetta, and even those of Ohrwalder and Slatin, all agree on the details related to the government expedition of General Hicks and its disastrous outcome. So, given that three of these works, Grigolini, Ohrwalder and Slatin, are published, and at least two are easily accessible, we do not feel the need to quote them here.

One of the greatest concerns of Teresa Grigolini after this defeat was to let the sisters of the community of Khartoum know so that they could save themselves before it was too late. Marietta Maragase, who was in the camp and who was more free to move, offered herself as a messenger and to attempt the journey to Khartoum. She left El Obeid on the 6th of December 1883⁷⁰ and managed to arrive in the capital of Sudan on the 28th or 29th of the same month. Among the various messages which she carried, three were from Teresa and they were addressed to Victoria Paganini⁷¹, then the Superior in Khartoum. In the first, written on a piece of cloth, Teresa wrote, in the name of all:

⁷⁰ See, *La Nigrizia*, 1(1884)8.

⁷¹ Number 7 of *AMN* is dedicated to Victoria Paganini.

“Dear Victoria,

Until the 2nd of November, we still hoped to see you again one day, but since then, all hope had abandoned us. You, in Chartum have no idea of our tragedy [...].

The most important thing I want to say is that even Chartum can count itself as lost; so do all you can to save yourselves, because woe to you if you find yourself in the disastrous situation which we are in! What we have suffered till now and what we shall still suffer in the future, only God knows. We are in the hands of tyrants who know no pity. You have to know that we live in constant fear of losing our religion [...].

At the moment, we have something to live on and also clothes to dress ourselves, but we passed through several months without a change of clothes, full of lice, in dire poverty [...]. Marietta will tell you our story”...⁷²

Too Late

Unfortunately, when Marietta Maragase arrived in Khartoum, all the members of the missionary station had withdrawn on the orders of Monsignor Sogaro. However, Brother Domenico Polinari was still there and on the 29th of December, he wrote the following letter to Fr. Sembianti:

“Most reverend Father Rector,

Yesterday, an African Christian arrived here sent by Fr. Bonomi.

When she arrived, she was arrested and put in prison so that she would not spread the news about the disaster in Cordofan [...]. So, I informed Consul, who went immediately to the Governor so that he would hand over the young woman who was in prison [...]. She says that all the prisoners are alive but live in great misery and need food and clothes. Now the Consul has sent a telegraph to Monsignor to send them help and he is looking for a guide to accompany the African woman [...].

⁷² AMN, 12(2006)149-50: Message on cloth, with neither a date nor a signature. NB: In number 12 of AMN **all** the writings of Teresa Grigolini are presented. We limit ourselves here, therefore, to citing only essential passages.

She has brought several letters from the missionaries written on paper and cloth and sewn into a mat. Sr. Grigolini writes to the sisters that it would be better that they all leave Khar-toum for fear that the Mahdi will come and take command of this city [...].

*PS: While I was closing this letter, Marietta came to me and told me that all those in Cordofan ask us to greet their relatives and to ask them to pray for them [...]. She also told me that the Arabs of Cordofan took the chasubles and made saddle cloths from them for their horses, and that they used to use the chalices in their orgies but now they have sold them for quarter of a thaler, etc.”*⁷³

New Attempts at Ransom

About a month later, on the 25th of January 1884, Fr. Bortolo Rolleri sent to Verona a copy of all the letters delivered by Marietta Maragase. “*I have sent the originals,*” he explained, “*to Monsignor Sogaro.*” Then he added:

“The letters of Fr. Bonomi and Sr. Grigolini are written on very fine light paper, while all the others are written on white cloth [...]. All of the letters say that Marietta knows everything and she will tell you all. However, I came to know little more than was written in the letters. Here is what I came to know. It is said that the uncle of the Mahdi, a certain Abd el Qader, respects and protects all of our prisoners. But there are other two, in high positions, who dislike them and persecute them. I am also told that the other two misfortunate [...] ones have taken Muslim names, that they have good salaries and that they will be taken to Mecca. Nevertheless, according to a letter from Fr. Bonomi to the consul Hansal, the intention of the Mahdi is to go there and then propagate everywhere [...] his religious reform. Fr. Bonomi feels that he will succeed unless the European governments do more soon to stop him and put

⁷³ *La Nigrizia*, 1(1884)29-30.

an end to so much evil. In the same letter, Fr. Bonomi also says that the first letter of the Consul to the Mahdi for their freedom was received and achieved something, but that a second letter would be needed. Mr. Hansal did write a second letter and it was sent together with 250 pounds which I paid here in Cairo on the 19th of January so that it could be transferred by telegraph to Khartoum [...].

The consul Hansal prepared a full report about it and sent it to Vienna to be stamped: there is also a note about the defection of our unhappy two. I feel however, that we should not publish it, even although, unfortunately, it is already public enough [...].

Know that I have written in this regard also to Cardinal Simeoni and I have sent him a copy of everything, as I am sending it to you”...⁷⁴

“The last post brought me the letter of Polinari, dated 29th of January”, Sembianti replied. “He writes that Khartoum is peaceful and there is no danger. He says that Marietta left on January 25th with four camels carrying money, cloth, rice, sugar, medicine, etc., and a letter from the Consul Hansal to the Mahdi”...⁷⁵

The intervention of Gordon* Pascia

After the heavy defeat suffered by General Hicks, the British government decided to send General Charles G. Gordon to the Sudan again. Although he had the advantage of knowing the country well since he had been the Governor from 1874 till 1879, what was not so clear was the task he was to undertake. That is, it was not clear if he had to simply carry out an investigation into the situation and write up a full report⁷⁶, or whether he had to pacify the Sudan, clearing the country of Egyptian garrisons to restore it and then hand back to the lo-

⁷⁴ ACR, A/32/5/11 (typed copy): Rolleri to Sembianti. Cairo, January 25th 1884.

⁷⁵ ACR, A/28/27/37: Sembianti to Rolleri. February 26th, 1884.

⁷⁶ See, Delebecque-Giardini, p. 125.

cal Sultans “the power which was rightly theirs through their ancestors”.⁷⁷

Whatever the case may be, Gordon Pascia, we read in *Nigrizia* of March 1884, “took on the difficult mission and on the night between the 26th and 27th of January that year, he left from Cairo for Khartoum”... (p. 41).

“Having had to travel via the Nile, it is written on the previous pages, and therefore to pass through Scellal, he went to visit Monsignor Francesco Sogaro⁷⁸ on the 31st of January, and in answer to his prayers he promised that the liberation of our prisoners would be one of his first concerns. In fact, he said that he had already written to the Mahdi about this, declaring himself the guarantor for whatever sum of money was requested for the ransom”. (pp. 39- 40)

In the second half of February, 1884, G. Ohrwalder recalls in his *Memoirs*, “a letter from Gordon himself to the Mahdi arrived [...] in which he offered him all of the western Sudan with the title of Sultan. He promised free trade of slaves, free passage for pilgrims to Mecca and he ended by imploring him to free all prisoners”... (p. 133).

The result of this letter, according to Delebecque-Giardini would be what is described on pages 165 – 166 where one reads:

“On March 22nd [1884] the Government Palace in Khartoum witnessed a strange scene. The Governor General, in his splendid uniform, red with gold embroidery,[...] entered, with his usual vigorous pace, the great Hall. The band played the khedival anthem. Then Gordon, taking his place at the throne, [...]

⁷⁷ Gozzi, D., p. 273. In effect, once he arrived in Khartoum, Gordon was handed two documents signed by the khedive. In the first document, he was nominated as General Governor once again,” in order to re-establish peace and order.” The second document announced the evacuation and the implementation “of the necessary measures to re-establish a regular government.”(See, Delebecque-Giardini, p. 136). As we shall see later, Gordon must have considered that one of the ‘necessary measures’ was the suspension, at least temporarily, of the prohibition of the slave trade.

⁷⁸ “This morning His Excellency Gordon Pascia came to Scellal”, Francesco Sogaro wrote the same day to Cardinal Simeoni. “We discussed things together and I was highly satisfied because I found him very committed to working for the liberation of our personnel”... [AP SC Afr C., vol. 9(1881–1885)1135v].

*made a sign after which, three fierce looking Arabs armed with lances and sabres were led in. They were carrying a letter and a parcel. They were the Messengers of the **Mahdi** and they were carrying his reply [...].*

*The ‘Servant of God’ acknowledges having received the letter and the proposals. Then he added:” You say that you desire to open the way that would permit the Muslims to visit the tomb of the Prophet. You also express your desire to establish friendship between us and you ask us to free the Christians and Muslims, promising to declare me the Sultan of Kordofan... How is it possible that a man who is not a believer in the prophet of God, could desire to open the road for pilgrims to visit his tomb? The prophet has no desire to be visited by dogs... learn that [...]. I am the proclaimed **Mahdi** and the successor of the prophet. I have no need to be the Sultan or the King of Kordofan... I am a servant and my duty is to show the way of God and of his kingdom...[...]. Be, therefore, on your guard and surrender to us in order to be saved”...*

“Gordon read the letter aloud in the presence of the assembly”, the account continues. “Then, standing up, [...] he instructed the messengers to inform their master that he “could have no further communication with him” and then he dismissed them.” (p. 167).

Gordon knew well, however, that his position in Khartoum was quite precarious. *“The monotonous roll of the drums of the Dervishes which could be heard night and day, and the whizz of the bullets which rained down on the walls of the palace proved well that his territory was heavily surrounded. In addition, all the information received on the movements of the enemy tallied: new contingents kept arriving, continuously reinforcing the besieging troops.” (Ib.).*

5.

Rahad: An Unfortunate Day

“With the fall of El-Obeid, Major Gozzi noted, the whole of Kordofan, except for some mountainous regions of Nuba, remained the uncontested territory of the Mahdi. In fact, having established in that city the headquarters of his government, [...] he dedicated himself to the political preparation of the extension of the revolution, to conquering Khartoum and to implementing his plans for the reform of religion and of the submission of the world to Islam” (p. 220).

These proposals of the new ‘prophet’, if weakened a little with the return of Gordon Pascia as Governor of the Sudan, acquired new strength when it became common knowledge that the English government, at least for the time being, did not intend to take military action. Therefore, the new governor would not have had an army at his disposition even for the defence of the capital⁷⁹ in case this became necessary. So, between March and April 1884, the Mahdi had decided to break camp and begin moving his troops.

⁷⁹ It happened that on the 19th of March, exactly one day after the arrival of Gordon in Khartoum, “at the end of a debate which lasted five days [...], Lord Harrington defined the position of the ministry, beginning with the declaration that Egypt, which had installed the garrisons, was solely responsible for their security. After this, he added that Gordon had only been sent to the Sudan by the request of the Egyptian government and he ended with the following words of which it can only be said, that they represent a turnaround [...]. I sustain that we are not responsible for the evacuation or the liberation of the garrisons in West, Central or East Sudan” (Delebecque–Giardini, p. 49).

“The pacification and the reform of Gordon have been a fiasco”, the Consul, Hansal, commented. “England cannot abandon its ambassador [...]. The English troops must free General Gordon in Khartoum. This is the only hope for us.”... (ACR, A/32/5/3: Hansal to Sogaro. Chartum, April 1st, 1884).

“He sent out a long statement, Ohrwalder wrote in his memoirs, in which he invited all the men to follow him to Chartum [...], notifying them at the same time that the only way to travel would be via Rahad.” (p. 134)

The Circle Tightens

“It was towards the end of March 1884,” Luigi Bonomi recalls the following year in his report.⁸⁰ “Left abandoned to our own resources⁸¹, it was wise not to leave any stone unturned [...]. I tried also to obtain from the Mahdi himself, through some powerful intercessor, permission to leave by himself. I also wrote him a letter in which I reminded him of the permission we had received at the beginning, insisting that he keeps his word; but the only response I received was evasive. So, since this way was closed, we resolved to try to escape”... (p. 140-141).

“It was so difficult,” Ohrwalder comments, “because everyone avoided us and were afraid to speak with us. Nevertheless, someone we trusted kept camels and guides ready and we were waiting to be able to go from one day to the next.” (p. 135)

According to Teresa Grigolini *‘the trusted person’* who had contacted the camel owner and prepared the escape was Giorgi Stambulieh. The departure was planned for Saturday 29th of March. The previous week, obviously, had been dedicated to making preparations, as Teresa herself recalls in her *Memoirs* (see, pp. 54-55).

⁸⁰ See, *La Nigrizia*, 5(1885)135–154.

⁸¹ In effect, since the personnel of the Catholic Mission had left Khartoum, contact with the prisoners had become even more difficult. However, this did not mean at all that they intended to abandon them. *“Marietta said that she had to return to Cordofan [...] and the Consul Hansal asked if it was possible to send money and provisions on our account. I told him [...] that in such cases nothing should be left unattempted”* ... (AP S Afr. C., vol. 9, f. 1120: Sogaro to Simeoni, January 10th 1884).
In addition, when the Mahdists were able to disable, in March 1884, the telegraph lines which linked the capital with Berber, Sogaro himself decided to leave some missionaries as close as possible to the Sudanese border in order to attempt any contact possible.

We have no way of knowing whether it was the preparations which drew attention, or whether the escape attempt had been favoured by the deputy of the Mahdi only to fail on the vigil, making the delusion all the more bitter. The fact remains that, “on the 28th of March 1885,” Ohrwalder writes, “*the Caliph Abdullahi appeared unexpectedly with a great number of people in front of our house and called Fr. Bonomi, myself and brother Giuseppe Regnotto.*”

He continued therefore, “*We found him sitting on a goatskin surrounded by Emirs and after having invited us to sit, he began asking the usual questions and making the same exhortations to us to embrace his religion. Since his proposals had no effect on us, he made us return home. The sun had just gone down when we saw about 30 satraps on horseback [...], declaring that they had orders to take away the Sisters*”... (p. 135).

According to Teresa Grigolini, this actually happened on the 29th.

“*We were just waiting for the sun to go down,*” we read in her *Memoirs*, “*Then we heard the beat of drums [...]. This was the sign that the Caliph was going out of his residence [...]. Usually they passed quite far from our huts, but this time, we realized with great fear that they were directed towards our area, telling us that the Mahdi wanted us at his house*”... (p. 55–56).

“Imagine our great Fear at those Words”

With an efficacy which is rare, Teresa Grigolini describes further what happened next. The passage is, no doubt, known, but it is worthwhile recalling it here.

“*We quickly put the cloths which we had kept ready for our escape on our heads,*” she remembers, “*and off we went on foot with those devils [...].*”

We arrived at dusk and they assigned us a hut at a discrete distance from the others. We threw ourselves on the ground, exhausted, filled with fear and with a bitterness in our hearts that no one could imagine. No one saw us and no one came to the hut [...]. In the darkness we lay down on the bare earth with our marcub [Sudanese shoes] under our heads. In the meantime, the Muslims began their prayer. We could hear a mul-

titude saying, Amin. The earth was deafened by those gloomy voices. With the light of day, our minds were also enlightened. We thought of the Fathers whom we had not been able to greet and we also thought about why they had brought us there [...].

Finally a man appeared who had a certain air of authority, holding a lance. He called us outside and made us stand before him and with an authoritative voice he asked, "Do you want to become Muslims"? We answered that we were Christians and that Christians we would die. We thought he was just one of the Arabs, but a girl told us that he was the grand Caliph.

All the while, there was nothing to eat or drink. In reality, we did not feel hungry, but exhaustion was making itself felt. So, we asked for a little water to drink"... (pp. 56 – 58).

If they had had the order to Kill us, We would have been in Paradise in a Moment...

"Later", Elisabetta Venturini writes, "they brought us some bread and water. A little while afterward, they came to instigate us in all manners, good and bad, all together as well as singly. In the end they tried everything [...].

In the meantime evening was falling [...]. We lay down to rest for a while thinking that because it was night we would be left in peace; instead we were wrong. Just in the depth of the night, when all around there was silence, with a small lantern in his hand Caliph Abdulahi came forward with three of his [...]. Then they started to talk with us asking why we didn't want to be Moslems [...]. In the end, seeing that despite so many questions they obtained nothing [...], they disdainfully stood up, took the black sister, Fortunata, aside, about ten steps away from us, tied her to a pole and said to her: "You at least who are black like us, surrender and do not act like the others, otherwise you will be sorry. You will see tomorrow what we will do to them if they do not say the formula". The sister who knew Arabic well frankly answered: "Do to me as you like, since I am like them and will never renounce my religion". Finding her so strong the Caliph took the whip and beat her and then another one took over until they were both tired.

Anew they returned to us, took the superior and us and again

tormented us with all their power. And having found a pair of scissors, I do not know how, using it they tormented sister Grigolini and since she was the superior they were after her ever more [...]. They harassed us the whole night almost, without achieving their aim and tired, in the end they went away. We had some hours of respite, only just a few hours, since at sunrise they appeared again telling us that the fathers had given in and were happy [...] We told them that even if the fathers had submitted, it would never happen that we do the same and that they were wasting their time for nothing.” (pp. 43–46)

The Separation

“It is easier to imagine these things than to write about them. They turned on us with beastly cruelty and had they received the order to kill us, I believe that in an instant they would’ve sent us to heaven. Unable to do so, they vented their anger by separating us”... (p. 46).

That separation, according to the *Quaderno di Fortunata Quascè*⁸², took place on April 1st 1884, in view of the departure for Rahad. The prisoners were handed over to five Arab women.

*“These were,” explains Teresa in her Memoirs, “the women of the five greatest chiefs who were close to the Mahdi. We had been given to them as slaves. You can just imagine what they did to us to try to get us to apostatize. Instructions, promises, calling us fortunate because the Mahdi and the Caliph were fond of us and with great pleasure would have married us if we were Muslims. You can just imagine our **happiness!**”... (p. 59)*

“A few days after they had divided us,” Elisabetta continues, “the Mahdi and all his retinue left for Rahad, two days’ journey from Kordofan”⁸³ [about 80 km]. We too had to leave with

⁸² See, APMR, VI/Pp/5/5–1283, p. 14.

⁸³ According to the *Diary* of Sr. Vittoria Paganini, the first to leave El Obeid would have been Concetta on April 2nd 1884. Three days later on the 5th of April, Teresa left, while Bettina left on the 7th and Maria Caprini on the 17th. No date is reported for the departure of Sr. Fortunata (APMR, VI/Pp/6/1-161, p. 8).

that multitude of people, each one with the proper master.” (p. 48)

*“On the occasion of this journey”, Fr. Bonomi adds, “the same threats and promises were renewed, not only to us men, but even more to the sisters. Perhaps our bold behaviour made them more cautious. I have to confess though, that the example of their heroism was the object of great admiration for us. The painful separation, which came about at that time, did not allow me to listen to their description of the details. But reliable witnesses were able to tell us that they left with unconquered constancy. They were made to walk barefoot, without shoes, across that terrain full of thorns, exposed to the burning sun without any shade during the journey. They were deprived of the relief of a little water, and they were beaten at times. Overcome by suffering and tiredness, they were not able to keep up with the others.”*⁸⁴

***“Day of mourning at Rahad...
Saturday, 12th. April 1884”***

(Costanza Caldara)

*“As soon as we reached Raht,” Elisabetta recalls, “everyone knew already that a sister had apostatized”... (p. 54). According to a note left by Costanza Caldara in her notebook, this happened on April 12th 1884.*⁸⁵

That sister, about whom everyone was talking, and who in the end yielded to pressure and pronounced the formula requested, was Concetta Corsi. According to Sr. Elisabetta, the young missionary was to be given, as soon as she became a Muslim, to the harem of the Caliph, Abdullahi.

“Into what hands she fell, poor Concetta”, Elisabetta commented in her diary. “She was put with those ugly women who wanted to circumcise her at any cost, in order to prepare her for the Caliph. They harassed her for eight days, aiming at winning her, but they didn’t succeed. Then, more naked than dressed, she left for Rahad with the whole brigade, and since she didn’t succumb, she was kept as the last of the slaves and

⁸⁴ *La Nigrizia* 5(1885)142.

⁸⁵ APMR, VI/C2/8/1–2009, p.13.

consequently was mistreated by everyone. I saw her in this state on the road [...] Later on I came to know that it was her. On top of all this, towards evening two rogues took her aside from the people and undressed her for the purpose of raping her. She was so frightened that she started to scream loudly: "I want to go to the Mahdi". Meanwhile some people gathered and those two ran away without being identified. The following day, after her arrival in Rahad, she wanted to go to the Mahdi, most likely to report that there were evil people disturbing her, as well as to implore to be free from them. She hoped that saying the formula with the mouth, not with the heart for sure, she would be left in peace – but in the end, poor soul, she said it! Doing so, she thought of becoming free, instead she fell into more trouble. For now, she is there in the Mahdi's house"... (pp. 52 – 54).

First Concetta, then Teresa... and in the end the Others

When Teresa Grigolini arrived in Rahad and came to know about what had happened, she understood immediately how this could have come about.

"Those dogs realized", we read in her Memoirs, "that she was afraid of the men and of impure things and they agreed with each other. It was then that we felt our weakness." (p. 67)

"Sr. Concetta was the first one to realize this, she had written in the first version of her Memoirs, and therefore, she was the first one to yield."

"Therefore," she admits: "I was perhaps the second⁸⁶ and I was also taken before the Mahdi, and there, I met Sr. Concetta and when we talked among ourselves we concluded that this was how things were and if we had [remained] among those people, perhaps someone from among those dogs would have taken us to his house never to let us go. It was then that I invited also the others to yield, and being reunited again gave us new strength"...⁸⁷

⁸⁶ *"She too [the Superior] has yielded", Sr. Elisabetta affirms. "I was not present, so I cannot really say for sure. But it is probable [...] because she did not want to leave the sister"... (p. 55).*

⁸⁷ APMR, VI/G/1-801, p. 12.

We don't know how Sr. Teresa managed to send the message to the sisters, who, in the meantime, with their respective owners, were arriving in Rahad. It was a difficult message, even if she sought to explain why, as we find written in her *Memoirs* "*in certain cases it was better to yield*" (p. 67). It was so difficult that three of them, at a certain point, risked going "*secretly by night*" to "*the zeriba*" of Fr. Bonomi to ask his "*advice about taking poison*".

"He told us that absolutely – Elisabetta continues - we couldn't do that. He encouraged us to be strong; and he from the inside and we from outside the enclosure (because we were a little afraid of being found) mutually in tears, left each other." (p. 50).

From what Elisabetta left in writing, it seems that Fortunata Quascè was the third to make her decision. On page 55–56, we read, in fact: "*After Teresa Grigolini, they took to the Mahdi's house Sr. Fortunata, the African sister. However, before leading her there, during all the time she was separated they had her go through all kinds of trials and found her always strong as at the beginning. Very annoyed, they decided to put her with the other two, thinking that later she would also surrender. For the moment they left her there. But, as far as I know, she didn't surrender*"...

"Now we come to Sr. Caterina [...]. Unable to win her in any way, her master entrusted her to his women, giving them power to treat her the worst way. They put her with their slaves to ground the grain, to make the local bread, to wash their clothes, etc., and since they were not satisfied with all this, they had their slaves beat the Sister every morning with a whip. Repeatedly the women tried to take the religious objects she had on her, like scapulars, medals, etc., but did not succeed in taking anything. The reason, I believe, was that first of all she defended herself, but mostly –I believe and am deeply convinced—it was the precious relic of the Holy Cross she was wearing that gave her so much strength in self-defense incapacitating the women to put their hands on her. After a month of this kind of life, unable to win her in any way and knowing that the others were already in the Mahdi's house, they had her join the others too, always hoping that in time she would surrender"... (p. 56 -58).

“By the Grace of the Lord, she overcame Everything”...

“Presently there are four in the house of the Mahdi, Elisabetta takes up again, only Sr. Maria Caprini and Sr. Elisabetta Venturini remain out. More or less, approximately the same things can be said of each one of us. But, let us go and do the will of God and let us begin.

Sr. Venturini was designated [...] to Caliph Alli Dinar, one of the most ferocious. Just on the day in which they separated us, she was turned over to such a man. When she arrived they had her sit on the ground in front of this scoundrel, with about twenty other men [...].

Right away the Caliph with searching hands took away her devotional signs, but before, he fiercely threatened her saying that if she did not become a Moslem, he would take care of it. She answered that he could do what he pleased with her, but she would never become a Moslem. Meanwhile he had someone bring before him a clay pot with fire in it and in front of her they burned her devotional objects [...]. In her heart she was happy that her signs were burned, rather than have them treated with disdain.

Night was coming: oh terrible night, and would that it had been only one! Here, we must go on in obedience [...]. They put her alone in a place with a camp bed in it. Later on, in the depth of the night about fifteen men all totally naked came [...]. They instigated her in all possible ways; such unbelievable behavior, yet it is all pure truth. What could she do [...]? Nothing, just nothing, truly, except place herself in the Lord's hands; there was no other remedy than this [...].

When they had relieved their tension among themselves, etc., they threw the sister out of the place, so by day and by night she was exposed to the inclemency of the weather and not only this, but to all the jeering and insults of all the passers-by. This terrible scene continued for twelve consecutive days and the same number of nights. Not with her own strength, but with the Lord's grace she overcame everything and didn't surrender in any manner. Secretly, the Mahdi used to give orders to treat us in the worst way, but to keep us alive. Only later on we came to know about this.

When the Mahdi, with his encampment left for Rahad, also Caliph Alli Dinar followed with all his personnel, slave women, etc. Among them was also Sr. Venturini, who, since she was

kept as a slave, had naturally to travel on foot. Besides this, they wanted her to take the rope and lead the camel on which the women of Allì Dinar traveled and since she refused to do so, they beat her heavily.

The second day of the journey toward evening she was dead tired and could not go on. With no more strength to stay on her feet, she lay on the ground and stayed there totally alone. Eventually she lost the way and ended up in a wood inhabited by a great number of monkeys, big and small [...]. The conditions she was in were so bad that she was happy to die, but her hour had not yet come. After some rest, in the middle of the night she walked on again without knowing where she was going. Then she saw some light in the distance and directed herself towards it. As she walked on, she heard people's voices; on the one hand she felt consoled, but on the other she felt anxious not knowing who they were. Coming towards her were men sent by the Caliph to look for her. These were good men who had compassion and did not mistreat her [...].

Early in the morning they continued their journey to Rahad [...] and right away the sister was handed over to the Caliph. Then again they questioned her on religion and the reason why she refused to become a Moslem, while her sisters did, and a hundred more questions, etc. Her answer was an absolute no and that she would never become such. Then what could be expected? More infuriated than before, they invented other kinds of torments [...]. They beat her with the whip under her feet for several consecutive days in such a way that she lost all her toenails and her legs, as a result of the whipping, became all bruised up to the knee. She could not stand up, so without anything, like an animal, they threw her on the ground behind the house. Finally, tired to have her there without surrendering, early one morning they tied a thick cord around her neck and, with a multitude of people following, pulled her here and there with the aim of winning her over, but it was all useless. So their rage mounted and they, to come to an end, tied her to a tree trunk with the hands behind her back and beat her unceasingly from early morning till nearly noon. By this time she was almost dead, with no sign of life in her. In the meantime the news spread that a sister was on the verge of death, so the Mahdi sent to take her and gave orders to bring her with the other sisters. And so they did. She did not realize how they took her there"... (pp. 58-65).

Sr. Teresa Grigolini did know however, and in a version of her *Memoirs*, she remembers, “*She was taken and tied tightly to a tree, with her elbows touching each other behind, so that the tree trunk was between her elbows and her back and she could not move in any way. Some young boys played the sad game of throwing on her certain ants which bite like wasps and cause a convulsive shivering. Others beat her so hard on the soles of her feet that her skin was removed and all her toenails fell out. She was treated like this for a full day and then, untied in the evening, she remained at the foot of the tree for some days more dead than alive. It was in this state that she was carried to the Mahdi to recite the formula. Was she capable of saying it? I don’t believe so, but the Mahdi was satisfied and spread the news that she had apostatized.*

And this is the story of all of us,” she adds. “How many whippings! Once the whip caught my face and it swelled terribly, while blood flowed abundantly. The formula was wrested at a moment when we were exhausted and out of our senses and half dead from beatings and hunger”...⁸⁸.

“Yes, I am happy to suffer even more for my Religion”...

The account of Elisabetta continues: “*Now they are five in the house of the Mahdi. Sister Caprini is still missing, but they went to look for her too. She had stayed in Kordofan with her master [...]. As all the others did, she also traveled on foot from Kordofan to Rahad, and worse still, because everybody already knew that the sisters were in the Mahdi’s house, she was threatened in all sorts of manners to win her over. Yet she always put up a strong resistance. To aggravate the matter, she was known as one of those from Delen, from whom nothing could be obtained even before [...].*

Sr. Caprini was young and old at the same time. Her behavior was rather serious, but also solemn. And when she was questioned on religious matters, her answers were usually frank and strong, without fear. She used all the little Arabic she knew. This would enrage the interrogators who, as a conse-

⁸⁸ APMR, VI/G/2/3-803, p. 28-29.

quence, beat her more severely [...]. In their house they kept her as the last of all their slaves and the most menial tasks were all for her: washing and mending their robes, pounding the grain in the mortar in order to remove the husk, feeding the animals, etc. In the end, noticing that, no matter what, she was always the same and she looked happy about everything, they were wondering. Then she would say: "Yes, I am happy to suffer even more than this for my religion". She went on in this kind of life for more than a month.

At the end she left for Rahad and as soon as she arrived, they took her with the others to the Mahdi's house. As a consequence of the beating she had received and because of the fatigue of the journey and all that accompanied it, she was much run down. She had no more life in her. She was not the Sr. Caprini of before. On top of all this, they had the callousness to torment her also there threatening her again, although she had no strength even to answer their questions [...]. They finally got uselessly tired and went away and the sister remained always strong and never surrendered"... (pp. 66-69).

Before ending such a painful chapter of their story, and sometimes a controversial one in terms of how it is remembered after such a long time, Elisabetta Venturini insists once more:

"Here we were, forty days after our separation all together again, but such a reunion was so different from the first [...]. That reunion, according to me, was painful for the circumstances. But this one, besides being painful, was also terrible for the situation in which we found ourselves: in the house of the Mahdi! As a consequence, in the people's eyes it seemed as if we had all become Moslems. But I can say this, it is not true"... (pp. 69-70).

In order to be more precise, one would have to say that 'people' had been informed through the media *"that all except two Fathers and three Sisters had become Muslims"*. Monsignor Sogaro had read in the *Bosphore* and writing to Fr. Sembianti, he told him, *"You must try to rectify this and to be as precise as possible, and let things go, excusing the two of them. What really upsets me, to be very honest with you, is the fate of the three sisters. They were six; now we can only speak about three"...*⁸⁹

⁸⁹ ACR, A/39/34/12: Sogaro to Sembianti. Cairo, June 6th 1884.

Saddened and worried, Fr. Sembiani commented to Fr. Rolleri, *“With regard to the prisoners, we have heard some new and very upsetting news. This trial is too long for painful events to be avoided. In Africa, the Devil is working more adeptly than in the heart of Asia, where people are immediately martyred. In Africa they are slowly tortured and threatened. This is really devilish.”*....⁹⁰

The Expedient of Fake Marriages

“In the meantime, days were passing and we saw no one and we asked ourselves: What do they want from us now?”

(Teresa Grigolini)

In her *Memoirs*, Teresa still remembers: *“The thought the Mahdi may have divided us among his chiefs made us tremble. In such anguish, we decided to begin a Tridium to the Sacred Heart [...]. We had reached the third day and were at the second half of the last Glory be to the Father when a slave came to the door saying that the Mahdi wanted to speak with us”*... (p. 71).

What the Mahdi wished to communicate to us was that now that we were considered Muslims, we would be entrusted to a ‘catechist’ who would prepare us for marriage.⁹¹ According to Elisabetta Venturini, it was on the evening of April 30th 1884 that a Syrian, ‘a certain *Hantun Baladi*’ (p. 72), was given the task of going to get the sisters and taking them to his home, and arranging for all of them to be married. This poor Syrian, commented Elisabetta, ‘*did so reluctantly,*’ but he had to do it. The following morning, ‘*the first of May*’ he ‘*came to collect us*’. (p. 72)

⁹⁰ ACR, A/28/27/66: Sembianti to Rolleri, July 1st 1884.

⁹¹ It was no longer worth anything in fact, for the sisters, the fact that they considered themselves bound by a vow of chastity. Whatever bond had existed before the Mahdia, understood this time in the sense of a religious community, had no value for the Mahdi, not even if it had been a bond through marriage. Those who, as in the case of new followers, did not have a husband or a wife who was Mahdist, had in fact to be married or remarried. (See, Ballin, C., pp. 276–277).

“And so”, confirms Teresa Grigolini in her *Memoirs*, “the man walked in front and we followed behind, carrying Sr. Bettina, until we reached the hut of that poor man, who, in order to do us a favour, allowed us to have it for ourselves while he and his wife and child retreated to another corner”... (p. 73).

We were able to communicate this news to Fr. Bonomi who was in prison,” continues Teresa, “by using a box of matches. He replied to us using the same box”... (p. 78).

They did not have to wait long for the result of Fr. Luigi Bonomi taking an interest in their situation. According to the witness of Elisabetta:

“Past midnight, on the evening of May eight⁹², Mr. Rudolph Slatin suddenly appeared with some Greeks headed by Demetrio Cocorombo and with them was also Brother Isidoro Locatelli [...]. Mr. Slatin, may God bless him, did much to prevent that the Sisters fall into the hands of the Moslems. He encouraged the Greeks, suggesting that they simulate having married those women, but keep them as sisters instead [...].

In the end, they decided to take them as sisters, hoping that it would be over soon. On the very same night they went to call a Moslem priest to conduct the marriage ceremony, as if they had truly married. Sister Grigolini went to the house of Cocorombo, Sister Corsi with Isidoro Locatelli, Sister Chincarini with Tramba, Sister Fortunata, the African, also with a Greek called Andrea. Sister Caprini and Sister Venturini were still sick, so for the time being they were left alone”... (pp. 74-76).

⁹² Also this date, reported by Elisabetta Venturini, seems not to be exact, if Giuseppe Ohrwalder in his *Memoirs* says that Slatin would not reach Rahad before the end of June (see p. 148) the person most directly involved confirms, in fact, “I left from Fasher around the middle of June 1884”... (Slatin, R. - *Fer et Feu au Sudan*, p. 382).

6.

At Omdurman, in the new ‘Capital’ of the Mahdi

“When the time was judged right by the Mahdi to move to Khartoum to reinforce the rebels, who were already besieging the city, he prepared for the departure of all his armed forces from Rahad. One of his most important officers was left as governor of Cordofan, and when he returned to reside in Obeid, he took us missionaries with him because we had been entrusted to him to be guarded. The sisters, in the meantime, were made to set out on the journey with the crowds to Omdurman, which faces Khartoum, where the new camp of the rebels was set up”.

(Luigi Bonomi)

“Before the departure, however”, the report continues, “the Lord’s providence came to our help. Marietta Combatti [= Maragase] arrived on time with some help. She had departed from Khartoum at the end of January for Obeid, but was surprised by rebels on the journey. She was robbed of every item of clothing which she was bringing us, mistreated and threatened with death [...]. During this event, however, she was able to keep hidden most of the money she was carrying and when she arrived, she handed it over to us faithfully. We distributed the money between ourselves and the sisters and it served us during the time we lived in El Obeid, where we were taken towards the beginning of August 1884.”⁹³

⁹³ La Nigrizia 5(1885)144.

From Rahad to Omdurman

“After a stopover of some months in Rahad”, Elisabetta confirms, “the Mahdi with his encampment left Rahad for Khartoum and everybody had to go with him [...]. It was winter time, the time of sandstorms and of the rains –a bad time for traveling, but no one could avoid it. We had no money at all to provide things necessary for the journey. But the Lord, just in those days prior to our departure, provided us with some money, if I am not wrong, sent by Msgr. Sogaro [...]. We really needed it, so we could travel by camel, otherwise I do not know how we could have made it.

It took five months to cover the distance from Rahad to Khartoum [...]. To tell all the details of this journey of five full months would be almost impossible. It is enough to say that we were exposed to all the harshness of the season, day and night without any comfort. We slept on the naked ground and during the day were under a scorching sun. This was not the worst. Most heavy for us was to be in the midst of that rabble, since as much as we tried to stay away from it, the multitude was so great that we could not avoid being together [...].

By the end of '84 we finally arrived in Omdurman and there we stopped. Everyone tried to provide for himself a small shelter, for example, a straw hut to be protected at least a little from the people”... (pp. 78-81).

In the ‘Masalma’ District

With the arrival in Omdurman of more than 100,000 followers of the Mahdi, what had been until 1884 a small village, chosen because of the strong military fortress built by Kader Pascia, but then abandoned by General Hicks, now quickly became *“an amalgamation of all tribes and races of the Sudan with representatives from numerous nations such as Egypt, India, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Greece, Italy, Turkey and Ethiopia⁹⁴, etc.*

On the orders of Caliph Abdullahi, however, *“each tribe or race”, Paolo Rosignoli explained, “lived in its own district”.*

⁹⁴ Rosignoli, P., p. 169.

Therefore the district assigned to those who had converted recently was called ‘*Muslimanieh*’, that is, those who have renounced for Islam, or Al Masalma.

In that district, which is still perfectly recognizable today, all the foreign citizens who found themselves in Sudan at the time of the Mahdia and who, in order to save their lives, had converted to Islam, lived ‘*under house arrest*’, if one could describe it like this.

They were ‘*free*’ to organize themselves in such a way as to be able to maintain themselves. But they were not allowed to leave the new confines of Sudan, as redrawn by the Mahdist State.

Bound by the destiny of their ‘*husbands*’, the sisters who were prisoners were also assigned residences in the district which was set aside mostly for Greeks and Syrians.

“It is easier to imagine than to describe the state of our minds and souls”, one reads in the memoirs of Teresa Grigolini. “In this way, our situation was worsened. The only good thing was that these three men were from morning till midday in the Bazaar selling whatever they could to earn their bread. They sold cotton cloth of a very poor quality some jackets that we sewed at home, and some other local items. At midday, they came home and we prepared lunch and sent it to the hut of Fortunata, and there they ate alone and we ate separately, according to the customs of the country.

After eating, they would go back to the bazaar until evening. In the evening, we did the same as at midday, so, thanks be to God we were free enough [...]. Sr. Bettina was not involved at all because she was ill and she faked that she was worse than she was in order to save herself from a false marriage. In the meantime, we worked and we prayed in such distress that cannot be easily imagined”... (pp. 81-82).

The Response from the Mission

“In November 1884, the bishop sent to Dongola, Fr. Vicentini in order to have news of the prisoners”...

(Licurgo Santoni, p. 373)

For some months now, to tell the truth, Monsignor Sogaro had been thinking of ‘a *supreme effort*’ to obtain the prisoners, freedom, which was now considered “*impossible*”⁹⁵ even by Lord Cromer*.

After he had had to let go of the idea that it might be the Austrian Emperor who would negotiate with the Mahdi, and after having decided to open a ‘*small station*’ at Suakin in order to keep some missionaries as close as possible to the border of the new Mahdist State, the Apostolic Vicar had convinced the Austrian General Consul, Gsiller, to prepare a letter for the Mahdi which Domenico Vicentini* would then have been given the task of delivering.

Having left Cairo on the 7th of October 1884, Fr. Vicentini arrived in Dongola, which was still under Egyptian control, on the 14th of November. During the journey, he stopped over in Aswan, where he could have a “*letter of recommendation from Mr. Santoni, Director of the Post in Upper Egypt. The letter*”, he explained to Sembianti, “*is for the postal agent in Dongola. He tells him to help me with everything I might need and to present me to the chief camel dealer, who already travelled twice recently from Dongola to El-Obeid*”...⁹⁶.

About one month later, on the 10th of December 1884, Fr. Domenico communicated to Monsignor Sogaro that the messenger who had been contracted, Abd Al Giabbar Al Abadi would leave for Omdurman on the 13th, carrying with him two letters for the Mahdi, one from the Consul Gsiller and the other from Monsignor Sogaro himself. He would also take a message for Fr. Luigi Bonomi. In this latter, it was written as follows:

⁹⁵ ACR, A/39/34/27: Sogaro to Sembianti. Cairo, 26th September 1884.

⁹⁶ *La Nigrizia*, 6(1884)171-72.

Very reverend Fr. Luigi Bonomi,

Dongola, 8 Dicembere 1884

[...] Monsignor is always very eager for your (well-being). For this reason, I have come to Dongola. This messenger carries two letters to Muhammad Ahmad, one from the General Consul, the other from Monsignor Sogaro. May God bend the heart of Muhammad Ahmad to give you full liberty. If you know any way that we can better negotiate with Muhammad Ahmad, please let us know immediately. We will be willing to make any sacrifice. Give us your news"...

"In the event that the missionaries may not have anything with which to write a note of reply and this is very possible", Fr. Vicentini wrote to Monsignor Sogaro, "I gave to the Arab a sheet of very fine paper and a small piece of pencil to take with him and I told him to hide it inside a date to avoid any suspicion.

The Arab will take the desert route via Abu Gussi or Debeh. He will go with a load of dates, probably joining some Arab merchants or Kababisc.

*They say that in eight days he can reach Omdurman"...*⁹⁷

In Omdurman Market

Knowing that there was no longer anyone at Rahad and thinking that all the prisoners, including Fr. Bonomi, had been transferred to the areas around Khartoum, the messenger set out for Omdurman, where he arrived after more or less 15 days.

As he himself relates later to Licurgo Santoni, he had started to go around the market with the excuse of selling his load of dates.

"Having met a white man", he recalls, "I asked him if he were a missionary. He told me to follow him and arriving at a hut, I found one of the missionaries called Adam. This was the name received by Dimitri Cocorempas after he had pro-

⁹⁷ *La Nigrizia*, 1(1885)9-10.

nounced the formula. He showed me the sisters, who occupy some huts nearby. After he assured me that these were the people I was looking for, I handed over the letters asking if they would deliver those for Muhammad Ahmad. At that question, they told me to be very careful and not to speak with anyone, because if those letters were to reach destination, they could surely be killed [...].

So, I left promising to come back often. But, shortly after this, I was arrested and accused of spying for the English”...⁹⁸

The Fall of Khartoum

“Khartoum had been under siege since March 12th and it held out for nine months against repeated attacks.”

After the fall of Berber, which came about in May 1884, the situation in Khartoum became particularly difficult. *“The city,” La Nigrizia* reported in March 1885, *“had been under siege since March 12th and it held out for nine months against repeated attacks. Gordon sent dispatches and information to General Wolseley in all directions, but they rarely reached destination [...].”*

This is how they say that Khartoum fell. It was due to the betrayal of Faray Pascia⁹⁹ and of many friends and agents of the Mahdi who had spread propaganda in the city in his favour. Faray Pascia was given charge by General Gordon of the eastern part of the city, right in front of Omdurman where the Mahdi was camped. Therefore, he could welcome all the deserters of the enemy who ultimately were more numerous due

⁹⁸ ACR, A/32/5/13/3: Santoni to Sogaro. Dongola, 28th February, 1885.

⁹⁹ In reality, before the ‘betrayal’ of Farragh Pascia, chief of the Sudanese Africans who was commanding that part of the front, there was the incomprehensible ‘abandonment’ of England (see, Delebecque-Giardini, pp. 161-79). The accusation against Farragh Pacia, however, seems baseless. Gordon maintained him at his command post until the last moment, and the Mahdi decapitated him “*shortly after the fall of Khartoum*” (Ib. p. 260). The causes of the fall of Khartoum are considered also in the Report of General Wolseley* to the Minister for war, with the comment also of Major Gozzi (pp. 367-370).

to a shortage of provisions in the Mahdi's camp [...].

On 21st of January, Faray Pascia pointed out to General Gordon that there was great misery in the camp of the Mahdi¹⁰⁰ and that the rebels would desert in hundreds if they could be sure of crossing the white river safely. Gordon immediately gave orders for two steamboats to go by night close to Omdurman and take aboard all the deserters from the enemy camp. The captains of the two steamboats had already pledged loyalty to the Mahdi and during the night of the 25th, a considerable number of the Mahdi's troops were transported to the western entry to Khartoum. On the 26th at five in the morning, Faray Pascia opened the city gates, in agreement with the fugitives who were already inside the city. When this had been done, a massacre took place in which General Gordon and the Austrian Consul Hansal perished together with two thousand people". (pp. 67-68)

"The 25th of January 1885, was a Sunday", Slatin, who was in Khartoum wrote, "which I will never forget. Towards evening, the Mahdi, accompanied by his Caliphs, crossed the river. He addressed his warriors united there in such a way as to incite them to battle. The plan was to attack Khartoum the following day. I was hoping that someone might have warned Gordon, so he could make preparations.

The followers of the Mahdi had received orders not to speak with anyone. After having blessed his men and made them swear loyalty until death, the Mahdi returned to Omdurman with his Caliphs [...].

You can imagine in what terrible agitation I spent the night [...].

When the sun rose [...] suddenly there rose up shouts of joy... Khartoum, they told me, had been attacked and was already in the hands of the Mahdists. I did not want to believe this sad news and I went out of my tent.

In front of the area of the Mahdi and his Caliphs, a huge crowd had gathered, accepting to surrender. I could even recognize some people. In the front, there were three African sol-

¹⁰⁰ According to J. Ohrwalder, in fact, "after the arrival of the Mahdi in Omdurman, there was a terrible famine", because during the journey, "no one thought about cultivating the fields but only about destroying and deserting everything." (p. 157)

diers, one of whom was called Schetta [...] and he had in his hands something which was dripping blood. It was the head of General Gordon!

I felt sick and my breath was taken away. Nevertheless, I was able to control myself and overcoming my emotion, I looked at the pale face which was being presented to me! His blue eyes were half open and his mouth had kept its distinctive shape, his face was calm and his features were relaxed [...].

I returned inside my tent and threw myself on the ground, more dead than alive. Khartoum had been taken. Gordon was dead!"...¹⁰¹

At this point, unfortunately, all of the Sudan, except a part of the province of Dongola, found itself under the dominion of the Mahdi. Therefore, all of its inhabitants were obliged to submit themselves to the laws of a traditional Islamic Caliphate.

With regard to Khartoum, *"as he had decided about the other cities destroyed by him, the Mahdi did not want the city to be raised up again from its ruins. He established his residence at the fort in Omdurman on the left bank of the Nile. Many houses were destroyed and the bricks taken to Omdurman. Only the Palace of Gordon and the buildings of the Catholic mission were spared."*¹⁰²

The Return of the Messenger

For his good fortune, Abdel Gabbar, as Licurgo Santoni called him, had been kept in prison only for twenty days and then released for lack of proof. He decided, however, to complete the mission for which he had been contracted, taking advantage, perhaps, of the confusion created with the fall of Khartoum. So he remained *"for some time at the market, without ever approaching the missionaries, so as not to fall under suspicion. But one night, when everyone was sleeping, he could approach*

¹⁰¹ See, Slatin, R. – pp. 463-465. *"It is too horrible."*, one can read in the Journal of the Queen Victoria, dated February 5th 1885, *"The government alone merits every blame for refusing to send an expedition before it was too late"*... (quoted by Delebecque-Giardini, p. 266).

¹⁰² Canestrini, A, *I Prigionieri del Mahdi*, p. 61.

their hut to receive news to take back to Dongola.” ¹⁰³

That news, both written and oral, was received by Licurgo Santoni, because Fr. Vicentini was no longer in Dongola, as he had been recalled to Cairo by Monsignor Sogaro who was worried by what had happened in Khartoum.

“After two months of painful waiting, he explained in this last letter of March 2nd 1885 to the director of the Corriere of Verona, when I saw that the messenger sent to the Mahdi had not returned, and when I realized that the situation in the desert of Bayuda was becoming more dangerous, I thought of recalling the reverend Father Domenico Vicentini from Dongola. On the 11th of the month which has just ended, he wrote to me: I will leave this evening. Fifteen days after his departure, the messenger finally arrived there, bringing a letter from Sr. Teresa Grigolini, dated February 3rd from Omdurman on the other side of Khartoum. As you will be already aware from the telegram, the prisoners are in a situation of great suffering due to the shortage of food. They implore us not to take any further steps to approach the Mahdi because this could put them into grave danger. We learn too that the massacre in Khartoum was extremely bloody. This much I learned from Mr. Santoni, the general director of the Post in Upper Egypt and Nubia, who is now in Dongola and to whom Fr. Vicentini entrusted this business on his departure”... ¹⁰⁴

The written Content of the Message

Faithful to the task entrusted to him, Licurgo Santoni had immediately sent to the Apostolic Vicar the piece of cloth (15.8 x 20.8 cms) on which Teresa Grigolini, with the pencil specially sent to her by Vicentini, had written:

Very Reverend Father,

The misfortune in which we find ourselves is as deep as a bottomless pit. We have received the letter from Abdal Gabbar Abdalla. After having reflected, we have

¹⁰³ Santoni, *L'Alto Egitto e Nubia 1863 – 1898*, p. 374.

¹⁰⁴ *La Nigrizia*, 2(1885)40-41.

decided to attempt some other way and we would ask you to send to us here 16 camels used to carry merchandise. If we can manage with these, fine and well. If not, the money we could get for them would provide food and clothes for us and we can tell you that we are in dire need.

Entrust to this man from Dongola the merchandise in front of two witnesses who will keep the secret. It is important that no one there will know about his relationship with us. The success of the venture will depend on this [...].

Fr. Luigi is in El Obeid and he suffers as we do. Do not write again to our King, otherwise we shall lose our heads!

Chartum was completely massacred. It is estimated that there were 2,000 victims. We plead with you to help us as soon as possible.

We greet you heartily and we entrust ourselves to your charity.

Sr. Teresa Grigolini

*PS The Consul Hansal was killed together with all the Europeans and Gordon.*¹⁰⁵

The Oral Information

On the 28th of February 1885, from Dongola, Licurgo Santoni addressed the following letter to Francesco Sogaro, in which, among other things, he wrote:

“On Thursday morning, the 26th, Sceti Abu Batir brought me a piece of cloth on which Sr. Teresa Grigolini had written the response which I already had the honour of sending you on the evening of the 26th. Here below, you will find the information obtained from the messenger, by way of interrogation [...].

Q. When did you leave from Dongola?

A. About 70 days ago.

Q. Where were you going?

A. I went to Abu Gossi and got a camel and some merchandise. Then I went to Cordofan via Ombilela and I was accompanied by four Bedouins. After 15 days we arrived in Omduran where Muhammad Ahmad lives.

¹⁰⁵ AMN, 12(2006)155: Grigolini to Vicentini. Omdurman, 3rd February, 1885.

Q. As soon as you arrived, what did you do?

A. I went to the market and I started selling the goods I had with me. There I met a white man and I asked if he was a missionary. He told me to follow him and when we reached a hut, I met one of the missionaries called Adam, who showed me the sisters who live in three huts nearby. When I was sure that these were the people I was looking for, I gave them the letters asking if they wanted me to deliver to Muhammad Ahmad the letters that were for him. At that question, they asked me not to speak with anyone about this, because if those letters were delivered, this could be the cause of their death. So, they tore them up.

They asked me how come it was so long that no one thought about them, even though there is plenty of money? So, I left telling them that I would return often. However, shortly afterwards, I was arrested and accused of spying for the English. After twenty days of prison, I was released. I had a European companion who was also in prison. He was called Slatin before and now he is called Osmar [...].

After I received the letter from Sr. Teresa who sewed it into a fold on the left shoulder of my shirt, I remained there for another fifteen days and then I started out on the return journey.

Q. What do the missionaries do and how do they dress?

A. They buy and sell some small things in the market in order to earn enough for some food. They dress like the Dervishes and each of them has a Muslim name. Only the sisters are allowed to keep their own religion.

Q. What do they eat and where do they stay?

A. I ate with them twice. Once they had meat and the other time they ate bread with Doka. They have four tokol (huts); two for the men and two for the women.

Q. Do you think it is possible for them to escape?

A. If you give me the money necessary, I think I can manage, because they are not guarded¹⁰⁶ and if they could get the camels, they could escape easily enough.

Q. What do you think would be necessary in order to try to escape?

¹⁰⁶ Abdel Gabbar **believed** that the prisoners were not guarded, but that error, in the end, would cost him his life. When, in fact, he returned to Khartoum for the third time, to aid in the escape of "others from the mission [...] he was recognized and led before the Caliph, Abdullahi, and without hesitation, he was beheaded." (Santoni, L. - p. 382).

A. The missionaries are twelve; five men and seven women, so it was established that I should go with 16 camels; 12 for them and 4 for me and three Bedouins that I would take with me. On the way there, the 16 camels should carry merchandise. If we carry merchandise and pretend we are merchants, it will be easy to enter the camp of the Mahdi. Then, after having got rid of the merchandise, when the moment is right, we could attempt to escape. I think we should be successful, because, as I said before, they are forgotten among the crowd and no one cares about them.

Q. How much do you think this attempted escape would cost?

A. 240 pounds to buy the 16 camels and 160 for the merchandise; so, 400 pounds all together.

Q. What news did they give you about Chartum?

A. They told me that one of their companions lives in the garden of the mission.

Q. Did you give the money to the missionaries and try to bring someone with you?

A. When I was arrested, they took the camels and the 27 thalers which I had with me. I wanted to bring with me the youngest of the sisters. But at the last moment, they were against this idea, because they feared that they would be killed when it would be discovered that one of them was missing. They decided to remain united and wait until I would bring the help that they entrusted me to bring.

Q. Have you decided to return to try to bring the missionaries to safety?

A. Once you give me the money, I will leave immediately after having made the necessary preparations. I commit myself to bringing all of them, because the sisters will also manage the journey well. They themselves assured me of this when we established how we would escape.

I did not find it appropriate to speak with him about how much he would be paid personally if you wished to take up his proposal," Santoni concluded, "I will do that with great pleasure if you consider it worthwhile"...¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ ACR, A/32/5/13/3: Santoni to Sogaro. Dongola, 28th February, 1885.

“I Find Some Contradictions...”

“I am sending immediately to your Eminence a copy of the letter which arrived here yesterday evening from Dongola,” Monsignor Sogaro wrote to Cardinal Simeoni on the 18th of March 1885, *“in which the Director General of the Post in Upper Egypt and Nuba, Mr. Santoni reports partially in the form of interrogation, the news which he got orally from our messenger Abdel Gabbar [...].”*

[the transcription of the interrogation follows]

I wanted to transcribe faithfully this interrogation, so that Your Eminence may be informed minutely about everything. On the whole, I find some contradictions with the letter written by Sr. Teresina [received eight days ago].

First of all, the letter of Fr. Vicentini was addressed to Fr. Luigi Bonomi. Now, Sr. Grigolini responds in hers that Fr. Bonomi is in El-Obeid. However, in this interrogation, it is stated that the missionaries in Omdurman are five, among whom, there should be Fr. Bonomi since apart from him, there are only four others, and that is, Fr. Ohrwalder, Fr. Rossignoli and the two brothers, Locatelli and Regnotto. The sisters still living are five Europeans and one African. Here however, there are seven mentioned. In addition, how come the missionaries did not write a word if they were present? For this and other reasons, here we are all convinced that the so called missionaries spoken about here are none other than some Greeks to whom, as it was asserted more than once by Gordon, the sisters were joined in fake marriages in order to avoid them falling into the hands of the Muslims.

In any case, as soon as I received these details I discussed with some influential people here on what should be done. I also sent a telegram to Santoni in Dongola asking him to send them 300 thalers in silver while still considering whether to try any other ways, if it will be possible”...¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ AP SC Afr. C., 9(1885)1101–1103. Cairo, March 18th 1885.

Better to Avoid Publicity

In response to a letter which he had just received from Cardinal Simeoni, Monsignor Sogaro wrote:

“Eminent Prince and Father

I have just received your most appreciated letter for which I thank you.

In future, I will adhere scrupulously to the advice of Your Eminence about avoiding putting the prisoners in danger by publications which might eventually be seen by the Mahdi. I would only ask Your Eminence to allow me to explain the reasons for which, after seeking advice from several people, I decided to publish something.

On February 26th, the messenger we had sent arrived in Dongola after having contacted the Mahdi; Fr. Vicentini had already left Dongola for Cairo. Mr. Santoni, who was then in Dongola, having received personally the letter of Sr. Grigolini, did not only send a copy to Lord Wolesley, but he also sent copies to a newspaper in Florence, to the correspondent of the Daily Telegraph and to an Anglo - French newspaper in Alexandria, The Egyptian Gazette [...]. Mr Santoni, as he explained when he wrote to me excusing himself, did it in order to raise and engage the interest of the world in favour of the poor prisoners.

What upset me most, and induced me to break my silence, was that apart from the letter of Sr. Grigolini, he also spread the news he had received directly from the messenger, which seemed to portray the defection of all the men¹⁰⁹ because of his assertion that he had seen them dressed as Dervishes and that they all had Muslim names. It seemed to me then, that the danger of the publicity had already come about, and that with my publication, I could stem the negative effects of what had been published, without worsening things for the prisoners, with my own statement. In any case, I repeat, I will follow scrupulously your advice.

[...].

Over the past few days, I have received four letters from Khartoum. Three are from poor Mr. Hansal. Something very serious is mentioned: he understood from a certain Kalama-

¹⁰⁹ In reality, the messenger had exchanged the Greeks for the missionaries.

tiano, of whom I had spoken in one of my last letters, that all the men and women, with the exception of the Reverend Father Luigi Bonomi had, in the depths of their despair, embraced Islam, and that if Bonomi persisted, he would have to be ready for martyrdom. The letter is dated the 7th of October 1884”...¹¹⁰

Conduct “Beyond all Praise”

In the letter of the deceased Consul Hansal, dated October 7th 1884, we find written the following:

*“Most Reverend Monsignor,
[...] I was able to speak with Mr. Giorgio Calamatiano, who had brought letters from the Sisters in Kordofan.¹¹¹ With this man, who was dressed as a Dervish, we sent 100 thalers to the poor missionaries. All the Christian prisoners (13 Europeans, 12 Greeks, 11 Syrians) were once together with the Mahdi in Sciatt, close to the White river, four hours distance from Duem. They are all Muslims [...]. Mr. Calamatiano told the story of how the missionaries and the Sisters, in the utmost despair, had accepted Islam and how the sisters were married with the Greeks. Only Fr. Luigi Bonomi remained faithful, but he is destined to be martyred if he does not convert. I felt it better to keep this news secret, but Gordon and the Greeks came to know about it before me.
The siege of Khartoum continues”...¹¹²*

Now this letter, which arrived in Cairo in April 1885, should not have been a surprise for the Apostolic Vicar who, on the 6th of March had written to *Propaganda Fide*:

“In the past two days there have been upsetting rumours regarding the Sudan. It is feared that England might be forced

¹¹⁰ APF Afr. C., vol. 9(1885)1113–14: Sogaro to Simeoni. Cairo, April 16th 1885.

¹¹¹ It must have seemed strange that the sisters would have entrusted the letters to this Giorgi Calamatiano or Clementino, who in reality was the postman for the Mahdi himself. (see, Ohrwalder, G – p. 174).

¹¹² ACR, A/32/5/13/2: Hansal to Sogaro. Khartoum, 7th October 1884.

to renounce the campaign planned against the Mahdi due to awkwardness with Russia [...].

*Two days ago, I went to Sir Baring, British Plenipotentiary, and I asked him to tell me confidentially what he had been able to find out about our poor prisoners and especially about the sisters. He told me that it was true that in order to escape from the aggressions of the Arab Muslims, they agreed to pass themselves off as the wives of some Greeks, but this was no more than a clever scheme. For the rest, their conduct is above all praise. Nevertheless, we still experience great anxiety when we think of the good sisters and the terrible trials to which they are exposed"...*¹¹³

The affirmation of Sir Baring who attributed to the sisters “*a conduct above all praise*” should have helped to balance in a positive way that made by “*Mr. Giorgio Calamatiano*”.

Evidently, however, some doubt remained. If we look at the “*State of Personnel 1880 -93*” of the Congregation, we read that, while in 1884 there were “*six sisters in Obeid*”, the following year, 1885, there were none.¹¹⁴

In order to remove this doubt, however, it was necessary to attempt in any way possible to bring about their liberation.

¹¹³ APF Afr . C., Vol. 9(1885) 1156–57: Sogaro to Simeoni. Cairo, 6th March 1885.

¹¹⁴ See, APMR, VI/A/2/10–1888.

7. The Liberation of the First Prisoners

Despite the doubts raised by the letter of the Consul Hansal and by the report of the messenger on his return from Omdurman, the Apostolic Vicar did not hesitate to take the steps necessary to attempt to free the prisoners. His letter of March 18th 1885, already quoted above, ended with the following words:

"[...] Yesterday, I already consulted some people about what could be done and I also delegated Mr. Santoni in Dongola, via telegram, to send 300 thalers in silver, while I still think about the possibility of trying other ways".

Five days later, Monsignor Sogaro himself was forced to communicate that *"the messenger who had returned from the Mahdi"* and who had offered to repeat the undertaking, was no longer reliable and that, at least for the moment, another *'trusted man'* could not be found.¹¹⁵

"Yesterday I received a dispatch from Dongola from Mr. Santoni, he informed the following 29th of April, "in which he announced that he had sent money with two messengers, one going to Omdurman [...] and the other to El Obeid [...]."

However, since past experience tells us that without one of our own people, it is difficult to ensure a good outcome, I have decided to send the Reverend Fr. Dichtl to Dongola.

I felt it was my duty to do this because in case some tragedy has taken place, this time, we will surely come to know about it, since the messengers have been entrusted with gathering all the information possible"... (Ib. f. 1161).

¹¹⁵ APF Afr.C., 9(1885)1109: Sogaro to Simeoni. Cairo, 23rd March, 1885.

Initiatives of Licurgo Santoni

After having received the telegram of Monsignor Sogaro, who thanked him for all that he had done, and “*exhorted him to do something for the prisoners*”, Licurgo Santoni, “*considering that the Mahdi and his followers had left Obeid to besiege Khartoum, supposed that perhaps Fr. Bonomi could be easily liberated*”.

“*After some fruitless attempts*”, we can read in his book, “*I was finally able to find an Arab from the Ababde tribe, a certain Muhammad Mahamud, with whom I made a contract in which the Arab undertook to travel to El Obeid and to take Fr. Bonomi and bring him to safety to Dongola. The recompense agreed was 100 pounds sterling [...]. On April 26th, this Muhammad left for El Obeid, taking a message from me which he was able to hide by sewing it into a seam of his shirt.*

*Despite the many difficulties encountered, this messenger managed to bring Fr. Bonomi to safety*¹¹⁶ *and I had the pleasure of shaking hands with him on his arrival in Uadi Halfa*”... (pp. 374–375).

The day before the departure of the messenger for El-Obeid, as agreed, the director of the Post had also sent to the superior of the sisters who were prisoners in Omdurman an amount of money accompanied by the following note:

“*Sr. Teresa Grigolini,*

I received your letter dated 3.2.85 and I sent it to Monsignor Sogaro. The person carrying this note has been entrusted with bringing one of you to safety, since it is impossible to provide the means for all of you at the same time. He will give you, in exchange for a receipt, 100 megidi. In the name of the Bishop, I would ask you to profit from this opportunity by sending one sister so that we will be better able to help the rest of you who remain. We are all working to free you and, with some help from heaven, I hope we will succeed. Please accept my greetings to all as your fellow countryman.

L. Santoni”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ With regards to the liberation of Fr. Bonomi, see *La Nigrizia*, 4(1885)103-104; 135-154.

¹¹⁷ ACR, A/32/9/3: Santoni to Grigolini. Dongola, April 25th 1885.

Now, with regard to this proposal received to allow one of the prisoners (sister) leave with the man who had brought the money, unfortunately, nothing was done. On the 22nd of June 1885, in fact, Fr. Giovanni Dichtl wrote to Fr. Vicentini:

*“The man arrived in Omdurman [...]. On his arrival, one of his companions also left [...]. Our messenger gave him the news that our sisters are in Omdurman. He has not seen them all because he does not want to look for them immediately so as not to attract attention to himself immediately on his arrival. He wanted to persuade two to leave with the messenger who was about to depart, but they did not want to accept, for fear that the others may be killed after their departure.”*¹¹⁸

Last Unsuccessful Attempt at Ransom

On the 8th of June 1885, Fr. Giovanni Dichtl, entrusted with contacting the prisoners, wrote the following letter from Wadi Halfa to Monsignor Sogaro who was in Italy at the time awaiting his Episcopal ordination:

“Illustrious Reverend Monsignor Apostolic Vicar!

*Greetings from Wady Halfa. I arrived here the other day [...]. With regards to the journey to **Dongola**, I am experiencing great difficulties: the commander in Aswan and even more so the one who is here, don't want to know about it, because everyone is escaping from Dongola [...].*

*The Arabs here say that there is no danger in Dongola, but that the English are sending the people away [...]. Merchants and Arabs are unhappy about this withdrawal. Camels for hire cannot be found anywhere, not even at **10 pounds sterling** per camel.*

*Shech **Abu Baker** will arrive soon and then we will see. Santoni advises me to stay here for two months. I am ready to obey any order that you will give me [...].*

The English have imprisoned the relatives of the Mahdi. I think there are nine of them, but I am not sure. They have made them write to the Mahdi saying that if he wants to free his rel-

¹¹⁸ ACR, A/26/26/14: Dichtl to Vicentini. Wadi Halfa, June 22nd 1885.

atives, he should free all the **Europeans**. The letter was written in the presence of Mr. Santoni and sent to the Mahdi.

These hostages were brought from Dongola. We hope that something will come of it.

[...].

I have spoken with Mr. Santoni. He still does not know anything about the last messengers. One was entrusted to bring Fr. Bonomi from El Obeid and the other was directed towards Omdurman. It would be easy to bring them away by camels prepared for that purpose, because our prisoners, according to Santoni, live in the Mahdi's camp in great misery as people who have been forgotten. Mr. Santoni believes that Sr. Teresa wrote not to take any steps 'with our King' (not to say 'Mahdi') so that he would not become aware that there are people taking an interest in them and so, forgetting them, they might be able to take the opportunity to escape. In addition, there is now free trade with the Mahdi and this will facilitate things.

*[...]. All the news I have heard so far, seems to be consistent. **The Mahdi no longer gives them anything to live on**, while before he used to give something, even if it was just very little. Therefore, they have begun to sew Arab clothes and do small trade with grain in order to earn a living. So, according to these opinions, it appears that they are not Muslims and that they are dressed as they are because they don't have other clothes or in order not to stand out. The dress does not make the monk! [...].*

*With the next letter, I hope to be able to give you more interesting news" ...*¹¹⁹

Teresa was Right

With regard to the attempt to persuade the Mahdi to release the prisoners as an exchange deal, Teresa was right. Eight days later, in fact, Fr. Domenico Vicentini sent the following letter to the future bishop from Cairo:

¹¹⁹ ACR, A/26/27/3: Dichtl to Sogaro. Wadi Halfa, June 8th 1885.

“Most Reverend Monsignor,

I have just received a letter from General Wolseley addressed to you. Not knowing what it contained, I thought it better to open it to see if [...] I might be able to respond. I will send it to you immediately [...]. The report which it contains is dreadful! May God have mercy on our unfortunate brothers and sisters. It would be necessary to confirm the signatures [...].

I gave a short letter for General Wolseley to the messenger who brought the letter and who wanted also a receipt of delivery for himself. In the letter I thanked General Wolseley in your name and told him you had left for Europe and that I would send you the letter immediately”...

The letter of the General, which was written in French, was copied by Monsignor Sogaro, and it reads as follows:

“Kasr el Nussa, 16th June 1885

Monsignor,

I have the honour of informing you that Major General Sir Redwet Bulber based in Dongola has received a letter from the Mahdi, written in response to one which we had sent him, in which we had proposed to him an exchange of prisoners. That is, he should exchange the European prisoners in Khartoum for a certain number of his close relatives who are presently in our custody.

In this letter, after having invited us to convert to the Islamic faith, the only way to salvation, the Mahdi refused categorically to make the exchange proposed, affirming that all the prisoners have converted to the religion of Muhammad and that for this reason, they are dearer to him than his relatives. The same prisoners, he says, would not consent to return among infidels even if he sought to send them.

Included with this letter, there is a second one in Arabic. This second letter is signed by all the 96 prisoners. They declare that they are well treated and are happy and if they were invited to go to Dongola, they would not go. There is no doubt that the prisoners have been forced to sign this second letter under the threat of being mistreated or perhaps killed.

Among the signatures there are the following names: written first in Arabic and then with European letters:

Fortunata Qasè – Maria Caprini – Teresa Grigolini – [...] – Do-

menico Pollinari – Locatelli Isidoro – Giuseppe Regnotto - Paolo Rossignoli- Giuseppe Ohrwalder – Luigi Bonomi – [...] Venturini Elisabetta – Corsi Concetta [...] – Chattarina Ciharini [...].

I am very sorry, Monsignor, that the efforts made until now to remove the prisoners from the sad situation in which they find themselves, have been unsuccessful. I assure you that I will continue to do everything possible to obtain their liberation [...].

Always your servant

General Wolseley”.

Then evidently, since the document had been copied for the rector of Verona, the writer had added:

Rome 29/6 /85

Most reverend and dear Fr. Sembianti,

I have written a copy of the letter. I also believe that we can have no faith in what is written”...¹²⁰

A Deliberately Deceitful Affirmation

On the following 25th of June, Fr. Domenico Vicentini from Cairo had the joy of informing his superior about the liberation of Luigi Bonomi. Publishing the news, the editor of *La Nigrizia* added:

“Eleven of our missionaries are still prisoners of the Mahdi: 2 priests, 3 lay people and 6 sisters. The media had divulged rumours which were not very complimentary to our companions. They did this basing themselves on a declaration signed by 96 prisoners of the Mahdi, without realizing that this statement was deliberately deceitful. In fact, in this declaration, the prisoners were stated as saying that they were happy to be with the Mahdi and that if left free, they would not have abandoned him. This is unlikely, in fact, absurd. In addition, the reverend Father Bonomi, who arrived safe and sound in Dongola on the 24th of June, when interrogated on this argument by the English, declared that he had never heard tell of and knew nothing about such a declaration”...¹²¹

¹²⁰ ACR, A/32/5/13/5: Vicentini to Sogaro. Cairo, June 16th 1885.

¹²¹ *La Nigrizia*, 4(1885)103-104.

Those ‘Well Treated’ by the Mahdi’

On the 28th of June 1885, from Wadi Halfa, Fr. Giovanni Dichtl sent to Fr. Domenico Vicentini, the following news about the prisoners.

*“I spoke at length with a Greek who was present at the fall of Khartoum. [...]. Here is what he said about those ‘well treated’ by the Mahdi. He repeatedly saw the **six Sisters**, including the African, and a priest who was Muslim (according to the description it was Rossignoli) and another, but he did not see more [...].*

*This Greek who had been in Khartoum for **six** years and almost died from suffering and privation, hid himself for two days in a **public toilet**! He affirms how at the death of Gordon, they dragged him through the streets, tearing off his beard hair by hair and then cut his body to pieces and exposed his head in Omdurman.*

The sisters were tied to horses and beaten when the horses moved and were badly mistreated so that they might accept to become Muslims. They are in fake marriages [...]. Sr. Teresa is bent over like an old woman. They make the clothes of the Dervishes and sell them. Now they are a little resigned because they can earn their living, but before they used to cry a lot. When Fr. Luigi comes, we will hear the truth [...].

With regard to the 96 signatures on the letter of the Mahdi, you should not worry. Who would believe such gossip that they are well treated – (Slatin is in chains!) – and they would not like to come away even if they were sent? [...]. Do you believe that the signatures are valid? I don’t! Do you not understand the way in which these names were first written in Arabic and then transcribed in Italian? [...]. I have almost made up my mind to write to the Times of Egypt a short confutation”... ¹²²

We don’t know whether, or not, Fr. Dichtl wrote that ‘*small confutation*’ which he proposed. What we do know, however, is what Fr. Leone Hanriot wrote from Namur, that is, that the headlines of the European newspapers were “*full of this news of apostasy*”... ¹²³

¹²² ACR, A/26/26/15: Dichtl to Vicentini. Wadi Halfa, June 28th 1885.

¹²³ ACR, A/27/6/46: Hanriot to Vicentini. Namur, July 27th 1885.

The Death of the Mahdi

“Towards the middle of June”, Slatin recalls, “the Mahdi took ill and for some days, he did not appear, even for prayer. At first, though, no one was worried about the state of his health, because he had received from the prophet, as he had many times told his followers, the happy news that he would successfully conquer Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem and he would die in Kufa after a long and glorious life.

The illness, however, was serious, because he had typhoid. After the sixth day, in fact, those close to him began to fear for his life. The Caliph, who would be the person most affected by the outcome of his illness, never moved from the Mahdi’s bedside by day or by night [...].

*On the morning of the seventh day, his health had worsened so much that no one doubted any longer that the Mahdi would die [...]. He was already unconscious, with some moments of lucidity which were becoming fewer and fewer. When he realized that he was dying, he said in a supplicating voice to those around him: The Caliph Abdullahi is designated by the Prophet as my successor. He and I are the same. As you followed me, now do the same with him. May God have mercy on me”.*¹²⁴

It was probably after the death of the Mahdi that Teresa Grigolini received a message from the ‘Most esteemed Fr. Vicentini’. Teresa, who did not yet know about the happy outcome of the escape of Luigi Bonomi, replied as follows:

*“We have received again your news and we still hope for some help from your charity. For such a long time now we are struggling with fear, hunger, nakedness and every kind of misfortune, so much so that we are broken and desperate. If you knew just one thousandth of what we are suffering you would certainly have sacrificed before now a few million thalers. If you had given some money to **Mohammed Abu el Hassun**, he would have brought it to us directly... We still want to hope that you will entrust some money to him on his return with this letter, which is in the name of all of us here. We all implore and beseech you to help us. We are divided. A few of us are here and*

¹²⁴ Slatin, R.- *Fer et Feu au Soudan*, pp. 498–500.

others are in Kordofan. In Kordofan there are Fr. Luigi Bonomi, Fr. Josef Ohrwalder, Fr. Paolo Rosignoli, Giuseppe Regnato. Here in Omdurman, close to Khartoum, there are Isidoro Locatelli, Domenico Polinari and six sisters: Sr. Concetta Corsi, Sr. Caterina Chincarini, Sr. Marietta Caprini, Sr. Elisabetta Venturini, Sr. Fortunata Quascè and Sr. Teresa Grigolini, and we are all in good health. We sisters, in order to avoid horrendous dangers, are divided in three houses under the protection of three Greeks who are good enough to keep us hidden and to share with us the little bread they have. Our work used to help us at least not to go to bed hungry, but for some time now, our sewing is not so much in demand and we do not earn enough. So once again, we beg you to try any means to help us and if it is not successful the first time, it will be the second or third time. Never mind about the money which will be lost. When we get out of this hell pit, we will go ourselves in search of charity in Europe to pay off the debts.

*In case there is no one there in charge of the mission, we are addressing this letter to the head of the government, asking him to send a telegram to Cairo or somewhere where there are the superiors of the Church so that they might send us at the earliest, through **Mohamed Abu el Hassun** two or three thousand thalers. We will pay him 150 thalers. He can deliver the money directly to Demetri Cocorombo our well deserving Wakil [delegate]. He can still easily send money to Kordofan for the Fathers who are also in dire need.*

Above all else, we beg you to keep this secret because many people come and go from here and even just a word said about the Church personnel could cost us our lives. Many greetings from each of us. With profound esteem and respect,

*Humble servant,
Sr. Teresa Grigolini*

PS. I recommend this man who has good will. The letter he was carrying was taken by the fuyara and he was very sorry about it. This country has become a place of horror. Hunger is causing disasters among the poor. The Mahdi died on the 22nd of June, but his Caliph, who is a worse demon than the first, remains.”¹²⁵

¹²⁵ AMN, 12(2006)156–157: Grigolini to Vicentini, not dated.

The Escape Attempt of Elisabetta Venturini

Some days later, we don't know exactly when, Teresa Grigolini entrusted another message to a Syrian merchant, evidently known as a man who could be trusted. In the note, she wrote the following:

"We are entrusting to this Syrian gentleman, who is called Giorgio Iusef Abagi, one of our sisters, Sr. Elisabetta Venturini, so that he can take her to Assuan. If on arrival at Berber, he will find the road without too much danger, he will take her with him, otherwise, he will come only with this note of mine, which is written in the name of all of us, in which we beseech you to help us as for a long time now we are bearing the most deplorable misery.

This man is well disposed towards helping us and according to our plan, he would risk trying to save all of us if he had the money necessary [...].

*Our salvation is first in the hands of God, and then in a good sum of money. So please think about this. We are so tired of suffering that we have no more strength. If Sr. Elisabetta arrives, she will tell you everything in detail"...*¹²⁶

What 'Bettina', as Sr. Elisabetta Venturini was often called, had to tell, can now be read in her diary where she writes:

"One good day, or bad, as one wishes, the Mahdi sent one of his satraps to take Sr. Concetta and Sr. Venturini because he wanted to see them. There is no telling of their fear since no one knew the reason why he wanted the sisters there in his place. Perhaps he wished to question them about the two who had escaped, and thousands of other things. In brief, saying good bye to Sr. Grigolini and Sr. Chincarini, they were very frightened thinking that perhaps they would never return. On their arrival, the Mahdi had them brought to a small courtyard where he was seated on a beautiful mat colorfully woven and made the sisters sit near him. Then, turning to Sr. Corsi, he congratulated her, knowing that she was married to Faragialla, as they called Isidoro. And after a thousand grimaces and faces, he

¹²⁶ AMN, 12(2006)158-159: Grigolini to Vicentini, not dated.

turned to Sr. Venturini. saying that she must also marry [...]. After some customary local compliments, he dismissed the Sisters”... (pp. 83- 85)

Was it this renewed interest of the Mahdi in her, that convinced Elisabetta, who was not yet ‘married’, to try to escape at all costs?

It is not improbable. It was just that, having decided to take the opportunity which had presented itself, she denied herself, without wanting to, the real possibility of being freed, as was verified a short time afterwards.

The Liberation of Maria Caprini and Fortunata Quascè

“May God bless the procedures that are in place for the liberation of the others!”

(G. Sembianti, August 5th 1885)

It is very probable that it was very soon after Elisabetta’s departure that *“a faithful Arab with 17 camels arrived in Omdurman to take away all the prisoners, or at least the Sisters”*¹²⁷

“This was”, we read in the book of Licurgo Santoni, “Abdel Gabbar, the man who had taken the first note from Omdurman to Dongola and who, after having heard about the sum received for the liberation of Bonomi, came to Uadi Halfa and made a contract committing himself to freeing as many missionaries he could for the sum of 100 pounds sterling each.” (p. 381).

Abdel Gabbar, without wanting to, had lost precious time with his ‘disappearance’ immediately after he arrived in Dongola, the previous February.¹²⁸

Then, when he presented himself again, after the liberation of Fr. Luigi Bonomi because he was encouraged by the reward that he would receive, he was however, unable to leave again before the end of July, if not later. So, in Omdurman, he could

¹²⁷ ACR, A/38/49/31: Sogaro to Canossa. Cairo, November 27th, 1890.

¹²⁸ See, APF Afr .C., vol. 9(1885)1109: Sogaro to Simeoni. Cairo, March 23rd, 1885.

only notify the sisters of his presence in August, after the departure of Sr. Bettina.

It was, unfortunately, too late to liberate all the sisters. In fact, Sogaro, in his letter to Luigi di Canossa quoted above, recalls that, one of the prisoners was unable to leave *“because she was pregnant.”*¹²⁹, *another because she was ill and could not ride a camel, yet another because she was in Berber and Sr. Grigolini because she did not have the heart*” to leave Concetta there in this condition...

From among the six, only two would be able to take the chance to leave: Maria Caprini¹³⁰ and Fortunata Quascè. This was a great delusion for the guide who was hoping for a more substantial reward. It was also a great trial for those who had to remain, and in particular for Teresa Grigolini, who had asked the mission the considerable effort of 16 camels, and who now had to renounce the liberation she had often dreamed about.

“They arrived in Cairo”, Sr. Matilde Corsi later relates, “dressed as slaves, with a kind of sheet of heavy dark blue cloth which covered them from head to toe. Nothing is known about their arrival. They have changed so much that the sister in charge at the door, the actual reverend Mother Costanza Caldara, could not recognize them. Finally another sister appeared who, without speaking, threw her arms around the two who had arrived. They recognized each other and shed tears of consolation.

Going upstairs to the dormitory, Sr. Maria Caprini could not manage without leaning to the banister due to pain which was etched on her face and sore feet. But this was nothing for her. Now she was at home in the house of the congregation [...].

¹²⁹ With regard to the story of Concetta Corsi, see AMN, 10(2005)73–107.

¹³⁰ See, AMN, 10(2005)175–209; for Fortunata Quascè instead, see no. 9 of AMN.

*She was ordered to give an account of the Mahdist war, but she was very clever in trying to hide her sufferings"...*¹³¹

With contained joy, but equally grateful to God for the liberation of at least two sisters, the editor of *La Nigrizia* announced in the November 1885 issue:

"Our joy is not yet complete. While content about the liberation of some of our most unfortunate brothers and sisters, we experience great sorrow for those who remain in the hands of those barbarians. We have been given a description of their very painful and difficult situation. May God shorten for them such a long and dangerous trial, by giving success to the efforts to free all of the others"... (p. 168).

About Elisabetta Venturini, in flight but not yet free, it was evident that nothing should be published. However, Licurgo Santoni gives news about her on November 15th, six days after the arrival of Maria and Fortunata in Cairo. He wrote to the "Very Reverend Fr. Vicentini:

I read with great pleasure your last letter which gave me news about the liberation of the two sisters. I saw them lately and I believe they are beginning to overcome the many hardships suffered.

Three Egyptian officials who had been imprisoned at the fall of Berber arrived today together with the postal worker. They were able to slip away from Berber via Korosko just seventeen days ago.

*I talked at length with one of them who knows well the sister who Sr. Maria Caprini had told me had gone to Berber. He told me that the sister had gone to Berber with two Syrian men, Giorgi and Nahum and that she is still there with them. They had already started out, following Mohammed el Ker to Dongola, but after 12 hours, they were made to turn back and now she is still there with that family, in a much better situation than the others"...*¹³²

¹³¹ APMR, VI/Pp/4/5-1457: Information on the life of Sr. Maria Caprini, pp. 16-17.

¹³² ACR, A/32/5/13/11: Santoni to Vicentini. Assiut, November 15th 1885.

Sr. Bettina herself, always speaking in third person, remembers these moments of her flight:

“She left with Giorgi Abagi in a small boat, pretending to be his wife, though not officially. Arriving in Berber, after some days of rest they left for Dongola on camel back with the whole Mahdist brigade that was also directed to Dongola. This time also his oldest brother, Nahon Abagi, traveled with them. As merchants they had the permission to go until Dongola. During their journey they stayed away from the people as much as they could, first of all to avoid it being discovered that a sister was traveling with them and also because they used to smoke and if discovered, the trouble would be great. In the end, as in all things, man proposes and God disposes. So it happened here too. In fact, when they were nearing Dongola, only half a day away, and were almost sure of success, around fifty Mahdists on horseback came to the Syrians and made them dismount from their camels. (At this time the sister was on the camel dressed as a black woman with the terga [burqa] through which she saw everything. Woe betide if they had come to know that she was a sister, but the Lord prevented them from knowing. The mahdists asked them where they were going and with which permission, etc. The Syrian showed them a paper with the permission to travel to Dongola. While some were inspecting the papers, others noticed that the Syrians were smoking, since they smelled the tobacco and found it on their clothes.

Then they thought that the worst would come, but with God’s grace, what could really happen, did not. One of the mahdists, in fact, knew the Syrians and interceded for them suggesting to leave them free and send them back to Berber. This is what was done”... (pp. 89-91).

Request for Silence on all these Matters, but Especially Regarding Concetta

“Do not let the newly arrived Fathers or Sisters, or any others who might arrive from Sudan be questioned by anyone.”

(Francesco Sogaro, September 22nd 1885)

The most anxious to know something precise about what had really happened to the prisoners, was, naturally, the Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa, who, on the 2nd of August of that same year, had been consecrated bishop in Rome and was, therefore, absent.

“Your Excellency”, Fr. Domenico Vicentini had immediately written to him from Cairo, “finally this morning, two sisters arrived dressed as poor Arabs.

I did not yet speak with the Sisters. I only told Sr. Caprini to be careful about speaking of certain things, and especially not to mention anything, not even to Madre [Vittoria Paganini], regarding Sr. Concetta. The Mother Superior tells me that the Sisters already made their confession to Fr. Geyer, [who from the end of August was waiting in Wadi Halfa] so we don’t need to think about this”...¹³³

Francesco Sogaro, in turn, did not hesitate to inform *Propaganda Fide* as soon as it was possible to do so. On the 1st of December 1885, he wrote, in fact, to Cardinal Simeoni:

“Your Eminence,

[...].

First of all, from the interrogation of the two sisters who were held prisoners, we have learned that the torments which they underwent were very cruel and long lasting, that they were always respected by the charitable and courageous protection of the Greeks, that one of them, however, entrusted to

¹³³ ACR, A/32/5/13/10: Vicentini to Sogaro. Cairo, November 9th 1885.

*Isidoro Locatelli, from the mission, was miserably betrayed by him and is now **pregnant**. This unfortunate sister was one of the most pious and virtuous and now she is consumed by suffering and she will probably not survive. Oh, my Most Eminent Father, how many tears this incident caused me to cry. While I write... but enough” ...*¹³⁴

According to L. Bano, the two missionaries who had escaped from Omdurman, also informed that Teresa Grigolini had baptized a child whose parents, Giorgi Nicola and Lucia Vittoria Sofia had married after the departure of the Catholic community from Khartoum.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ APF, Afr. C., vol. 9(1885)1236–37.

¹³⁵ See, Bano, L. 1976, p. 441.

8.

Growing Difficulties for the Remaining Prisoners

On the evening that Maria Caprini was finally able to leave Omdurman, Teresa Grigolini entrusted her with a letter for Fr. Luigi Bonomi, probably in response to one that he had sent her through Abdel Gabbar. With disarming, but very meaningful sincerity, sr. Teresa wrote:

“Very Reverend Father,

Your letter was much appreciated, but it did not satisfy me at all. You say a lot of beautiful things, but nothing about money, which is what we need most because we have nothing to eat and no clothes, in addition to the justifiable grumbling of the people we are with.

We are deeply shocked that you who spent a long time in this hellish place don’t seem to have any idea of our position here. We have been living with these people for more than a year and a half now and they feed us out of their charity. If one day they put us on the street, would they be guilty? Definitely not! Indeed, we have to be thankful because they have done even too much for us. But shame on the Mission! We know from a Catholic newspaper that the mission has received one and a half million for the ransom of the missionaries who are slaves in Africa, and they still haven’t risked anything worth mentioning. ¹³⁶

And what did Fr. Vicentini do in Dongola all the time he was there? Was he waiting for some raven to take us and put us down in Dongola? If he had sent us a little money, we would

¹³⁶ “After the escape of Fr. Bonomi, and even more so after that of Isidoro Locatelli, the poor prisoners expected, if not liberation, at least some help in proportion to their needs. Unfortunately, they did not receive it, or certainly not according to desires and their true needs. Why? The messengers sent with money and merchandise [...], either stole everything and disappeared, or they were robbed or killed on the way”... (L. Bano, *Missionari di Comboni*, vol. 4, p. 75).

surely have been able to escape changing country in the guise of merchants, but with nothing, you can do nothing [...]. It wouldn't be so bad if we suffered only in body, but the sufferings of the soul are so much worse. The lack of money will put us in deep trouble as we are not able to live far from the big dogs. We are still in great danger and I can't understand how you, a man of such intelligence, don't think about certain horrible things...

*I will end by urging you to send us some money soon, as soon as possible, in the name of Cocorombo who, if he does not receive help within a month will throw us out of the house. Sr. Marietta will talk with you about all that I have not mentioned here. **Do you remember those two letters which I wrote to you in Kordofan from Rahad?***

I thank you for the letter and for the care you are taking to free us from this hellhole. I urge you to be perseverant and not to leave from there until you see us all freed [...]. It is regrettable that this man has delayed for two and a half months before coming here [...].

*I greet you in the name of Cocorombo and the other Greeks and especially the Sisters and Isidoro. Since last August, Sr. Bettina is no longer here. She went to Berber with a Syrian, believing that she might be able to escape via Corosco [...], but when they were three days distance from Berber, they were made to turn back with others. Now she is in Berber with a good man called **Giorgio Iusef Abagi**.*

I will stop here, greeting you with a kiss to your hand [...].

PS The Greeks would like to know if the government will pay the money orders which were lost.”¹³⁷

Misunderstanding between Prisoners and Rescuers

Obviously, the letter quoted above could not but evoke the reactions of all those who may have felt themselves called into question. Domenico Vicentini, who was in Cairo, and who had received a similar letter, was probably influenced by this in his meeting with Maria Caprini.

¹³⁷ AMN, 12(2006)161–162: Grigolini to Bonomi. Omdurman, Ottobre 1885.

“My impression of Sr. Caprini was not the happiest one...”, he then confided to Monsignor Sogaro in a letter dated the 9th of November 1885, which we have already cited. “It is true that they say that this is her nature... but she seemed very cold throughout the meeting. She had in mind, and I still don’t know if she remains with this idea, that we have not done all that we could to free them.

This afternoon after lunch, I went to meet the mother superior and she told me about this notion... so, I asked the superior to call her and taking advantage of the letter Sr. Teresa Grigolini wrote to me, told them that their complaints are understandable because of their misfortune, but that on the other hand, much was done, as much as possible [...], Maybe she understood, but she is cold and a little harsh”...

This problem of communication, which is understandable, between the prisoners and their would be rescuers would become more serious as time passed, so much so that it would provoke painful and unpleasant incidents for all those involved.

Would the prisoners ever have known, for example, that at the beginning of March 1886, *“other messengers were sent to free the poor prisoners or to take them some money to help them if they were unable to free them”*¹³⁸ given that no one returned with any news?

1886: Fr. Ohrwalder in Omdurman

After the departure of the two sisters towards freedom which, fortunately, had no consequences for those who remained, the only light in the tunnel which, for Teresa Grigolini, seemed to be becoming increasingly darker, was the transferral of Fr. Josef Ohrwalder from El Obeid to Omdurman.

It happened that, at the death of Scherif Mahmud, uncle of the Mahdi and owner of the prisoner Ohrwalder, it was decided to transfer to the capital all the personnel belonging to the deceased. *“On this occasion”, we read in the Memoirs of the missionary, “freedom was given also to us to go to Omdurman [...]. We left El Obeid on March 26th 1886.”* (pp. 227–28)

¹³⁸ ANB, Nachlass Mitterrutzner, Sembianti 37. Verona, 20 April 1886.

When Josef Ohrwalder arrived in Omdurman, in April 1886, Concetta Corsi was already the mother of a child. This was a situation which must have weighed heavily upon her and would not have allowed her to forget the violence she experienced. Probably, in order to legalize at least the position of her son, she asked the Father to be able to receive with Isidoro Locatelli, the sacrament of matrimony. This was a decision that many would not understand, but one which Ohrwalder himself would later defend as valid.

“I have to let you know”, he wrote to the bishop in February 1888, “with regards to Mr. Locatelli and Sister Concetta, what begins must conclude, they are truly married. I can not explain more”.¹³⁹

Returning to Sr. Bettina

On the 20th of September 1886, Fr. Leone Hanriot wrote to Fr. Sembianti:

“Reverend Father,

I have been in Halfa for three days and I will stay for another seven. I saw Giodat Bey and also Abdel Gabbar, one of the two who had signed the contract to work for freeing our companions. However, nothing has been done. The Kababisc fought with the Dervishes, and he did not risk leaving [...].

Sabeh Bey of Corosco came here. He agrees with Gabbar. He says that he was entrusted to bring to safety the sister. He can and wants to save her, together with the Syrian, Jusef Abagi and his wife. It would require two months or more”...¹⁴⁰

Two days later, addressing himself once more to Monsignor Sogaro, Don Hanriot wrote further:

“Monsignor,

Yesterday at midday, this Abbadi called Hamed Abdallah who knows Italian, came here. He brought a note from the Greek, Demetrio. He is leaving tomorrow for Berber and Khartoum [...]. He has offered to take money to the sister in Berber and to our companions in Khartoum [...]. I prom-

¹³⁹ ACR, A/32/6/7: Ohrwalder to Sogaro. 25th february, 1888.

¹⁴⁰ ACR, A/27/6/56: Hanriot to Sembianti. Halfa, 20th September 1886.

ised him 30 pounds for each sister and 20 for each of the men. I have written two short notes, one for Berber and the other for Khartoum, informing the sister in Berber and Sr. Teresa.

He says it is easy to save someone among those in Khar-toum, by bringing them by river close to Berber. Once in Berber, they still need to cross to Suakin and then enter the desert, where they would meet no one.”¹⁴¹

It seemed Easy, But Instead...

“Most Reverend Father,

It is three months since I wrote V. P. [...]. - Fr. Leone Hanriot wrote to Giuseppe Sembianti on the 24th of January 1887. He continued:

“During this period, I have come to know that our messenger from Halfa, Abd el Gabbar of the Kababisc, the man who saved the two sisters and who was sent once again at the end of October to free more prisoners, returned to Halfa after having sold his merchandise. He did not advance any further because he was warned that if he were to fall into the hands of the Dervishes, he would be brutally killed because everyone knew that it was he who had saved the two sisters [...].

In November, two Abbadi Arabs were sent to Corosco. They also went with merchandise, but on condition that they would deliver the money to the prisoners, with the promise that, on their return, they would receive their money if they brought a signed paper by a missionary or a sister. If then they bring one or more prisoners, they will receive, in Corosco, 100 pounds for each prisoner.

Earlier than this, in October, Saleh Bey, chief of the tribe of the Abbadi, sent someone from Corosco specially to free Sr. Venturini who was supposed to be in Berber. It seems that this messenger brought her to Abuhamed and then, for reasons unknown, did not let her leave [...].

I have come to know from Mr. Messedaglia Bey, colonel at the service of the English, that this sister, in fact, is in Abuhamed. A month ago, an Abada [...] told me that he saw in Abuhamed a white woman who was a bit thin, not tall and

¹⁴¹ ACR, A/27/7/10: Hanriot to Sogaro. Aswan, 22nd September, 1886.

dressed as an Arab. She was under a shelter by the road and she had a book in her hand from which she was reading. Since the women of those towns are not white and don't know how to read, and even if they did, they would not do so in public close to a main road, I think that this woman may be the sister. Since this Abada was willing to save her and also the prisoners in Omdurman, I sent him together with his brother [...]. They left Assuan at the beginning of December. Let us see if someone will come, or if we shall receive some message. It is fifteen months since we last heard from our companions"...¹⁴²

In effect, no one presented themselves even at Berber if Sr. Elisabetta Venturini wrote in her *Memoirs*:

"As they returned to Berber, the sister stayed about six months with this family, hoping all the time to be able to escape, but in vain because the Mahdists always kept their eyes on them, fearing that they would escape. During the time that the sister stayed with this family, considering what time it was, she was treated well and even respected; they deserve to be praised. Anyway, seeing that the time passed without hope of being able to escape, she thought better to return to Khartum with her sisters. And so they did. Again in a small boat, in ten days of traveling, from Berber they returned to Omdurman"... (pp. 91 -92).

Our Companions are all Alive...

It was in the month of March 1887 that Fr. Francesco Saverio Geyer, who was given the task of making contact with the missionaries, was able to send some recent news to Cairo. In fact, on the 8th he informed Monsignor Sogaro:

"With this steam boat, the Greek Iani Iterio Kramale and the Turk, Isman, arrived from Omdurman last week. I insisted that they should come to your Eminence immediately on their arrival [...].

I will not write in detail here about everything they have told me. Our companions are all alive, including Fr. Giuseppe

¹⁴² ACR, A/27/6/62: Hanriot to Sembianti. Aswan, 24th january 1887.

Ohrwalder and Fr. Paolo who are in Khartoum and sell broad beans in a shop. With Cocorombo, there are two sisters [Teresa and Bettina], and another one is with Panaiotti. One sister, certainly Concetta, is with Isidoro. Already on the evening of their arrival, they related that these two are married and they had a child. I learned from them that it is boy and he is more than one year old. The other sisters still conserve their status.

I am telling you this, your eminence, because I feel it is my duty. Here, we do not talk about this. I have tried to keep it hidden. Even Fr. Schmitt does not know about it [...].

What I wanted to know was how the two managed to save themselves, so that we could make an attempt with our own companions. They took forty days to arrive and they say that from Khartoum to Berber it is quite easy, but very difficult from there on. Our companions are very poor, but if they had some money, probably some of them could be saved. I tried to send money. The two of them brought me a man who was a prisoner himself before.[...] He offered to go, but he could not bring any guarantee so I did not feel I could trust him after the sad experiences we have had until now with sending money. But I will still look into the matter. In case, I would like to know how much money I could send ”....¹⁴³

The Escape of Isidoro Locatelli

On March 24th 1887, who unexpectedly presented himself to Francesco Sogaro was not the Greeks who had been announced, but Isidoro Locatelli in person. It had been Fr. Josef Ohrwalder to make the proposal to him and had encouraged him, as he himself remembers in his *Memoirs* (see, p. 426). The pact which had been made between the two was that Locatelli, once he reached safety, would work to facilitate the escape of Fr. Ohrwalder and two sisters: Concetta Corsi and Elisabetta Venturini. This would be confirmed later by Sogaro himself in his letter to the Bishop of Verona¹⁴⁴ some time later.

This latter, he explained in his letter, was no longer with Co-

¹⁴³ ACR, A/43/38/14: Geyer to Sogaro. Suakin, 8th March 1887.

¹⁴⁴ Cf ACR, A/ 38/49/6: Sogaro to Canossa. Cairo, 5th May 1887.

corempas, but she had transferred to the house of Concetta because the Greek *“had Grigolini right from the beginning, and then for a time he also had Sr. Caprini, and now he also had a widow, a certain Miss Vittoria [...] and this was a little too much. He could not keep three without marrying any of them, also because the Greeks themselves, when there was some argument among them, used to tell him to keep quiet otherwise they would go to the Mahdi and accuse him of having the sisters in the house without yet marrying them, and other things like this[...]. In the end, Sr. Venturini went to the house of Sr. Concetta”*... (pp. 92-93).

Isidoro Locatelli, however, once freed, was able to do very little. *“Unfortunately”*, Ohrwalder will remember, *“The Caliph heard about the escape of the brother from the mission. His reaction was quick. He called us traitors and he threatened to have us thrown in the river or to have our heads”*... (pp. 426-427).

This reaction, confirmed more than once in the following letter of Fr. Geyer, made the prisoners feel more abandoned than ever and especially, deprived of the help that they so much needed. For them, it was imperative to find a solution...

Teresa Grigolini and Messedaglia Bey

Was it at this point that Teresa Grigolini felt obliged to look for help from elsewhere? The only piece of writing of hers which remains from that period is a note sent from Cairo on July 21st 1887 which arrived in Verona the following 4th of August. That message, which was addressed to a G.B. Messedaglia, ex governor of Darfur and at that time at the disposition of the Anglo Egyptian service, gives the impression of being nothing other than a desperate request for help. In it, one reads:

“Mr. Messedaglia,

If you conserve any human sentiment, I beg of you to help us in our great need, first of all by receiving this man [that is, the bearer of the message] and giving him a good tip, and secondly, finding any way to send us some money as we are in dire need. If the mission refuses, ap-

proach my family (Luigi Grigolini, Verona, S. Martino) The daughter of Giorgio Bey [Victoria] is with us too and she also asks for help from her brother-in-law, Giorgio Atanasiadis. My best wishes,

Grigolini Teresa"¹⁴⁵

With the following postal delivery, the brother of Teresa Grigolini wrote to Fr. Luigi Bonomi, who was the person in charge of the vicariate during another absence of the bishop, to ask him about this. So, on the 17th of August 1887, Fr. Luigi answered:

"Dear D Luigi,

I have received today your letter of the 8th in which you tell me about the copy you have received of Sr. Teresa's letter. It is natural that you and your family feel moved and wish to seek all the means possible to help her and her companions.

But I have to say, in defence of our exculpation that, already since June, I was already aware of the letter of Sr. Teresa and also of another two of Fr. Giuseppe.¹⁴⁶ I contacted Monsignor immediately and I also instructed a Father of our mission who has been placed on purpose in Upper Egypt to seek the bearer of the letters and entrust some money to him [...]. However, unfortunately, in the meantime, this Father [Luigi Speeke] has died and another one, that is Fr. Leone Hanriot, has now left from here, to see to this matter in the best way he can. You will know that we have already sent two messengers from Suakin, one with money and the other with merchandise [...], Isidoro Locatelli was also travelling to take them some help, but unfortunately, he had to return.¹⁴⁷ His guide, however, went on [...].*

¹⁴⁵ AMN, 12(2006)163: Grigolini to Messadaglia. No date.

¹⁴⁶ "I sent a certain Saleh Wad Hag Ali", one reads on a note of Ohrwalder," so that we can have some help. We are in great need.".... (ACR, A/32/6/2: Ohrwalder to Bonomi. Omdurman, 25th may 1887).

¹⁴⁷ "I must give to Your Eminence the news that the mission of Locatelli has failed", Geyer in fact wrote to Sogaro on the 12th of July 1887. "Having left on the 5th he met at two days distance from here, Ibrahim Bey, a rich merchant from Khartoum who was coming from Berber. He told Locatelli that he was a wanted man in Sudan and that his escape had caused very serious measures to be taken against the whites who were still there [...]. After this, Locatelli was persuaded to return"... (ACR, A/43/38/23).

*So, you will see, dear D. Luigi, that we have tried everything possible, and we will still try whatever we can to help the prisoners. The English and the Italian authorities are helping us a lot in these attempts. If, until now, we have achieved little, and especially since the prisoners are not aware of all the attempts we have made, then of course, they feel grieved and discouraged and feel that they have been abandoned. We hope, with the help of the Lord, to be able to send some help to them that will give them the possibility to try to escape. We assure you that we are taking assiduous interest in their situation”...*¹⁴⁸

First Appeal of Concetta to Isidoro

The echo of the rumour raised by the letter of Teresa, which, rather imprudently, Mr. Messedaglia had handed over for publication in *L'Unità Cattolica di Parma*¹⁴⁹ had still not died down, when another two letters reached those responsible for the Mission. One was from Fr. Josef Ohrwalder who complained that he felt, together with his companions, “*completely abandoned*”¹⁵⁰ while the second one was from Concetta Corsi, accompanied by the supplication to hand it over to Isidoro Locatelli. To this latter, Concetta wrote:

“Your departure from here was for me, and for all of us, a great misfortune, because as soon as the news of your departure reached the Caliph, he immediately closed the roads [...] in such a way that no one can move from here [...] on penalty of death [...].

I am sorry that this man you have sent can do nothing for us, because he came with no money and he cannot bring me away from here because of what would then happen to my companions. This man revealed himself to many and this is a great impediment. Therefore, I am writing to you to beg you not to be like all the others who have left this place, but to be of help to me and to the others. Therefore I beg you, for the sacred

¹⁴⁸ APMR, VI/G/4/4m/3-5570: Bonomi to Luigi Grigolini. Cairo, 17th August 1887.

¹⁴⁹ Cf *La Nigrizia*, 5(1887)129–131.

¹⁵⁰ ACR, A/32/6/3: Ohrwalder to Bonomi. Omdurman, 7th October 1887

bond that binds us, and for love of that angel we have in heaven, to remember me and my poor brothers and sisters. I am in a worse state than ever [...], If I don't receive help from you soon, I will end up in the hands of the satraps who fight to take me.

This man promises me he will return. Plan together. If he is sure of really freeing me then he should come with camels directly to the house and not go to any others [...].

I am here with Sr. Bettina. So, if he could do something also for her we would come away together. Send some blessed and most awaited money as we are in dire need, really dire need [...].

Address the letter only to Fr. Giuseppe Ohrwalder because apart from him I have no one else here to help and protect me”...¹⁵¹

Now, while Fr. Geyer was writing to inform the bishop that he had arranged for someone to take money to Fr. Ohrwalder¹⁵², this latter was writing another very interesting message on November 10th 1887, which stated:

“After eight months of cruel expectation, finally the man has come. With what? With empty hands. What a delusion! [...]. Luckily, Saleh himself proved to be generous [...]. Without knowing neither us nor you, he left us 15 thalers, and now he has given us 100 pounds, which you can refund him there...”

What Saleh left us has alleviated us as we are in our own houses, but for them [the sisters] who are in the houses of others, you have to understand me, this is not enough”...¹⁵³

Eight days later, Teresa Grigolini insisted again about this request when she herself wrote:

“If we send you another request, you will know what to do, and I ask you not to be mean. I cannot explain to you why”...¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ ACR, A/32/8/a: Corsi to Locatelli. Omdurman, 8th October 1887.

¹⁵² Cf ACR, A/43/36/8: Geyer to Sogaro. Suakin, November 1887.

¹⁵³ ACR, A/32/6/4: Omdurman, 10th November 1887.

¹⁵⁴ ACR, A/ 32/6/5: Grigolini. Omdurman, 18th novembre 1887.

Delays and Violations

Five months would pass, however, before Monsignor Sogaro would receive those messages. In fact, only on the 23rd of April 1888 he wrote from Cairo to Cardinal Simeoni:

“Eminent Prince and Father,

Approximately 15 days ago, I received a letter signed by Fr. Giuseppe Ohrwalder and Sr. Teresa Grigolini written on November 19th 1887 from Omduran. In this letter, they tell me that they are all alive and in good health. At the same time, they are inviting me to pay to the bearer, an Arab Muslim, 200 Egyptian pounds, equal to 5,200 francs for the amount given to them by the bearer himself.

*Today I received two more letters from the same priest and a note signed by a certain Sr. Concetta Corsi. Fr. Ohrwalder states that he has received 100 Egyptian pounds, equal to 2,600 francs. These two letters are dated the 10th and the 27th of November. Finding myself in need, I am addressing myself to the Holy Father that he might come to our help. We are sure that the sum which our confreres say they have received is much less than what they state. But, on the other hand, how can I refuse to pay? It would amount to closing the door on those unfortunate prisoners”...*¹⁵⁵

An Announcement through La Nigrizia

As things stood, in the month of July 1888, those responsible for the Missionary Institute felt it would be appropriate to inform the readers, among whom were also the relatives of the missionary prisoners, of what was happening, through the publication of the following text which was produced in Cairo:

“Cairo, 7th July 1888.

When the May issue was published, we could have given some news of our confreres and sisters who are prisoners in Omdurman. In fact, we had received three letters from them dated the 10th, 18th and 27th of November.

¹⁵⁵ AP SC Afr.C., 10(1886–1892)452.

But, as the bearers of the letters, one of whom had to return to Omdurman [...], were still here, for the sake of prudence, we believed it better to remain silent. It is incredible how easily news which is of interest to the rebels can arrive in the Sudan. Now we have received another four letters, two of which are dated 25th of February and two the 25th of May. The bearer of these letters left last year with 50 English pounds for which he has come back with a receipt.

It appears from all of these letters that they have received, on loan from the various messengers, the sum of 237 pounds sterling. We have good reason to believe that the money they have received is much less than they state. Perhaps they received thalers and then they wrote English pounds under threat of being given nothing at all”... (p. 97).

As proof of what he was stating, the editor quoted immediately after this the case of one of the messengers sent, who, having received from Fr. Leone Hanriot two letters and 2500 francs, would have given to the prisoners only the letter from the relatives of one of the sisters while he destroyed the other letter which talked about the money that had been sent to them.

In addition, in order to demonstrate “*his good heart he loaned to them a little money (perhaps 100 thalers) but because of the dangers met and that could be met, it was necessary to register more. In fact, he came with a receipt for 2500 francs*”... (p. 98).

An Appeal to Isidoro Locatelli

The discomfort and the sufferings of the prisoners were not only due to the lack of money. Concetta Corsi, abandoned by her husband, was in increasingly greater danger of “*falling into the hands of the Arabs*”. Worried, Fr. Josef Ohrwalder addressed a letter to Isidoro Locatelli on November 28th 1888 in which he wrote:

“Dear Tidoro,

Already two years have passed since your departure and still we have seen nothing from you. You left your wife in confusion in such a country and in such circumstances. We heard that you were on the way back when Ibrahim Borde-

ni persuaded you to change your mind.

After your escape, Sr. Concetta is on the point of falling into the hands of the Arabs. It would be a miracle if she could escape.

I cannot imagine why you have abandoned her in this state, knowing the danger in which she would find herself. Why have you not answered our letters?

We have not yet received the few things you took with you and which you promised to return. Please inform yourself. Do not think that Sr. Concetta can follow you, because after your departure, we who are in Omdurman cannot move neither from right nor left. If you were courageous, you would not leave your poor wife alone but you would return here so that we could either die together or escape together.

Before returning, when you reach the border, send us a letter asking pardon from the Caliph and I will present to him your apologies until pardon is granted [...]. Trust in my word, because we are sure of this”...¹⁵⁶

That letter, intercepted with others by the English services, was sent to Monsignor Sogaro who, on the 22nd of February 1889, communicated the contents to Cardinal Simeoni and to the Bishop of Verona. To this latter, he wrote:

“Most Eminent Prince and Father,

Yesterday evening, the Assistant major of His Excellency the Sirdar brought us two letters from Fr. Giuseppe Ohrwalder. They were sent from Omdurman and dated 28th of November and they arrived recently via Berber- Korosco. From these letters we have learned that they are all alive and that they have received approximately 5000 francs instead of 10,000, as appeared from the money orders. Fr. Ohrwalder complains because we have not paid a money order of 5,000 francs which he says he has received. But here, for serious reasons and also after advice of reliable people, we declined to pay. Now, he tells us that, in reality, he had received not 5,000 francs, but 1,700 and he had to give these to the Greeks who take care of the sisters and who were threatening to throw them on the street if they did not receive the money requested.

¹⁵⁶ K. 7 M CAIRINT, 1/13/81. Typewritten copy in APMR, VII/M/16/6-3541.

*I am telling these things to my eminent Father so that you can see for yourself the embarrassing situations we can find ourselves in at times. Last year, the Counsel of Lyons disapproved of me because I sent money which they said would only be lost. In addition, an article has appeared about this in some French and German newspapers. But on the other hand, by refusing to pay, our prisoners will no longer find anyone who might lend them some money to help them.”...*¹⁵⁷

The ‘Terrible Famine’ of 1889 – 90

“If the subjects were discontent with the Mahdi, they became even more so in 1889 to 1890 because of the great famine which afflicted them”...

“The harvest of the year 1888 was very poor” one reads in the *Memoirs of Fr. Ohrwalder* on page 315, and the consequences were so serious that also Rosignoli and Slatin speak about this in their writings.

According to Paolo Rosignoli, the population, calculated by him at *“more than 150,000 inhabitants”*, was decimated. One of the principal reasons, he explains, was the Mahdi himself because *“apart from having deprived agriculture of the most valid arms, with the slaughter of so many soldiers on both sides, he had also hindered the work of agriculture among those remaining. In fact, the Mahdi with his war mongering had reduced to the level of nomadic and beyond, the commercial relations with the bordering countries which were reduced to nothing due to the roads being insecure and taxes being imposed”*... (p. 170)

“The atrocious scenes witnessed particularly at the market of Omdurman where the poor and starving used to gather from all over”, Ohrwalder takes up, “are indescribable”. (p. 316)

“A woman was accused of eating her only child,” Slatin noted, [...]. “There were also parents who sold their children as slaves, not in order to gain money, but to seek to prolong their lives”... (pp. 594–595)

¹⁵⁷ ACR, A/38/49/19a: Sogaro to Canossa, 22nd february, 1889.

SOS from Teresa Grigolini

Obviously, such a calamity had a serious effect especially on the prisoners who were already very limited in their freedom of movement and initiative. It was precisely in this period, in fact, that what could be called a last urgent request for help from Teresa Grigolini arrived in Verona.

Teresa, who like Caterina was forced to live “*in the house of others*”, as Josef Ohrwalder had underlined in his note of November 10th 1887, sent to her brothers a letter which evoked a lot of feeling and also many reactions. In it she wrote:

My dear brothers, Antonio and Luigi,

If this small piece of paper arrives in your hands, I am sure it will mark a period of your life. After many years that perhaps you have cried for me, thinking me dead or you have abandoned every hope of having more news from me [three years had passed since the previous letter had been sent to Messedaglia]. Know however, that I am alive and well, despite my unspeakable tribulations.

*The superiors of the mission, on whose encouragement we left our homes, our country, our relatives and friends, at this time of our most dire need, have abandoned us. In this long period of eight years, they have never sent us any help, despite the widespread begging in Europe **for the missionaries imprisoned in Africa.***

*But why should we complain? If God had wanted to get us out of this hellish place, he would have done so without help from anyone. Therefore, there is nothing for us to say, except, may God's will be done, however much our human nature shudders. The thought that for God, nothing is impossible, gives me some hope that we may see each other again. If this happens, it would have to be numbered among his miracles. How hard is our imprisonment! If you wish to write to me, please address the letter to a certain Greek called **Giovanni Griva** [a companion and later, partner, of Demetrio Cocorempas] at **Suakin**.*

Greet our brothers and sisters, and our mother, if she is still alive”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ AMN, 12(2006)164-165: Grigolini to her brothers. 1890.

This letter cited above, is one which has to be read in context, otherwise, it becomes incomprehensible. Reading it, one has to also keep in mind another fact: the message, which arrived in Verona on the 17th of August 1890, did not arrive on time to avoid what Teresa feared most. In Omdurman, in fact, in that same month, she resigned herself to being united in religious matrimony with Demetrio Coccorempas.¹⁵⁹

“One evening”, Sr. Elisabetta Venturini later recorded, “Coccorempas, Trampa and Grigolini arrived there at our place to celebrate the marriage. Father Giuseppe Ohrwalder officiated even this marriage. Sister Corsi and Sister Venturini were also present and all were weeping. It is easier to imagine than to write about these scenes”... (p. 99).

Last Appeal also from Concetta

In that tragic year of 1890, we have also the final and desperate appeal that Concetta Corsi attempts to send to Isidoro Locatelli, through the ‘Italian Consul in Cairo’.

On the 30th of October, Concetta Corsi asks him:

“Respected Consul,

With these two lines, I am requesting you to send directly to Mr. Locatelli this letter. I am really asking you to help me as for many years now I am here abandoned without any news from him. He was good to me and he freed me from my enemies. Afterwards, he escaped, so that he could free me too, but this is impossible. Therefore, I am begging you to do all in your power to get him to return here [...] Let him say that he has been detained until now by the government. The reason for this request is that I am always in great danger and in extreme need. However, it should be understood that he should not come empty handed [...] I beg you to take care of this matter and to remember my misfortune”...¹⁶⁰

In the letter that she had asked to be sent to Locatelli, Concetta had written:

¹⁵⁹ For the circumstances surrounding the religious matrimony of Teresa Grigolini, refer to what she herself writes in *her Memoirs*, pp. 83-85.

¹⁶⁰ ACR, A/32/8/c.

“Dearest Isidoro,

*How many bitter sorrows
and how much misery have befallen me since we
were separated, without having any possibility of
writing even a line. After your departure, I joined
Fr. Giuseppe and Sr. Bettina to shield myself from
the wolves. We are here languishing and dejected.
In the two years of cruel famine, we almost died
[...]. Don’t think that I alone can be freed. Either
you rescue all three of us or no one. If you see from
there that the government has no intention to re-
take the Sudan soon, then be courageous and come
back here [...]. I beg you, even if there is good news
about the Sudan, still make an effort to come, be-
cause I am in great danger and in extreme need.
Don’t let any thought keep you, but I remind you of
our sacred bond. If you cannot [...], then one day
you will hear that I have become a victim [...]*

My heartfelt greetings with affection,

*Corsi Concetta”*¹⁶¹

Despite the fact that Concetta, before sealing the letter, had asked to keep it ‘*strictly secret*’, something must have been leaked to Teresa Grigolini, who, in one of the editions of her *Memoirs* writes, “*I know that they criticize a letter she wrote to Isidoro in which she invited him to return to Omdurman: She did it because she was half dead from hunger and she was asking from him some sustenance*”...¹⁶²

The necessary Explanations of Monsignor Sogaro

The Bishop of Verona, at this point, must have prompted Francesco Sogaro for a clarification about what was actually being done for the prisoners, and what progress had been made. In fact, on the 27th of November 1890, he received from Sogaro the following response:

“With regard to the prisoners, since it became known to the public that there was a wretched general defection, (the lat-

¹⁶¹ ACR, A/32/8/b: Corsi to Locatelli. Omdurman, 30th October, 1890.

¹⁶² APMR, VI/G/2/3 – 803, pp. 27-28.

est news we have received reports that the men are obliged to take part in the public prayer of the Muslims) and other miserable events. It seems to me that I am duty bound to do whatever is possible for those unfortunate prisoners and also to speak about these events as little as possible. I have sought to follow this line of conduct and my confreres can bear witness to what I am about to write here.

Starting from Lord Dufferin, Sir Mallet, Lord Wolseley, Sir Egerton and the current Pleni Potentiary, Sir Baring, all of these could bear witness to the various attempts made. With the last of these, I actually insisted that he authorize me to travel myself to Omdurman, taking with me a letter from the Austro Hungarian Diplomatic Agency, so that I could negotiate with the Caliph for their liberation, or at least be able to take them some money and other necessities. I was ready, and by the grace of God, I am still ready to bear all the possible consequences which could be foreseen. But my prayers were not answered [...].

For four consecutive years, our confreres replaced each other at the border so that they could find ways of sending help to our prisoners: Fr. Vincentini, Fr. Geyer, Fr. Dichtl, Fr. Bonomi, Fr. Hanriot and Fr. Speek who died there. God only knows the many efforts we have made and the money we have spent. Once, and it was the only time, we managed to send to Omdurman a faithful Arab with seventeen camels to bring out to safety all our prisoners, or at least the sisters. But only two were able to leave. We don't know why the men could not travel. Among the sisters one was pregnant, another was ill and could not mount a camel for long hours, another was in Berber and Sr. Grigolini had no heart to leave the others behind. So only two could be saved.

In addition, I tried to get to know a certain Zubeir Pascia, a very powerful man in the Sudan, almost a Sultan. So much was done that he even offered to go free our prisoners through negotiations with the Caliph and in order to gain the permission of the Pleni Potentiary, he was even ready to leave as hostages two of his sons and his women. But all was useless. He did not gain the permission to travel.¹⁶³*

¹⁶³ In reality, one would have to be surprised at the contrary since not even Gordon Pascia was able to obtain the return of Zubeir Pascia to Sudan as he was too well known as the biggest ex slave trader in the Sudan. In addition, he was suspected of maintaining secret relations with the Mahdists.

In addition, the Austro Hungarian Diplomatic Agency, through our begging, wrote a beautiful letter to try to obtain the liberation of our prisoners. It was sent to the Mahdi through a special messenger, but unfortunately, it had no effect.

Messengers who took other letters were many. Then, with regards to money spent for the liberation of the prisoners, it reached such a sum that, even without knowing precisely how much, L'Univers of Paris wrote a long article, reproduced first in many French newspapers and then in German ones, regarding their disapproval of the waste of money by the mission for this purpose.

In addition, could we reasonably suppose that the prisoners found themselves in the miserable conditions that they described, after we received and paid numerous drafts paid by them in Omdurman, the copies of which I would like to list here below?

“Saleh Hag Ali left us 15 thalers and 100 guineas, for which you will pay out the same amount.– Omdurman 10 November 1887.

Fr. Giuseppe Ohrwalder”.

For this man we paid 110 guineas which is equivalent to 2,750 Italian lire.

“The signatory declares that he has received from Mr. Mohamad Said fifty pounds sterling payable by the Superior of the Mission of Sudan in Cairo.– Omdurman 25 February 1888.

Fr. Giuseppe Ohrwalder”.

A generous tip was added and the total amount paid out was 1,262.50 Italian lire.

“The signatory declares to have received from Mr. Mohammad Said Ebn Ibrahim Kalifa 37 English guineas and we ask that his request for the same be satisfied at the earliest. Omdurman, 25 May, 1888.

Fr. Giuseppe Ohrwalder”.

For this man, we paid 934,25 Italian lire as well as a tip.

“Omdurman 7th January 1889 – we have taken here 200 Egyptian guineas (the Egyptian guinea is 26 Italian lire, therefore, the equivalent of 5,200 Italian lire) from Mr. Hagi Ahmed el

Farsci and I have written that you will pay this sum to Mr. Mohammed el Saied the son of the above mentioned.

Sr. Teresa Grigolini – Fr. Giuseppe Ohrwalder”.

This time, after having received some information from another messenger who had returned from Khartoum, according to whom Al Frasci could not have that amount of money, we made some other investigations and we came to know from Fr. Ohrwalder himself that he had not received 5,200 but only 1,600 francs. Therefore, I wanted to hear the opinion of two general Consuls and also of my confreres and various other people. All of them advised me that for this time we should come to a compromise but they suggested that in future I should not consider valid those signatures since there, the mission and the missionaries no longer existed, but only poor slaves who, if forced, could sign for sums of money that could bankrupt the entire mission. In the meanwhile, for the 1,600 francs, I paid 3,700 Italian lire.

In 1887 we sent from Suakin a sum of money that they had asked for together with goods to the value of more than 3,000 Italian lire. These were all lost. Then we also have to remember the small sums of 300, 400 or 500 francs.

This year, one day in the month of August, when I had already counted out on my table 505 Francs for someone who had come with a letter from Fr. Ohrwalder, another messenger arrived from Omdurman with a letter written in German by Fr. Ohrwalder himself, in which he had written that we should not pay any money to anyone anymore without some guarantee, because most of what we had sent had been lost. Therefore, in this way, I came to realize that most of the receipts sent by Sr. Grigolini and Fr. Ohrwalder were false, inducing us to pay, trusting blindly in some Arabs, who then pocketed the money and took it for themselves.

And all of this is only a small part of all that has been done for those poor prisoners”...¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ ACR, A/38/49/31: Sogaro to Canossa. Cairo, November 1890.

The Death of Concetta Corsi

“After some time passed during which it was relatively calm, Sr. Concetta became ill due to so many trials and much misery: she was tired and deprived of all sustenance”...

(Teresa Grigolini)

“We were almost at the end of '91 when Sr. Concetta, caring for a small child who later died of typhoid fever, contracted the disease herself and we too with her. We survived, but Sr. Concetta died in twenty four hours.

Before dying she made her confession. She knew that she was dying and that there wasn't hope of healing because she recognized the signs of the disease and when she saw her fingernails turn black and her nose starting to bleed, she told us: “There is nothing else for me, I die and die happy. I want to make my confession before I lose consciousness”. And so she made her confession in full awareness and on the morning of October 3, 1891 she died assisted by the father and by her three sisters who were all there.” (pp. 105-106)

“She died a martyr”, we read in the third edition of the Memoirs of Teresa Grigolini, “because she suffered very much even at the hands of him who was supposed to protect her: how much hunger she suffered and how badly treated she was”... (p. 27)

“According to Sudanese custom”, Josef Ohrwalder recalled, “we placed her corpse in a cloth and covered her with a straw mat as we had no coffin and we carried her two hours after she died, accompanied by all the Syrians and Greeks, towards the North, where she so often fixed her gaze, far from the dwellings. In deep silence, we buried her, placing some thorns on the earth to make it more difficult for the hyenas to get at her.

After a prayer for the repose of her soul, we returned home silently, consoling ourselves with the thought that we would all die soon in a similar way”... (p. 434).

9.

The Liberation of the Last Prisoners

“It was already the beginning of 1891 when the Father decided to write a note to Monsignor Sogaro telling him that [...] if he felt like risking sending someone to get us,[...] we were ready at any cost.”

(Elisabetta Venturini)

“Now even Grigolini has gone”, Sr. Bettina sadly commented on the occasion of the religious matrimony of Teresa Grigolini. She went on to write:

“Let us come back to us: our condition was such that we knew not how to live. We invented a new job for ourselves: we thought of making fringes and ribbons for the tob [mantles] of Arab women, as it was the custom then [...]. We kept doing this work until the time of our escape. Fr. Ohrwalder, as we mentioned before, seldom left the house, except on some rare occasions when he went to Slatin to bring him our work, because we sewed for him. But lately he wouldn't go out at all. He made it a point to never leave the place even at the cost of dying of starvation. One time, in fact, as he was returning home, after having gone to Slatin's place as usual, these Mahdists took him aside and brought to him two bad women [...], in order to induce him to evil. Meanwhile, with all these miseries, time went by and Fr. Ohrwalder was in deep sadness, due also to the fact that he was not so well. He had no more words to say. Truly he was not himself anymore. It was already the beginning of '91 when Fr. Ohrwalder decided to write a small note to Msgr. Sogaro telling him that we were three all together: one father and two sisters and if he thought worthy to risk sending someone to take us with all the necessary things for the journey, we are ready at any cost. . He sent this card through an Arab man.” (pp. 100-104)*

In fact, we can find in the *Archivio Comboniano* in Rome, a note written by Fr. Josef Ohrwalder probably at the end of June 1891, in which he asked Monsignor Sogaro:

*“Has Hag Ahmed al Farsi not told you anything about my plan to escape? I ask you please to get some information from him. He certainly has news. He knows my home... This is essential. Then you will also need an intermediate. If the secret is leaked, nothing else will be possible [...]. I ask you to make it possible for the above mentioned to carry out the plan. We are all still alive. Best wishes. Fr. Giuseppe Ohrwalder”.*¹⁶⁵

“The plan of the man, we read in the Memoirs of Ohrwalder himself, was that he would return from Omdurman to Berber, which because of the strong current at the time when the Nile was at its highest, he could reach in three days. There, he would supply himself with a raft or a boat and keep ready at Berber sufficient camels so that from there he could go to Korosco through the desert”... (p. 430).

Evidently, the plan of the young Ababda must have convinced the Apostolic Vicar because recently the contract written in Arabic and signed by him was found in the archives in Khartoum. In the document, translated first into English and then into Italian, we read:

Contract made with Ahmed Hasan el Abadi

I, the undersigned, [...] accept to leave immediately for Omdurman in order to accompany Fr. Ohrwalder and the two sisters from Omdurman to Cairo. I undertake to care for them during the journey and to do everything in my power to bring them here and give them every comfort. As a reward and repayment for the expenses that I will undergo between Omdurman and Cairo, Monsignor Sogaro has agreed to give me:

- 1) Merchandise to the value of 100 pounds sterling [...].*
- 2) Twenty pounds sterling before leaving Cairo.*
- 3) On my return to Cairo with Fr. Ohrwalder, three hundred pounds sterling, that is, 100 pounds per person.*

This is the agreement between myself and Monsignor Soga-

¹⁶⁵ ACR, A/32/6/24.

ro and I have signed it of my own free will [...].

Monsignor Sogaro and I have signed this agreement and Wingate Bey A.A.G. Intelligence is the witness. This agreement will be kept in the war office until i return from Omdurman with the three people mentioned above and I undertake to act in accordance with the content of the agreement.*

*Signed: Ahmed Hasan el Abadi of Sayala [...] and
for Monsignor Sogaro: Leon Hanriot
9th July 1891”* ¹⁶⁶

According to the agreement cited above, the young Ababde should have left Cairo for Omdurman the following 20th of July. Josef Ohrwalder, in fact, sees him arrive at the door of his hut on the 27th of October. “*I have come,*” Ahmad says, “*Are you coming?*” (p. 435).

After Ten Years of “Terrible Suffering”...

“Happy those who fell in battle, those who died of hunger or illness, those massacred in Khartoum [...]. We had suffered agonies without meeting death. We had looked death in the face, without receiving the decisive blow”...

For the prisoners who were awaiting his arrival, it was about time. In Omdurman, Ohrwalder wrote in his *Memoirs*, “*The times of the rains had come and was passing, the Nile had reached its highest level and had lowered again without Ahmed appearing. I was not surprised because to such illu-*

¹⁶⁶ ACR, A/32/9/27: contract for the liberation of the prisoners found by Fr. Giovanni Vantini and translated from English by Sr. Angelita Tutungi.

NB: The “*ability with which Ahmad Hassan prepared and conducted the escape was very commendable*”, R. Wingate left written, “*There are very few Arabs worthy of trust and I recommend that Ahmad Hassan be well rewarded and that he be given a permanent post among the Intelligence Agents at the border where he could be employed to great effect. It would be dangerous for him to return to the Sudan at present*” (CAIR-INT, 1/13/81; translation from English in APMR, VII/M/1-3542)

sions I was already well accustomed. I had only one thought: to the deceiving winds another was added. Even if the liberator from Cairo did not arrive, another was on the way, in the form of death.

The tiring work had consumed our strength. I was spitting blood and had pain in my chest and I was nothing but skin and bone. The Sisters were closer to the tomb than I was. Ten years of the most terrible physical and moral sufferings had reduced us and made us dull minded and slow, and not very desirous of this miserable life [...].

“Happy those who fell in battle, those who died of hunger or illness, those massacred in Khartoum [...]. We had suffered agonies without meeting death. We had looked death in the face, without receiving the decisive blow [...] We saw innocence oppressed, the blood of innocents flow, human dignity trodden upon. [...].

The frightening cruelty, the oppression of many years had so weakened our nerves that with every knock on the door we were agitated and the beat of a drum made us tremble. Almost half of the Europeans, Syrians, Israelis, Greeks had already died in slavery, and I was hoping to follow soon [...].

How often I offered my life and placed it in the hands of the Good Lord. Each hour the thought of Divine Providence and of the Holy will of God comforted me [...].

And then, to my surprise, on the evening – such visits had to be made in the evening in Omdurman - of the 27th of October 1891, Ahmed Hassan unexpectedly appeared.”... (pp. 433-435).

Caterina Instead of Concetta

“The three Arabs,”¹⁶⁷ continues Sr. Bettina, “then went away telling us that they would return later. Presently we were in the midst of another dilemma; that is, there was room for three to leave and we were just two. Sr. Concetta had already died. What to do? Fr. Giuseppe was of the opinion not to talk to an-

¹⁶⁷ “Ahmad Hassan [...] arrived in Omdurman with two friends towards the end of October. He communicated his plan to Fr. Ohrwalder and they agreed to find an opportunity to escape [...]. In the meanwhile, he secretly bought four robust camels which he kept in different places in order not to look suspicious and he nourished them well.” (CAIRINT, 1/13/81, file number 17: report of Wingate).

yone and have just the two of us leave, because he was afraid of being discovered. But Sr. Venturini would never leave father in peace and would tell him: let us take Sr. Caterina too, otherwise she will end up like the other two[...].

Truly, it was somewhat difficult to take her away from Trampa, but when the Lord wants something, he removes the obstacles. Fr. Giuseppe sought advice from Grigolini on what to do and she suggested that it would be better to take also Sr. Caterina, so at least the three of them would be saved. She added: don't think of me, since I am lost already and then when you have gone, the Lord will think of us too. We didn't know which excuse to present in order to have Sr. Caterina come to us. We thought of telling Trampa to allow her to keep a little company with Sr. Venturini who is alone. In this way she was able to come there to our place"... (pp. 107-109).

Providential Turmoil

On the 24th of November 1891, there was an uprising in Omdurman against the Caliph, Abdullahi. "After midday," Ohrwalder recalls in his Memoirs, "the news spread that the Caliph Scherif, who accused Abdullahi of having deviated from the principles of the Mahdia and of having oppressed the people, had rebelled. The people closed the market and everyone hurried home. There was great fear all over the city [...]. I could not get more exact news about the real reason for the revolt since I could not leave the house the following day, and then I left"... (see, pp. 421- 422)

"Ahmed," Ohrwalder takes up again, "reappeared only on Friday 27th of November and communicated that the date of departure would be Monday evening" (p. 438).

"We were preparing to leave on November 30 while suddenly, on the evening of November 29, the camel drivers came to take us and said that at a little distance the camels were ready. Had it been a misunderstanding? The fact is that there was no time to waste, but we were sorry to go without saying good bye to Grigolini. What should we do? Fr. Giuseppe thought of going to her and asking for a little laudanum, as he used to do other times when he needed; he did so and while she gave him the laudanum, he greeted her with signs. He couldn't do other-

wise because Cocorempas was present. She understood everything”... (pp. 109 – 110).

“I put the piece of sugar dipped in the medicine in my mouth,” Ohrwalder confirms, “and took my leave with a handshake. I hurried back to my house which the Sisters, dressed in black, had just left. I locked the front door and took the keys with me [...]. On reaching the camels, a man whom I did not know [...] lifted me on to the camel [...].

Ahmed took the Sisters quickly and settled them¹⁶⁸ [...]. As soon as we were seated, the animals galloped off at speed into the darkness, without us being able to stop them”... (pp. 439 – 440).

Towards Freedom

“We passed the place where the sister who had died recently was buried” [...] one reads on in the memoirs of Ohrwalder. “Without a word, we went on ahead [...] I spied in the darkness and my ear was attentive to every movement in case anyone following us would approach.

Finally, Omdurman was behind us. In the soft bed of the desert sand in Kor Scambat, we got down in order to adjust the saddles. Then, we hurried towards the North along the river [...]. The narrow path ran between many thorny bushes which, in the dark, we were not able to make out. The thorns tore at our clothes, our feet and our hands which we kept in front of our eyes in order to protect them. Blood dripped from us, but there was no way we could stop, and without any pause, we hurried towards the North [...].

One of the sisters who was in a desperate state, fell from the camel unconscious. We sprinkled water on her and with difficulty we brought her round. We lifted her on to the camel and tied her tightly. It was a matter of life and death. We rode like this day and night [...].

Without stopping and without sleeping we went on towards the North along the left bank of the River Nile [...]. On the

¹⁶⁸ “Each sister was entrusted to a guide who would guard her”. This is explained in CAIRINT, 1/13/81, file number 171. See, APMR, VII/M/1m/1-3542: Italian translation of the report signed KAIMAN.

third day of our flight, we could already see Berber in the distance [...].

The thought of the river crossing was always on our minds [...]. Arriving on the plain, our guides recognized the territory. We were in the village of Banga where boats could be found to cross the river [...]. After a long discussion, Ahmed and Auad left to go to the river which was at an hour's distance, while Hamed remained with us and the camels [...].

Finally, at sunset, they appeared again, in a good mood. They had learned that [...] our escape had not yet been discovered. They had also made a contract with a ferryman [...] alleging that they some slaves to be taken to the Emir of Abu Hamed"... (pp. 440 – 445)

The Last Adventures

After having finally crossed the river by ferry, the travelers had continued their journey going towards the place where they could get their last supplies of water.

"Many palms and sturdy bushes grew luxuriantly along the bank of the splendid river in which the stars were reflected", the account continues. "Ours hearts were beating fast [...]. We were rejoicing at having passed through this third and critical point, when all of a sudden we heard the sound of a camel. We almost fell at the fear we experienced"... (pp. 447–448).

Unfortunately, it really was a guard who had decided to do his duty. Only when he accepted to 'dialogue' with Ahmed and to receive twenty thalers, could the journey resume. After such a fright, Ohrwalder comments further, *"our tiredness left us, even the camels seemed to have understood the danger because they went very fast [...]. This fact taught us that we were still in the sphere of control of the Mahdi [...]. Nevertheless, I was consoled by the thought that they would not have taken us alive [...].*

The proximity of our destination gave us courage to bear the tremendous exertion. Our greatest enemy was tiredness and the need to sleep"... (pp. 449–450).

Finally the 8th of December Dawned ¹⁶⁹

“This morning, Ahmed said, we will enter Murad [...]. Before the sun rose, we entered the ravine in the mountain which leads to the well of Murad [...]. A prayer of thanksgiving arose from the depths of the soul [...] towards heaven: they were emotions that could not be expressed in words. Our camels gathered their last strength so that they could present themselves to the Ababda who were approaching [...].

Surrounded on all sides, we went to the hut of the army officer. On the 8th of December, feast of the Immaculate Conception, we dismounted from our camels in Murad [...].

On the 8th and 9th of December we rested [...]. We left from Murad on the 10th of December. Our camels had also recovered and we began the last camel ride in a relaxed manner [...].

Without any further incidents, we reached Korosco at an early hour on the 13th of December [...]. The military authorities led by Ali Bey Heidar, received us in the most courteous manner. For the first time we were among white people in beautiful apartments and we heard music which moved us so much”... (pp. 451–454).

They Still Thought it was Concetta

The following day, 14th of December 1891, Monsignor Sogaro communicated to Cardinal Simeoni the happy outcome of the mission telling him:

“I would like to bring immediately to the attention of Your Eminence that yesterday three of our prisoners, the Reverend Fr. Ohrwalder, Sr. Concetta Corsi and Sr. Elisabetta Venturini, who were saved by that Arab whom I sent in the month of July, and about whom I had informed your Eminence, arrived in Korosco (Upper Egypt). As soon as I have seen them, I shall immediately send you more details”... ¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ “Later”, one reads in the conclusion of the memoirs of Elisabetta Venturini, “we understood that it was Our Lady who had saved us, because on the first day of the novena we left and on the 8th of December, Feast of the Immaculate Conception, we arrived at Murad where we were out of danger.” (p. 110)

¹⁷⁰ APF SC Afr. C., vol 10(1886–1892)887.

One week later, from Cairo, Sogaro wrote once again to *Propaganda Fide*, rectifying the error and completing the account:

*“This morning, Fr. Giuseppe Ohrwalder, Sr. Catterina Chincarini and Sr. Elisabetta Venturini arrived. Sr. Concetta Corsi from Barletta died in Omdurman on the 3rd of October, assisted by the commendable priest and the sisters. She had caught typhoid. Now the only one to be rescued is the priest Rosignoli because Brother Regnotto married a certain Mariam, daughter of Giorgi Hall, a Catholic Syrian. Then the former superior, Teresa Grigolini was married to a certain Greek, Demetri Cocoremba.”*¹⁷¹

There are serious reasons though why her conduct should not be condemned. She is more of a victim worthy of compassion in that she always demonstrated an exemplary innocence.

It seems certain that the end of the revolt is approaching. On the 24th of November there was a civil uprising between the leader, Caliph Abdullahi and the Caliph Scerif, a young man about 21 years old, the nephew of the deceased Mahdi. For some days, Omdurman was thrown into confusion and seventeen people died. Now it seems that calm has been restored, but the reason for the ongoing discord is the mutual contempt that exists between the invaders, the Baggara, and the local people.” (Ib. ff. 891-892)

The Reaction of the Press

*“When the news reached Cairo that those fleeing from Khartoum had reached Korosco, we read in the *Illustrazione Italiana* of January 10th 1892, there was a great commotion here. In many respects, this news interested every class of people: those who were curious, merchants, remaining relatives of the prisoners, [...], Consular authorities, the Egyptian authorities, the English authorities and journalists. They all wanted to*

¹⁷¹ *“Now on the argument of [...] the marriage contracted by the ex superior of the sisters and by Brother Giuseppe Regnotto”, Monsignor Sogaro explained the following 16th of January, “I have to add that neither one nor the other were bound by the vows. This is true of the first because the Sisters made three yearly vows and they expired in 1882 when they became prisoners and they did not renew them again. The other had only pronounced an oath and also for him the time had expired”. [APF SC Afr. C., vol. 10(1886–1892) 900]*

know something. The correspondent of The Times hurried to meet them at Siut and others surrounded them and until now continue to surround them [...].

The news that they bring is abundant and for the first time it is possible to know something about the state of Sudan. Khartoum is destroyed and abandoned. Nothing remains except the government palace and the church of the Mission. Omdurman, the new capital, which faces Khartoum from the left bank of the Nile, has about 150,000 inhabitants, a mixture of all the races in Sudan. In accordance with the rigid precepts of Al Mahdi, no one could build a house. There were only tents and huts. Our prisoners lived for seven years in huts made of sugar cane. Now the rigour has been relaxed and some modest little houses made of mud bricks can be seen here and there in the camp [...].

The successor of the Mahdi, the Caliph Abdullahi has his residence there[...]. The Sheikh Nur al Garafani is the director of the Beit al Mal (the Administration of the Common fund) [...]. The influence of the Mahdi remains great and the war-rising spirit of the tribes is still untamed. Fr. Ohrwalder believes that, since the tribal leaders are not cleverly deployed, retaking the Sudan will remain a difficult task [...].

With regard to their personal experiences, the prisoners say that they suffered tremendously in the first years of captivity. They now wonder at how they were able to survive the physical and moral ordeals and they attribute all merit to God. The suffering, persecution and contempt reached its peak in 1883 [...].

The prisoners remained for several years confined in 'zeribe' covered with a few cloths and had only durra and millet seed to eat and only when this was given. Three years ago they were told that they were free... to earn their own living and they did this through the work of Fr. Ohrwalder who weaved and the Sisters who made bread and manufactured the coloured shirts of the dervishes [...].

These humble champions of a noble cause return now to the darkness from which a great disaster led them out, but in their withdrawal, we will always admire them. In the sacrifice sustained for a noble cause, their faith in the destiny of the human race is strengthened". (pp. 19- 22)

Nigrizia too, which for a long time had given no news of the prisoners, opened the edition of January 1892 expressing that it was happy to be able to communicate " the very

consoling news of the liberation of three prisoners, who for more than nine years were held captive of the Mahdi in Omdurman. The trials and the sufferings which they experienced were many and very grave.”, the editor commented, and he continued, *“When we shall have further details, we shall content our readers. For now, they will be happy to hear the details of their escape in the following report sent by His Excellency, Monsignor Sogaro to the Most Eminent Cardinal Luigi Canossa.”* (p. 3)

After this introduction, there follows, in fact, a report of almost seven pages, which, however, does not offer any further information to that already known. The only thing that sounds a little strange is the affirmation, which differs from what Fr. Josef Ohrwalder, in the same period wrote to the brothers of Teresa Grigolini,¹⁷² that *“justice should be rendered”* to the “good Greek” who having sheltered Caterina Chincarini, always treated her with *“the greatest care and veneration”*.¹⁷³

Fr. Josef Ohrwalder, however, had every opportunity to speak personally with the Bishop of Verona during his journey in It-

¹⁷² *“Sr. Caterina Chincharini’s case was the same as Sr. Teresa’s, but she is safe, only by a miracle from the Lord who is great and by means of whom God saved Daniel from the lions and from the blazing fiery furnace [...]. The Lord [...] wanted to free Sr. Caterina even though her liberation was very complicated, and humanly speaking, desperate.”* (APMR, VI/G/1/1-1810: Ohrwalder to Luigi Grigolini, Cairo, 23rd January 1892. The more recent witness of Sr. Romana Antolini runs along the same lines. In January 1891 she recalled, *“In my first years of mission, I am speaking of 1937 to 40, I often had occasion to hear from Sr. Amalia Lonardi about the period in which our sisters were held prisoner by the Mahdi. She used to tell us that it was a period of much suffering in which they were tried to the limit in their faith and in their virtues [...]. I was talking about this some days ago with Sr. Rachele [...]. She confirmed for me what Sr. Amalia Lonardi had told me and she added other details such as that of the ongoing persecution of the Greek to whom Sr. Caterina had been entrusted and of the anguish, suffering and humiliation she experienced as she tried to escape from his tricks and conserve herself pure for the Lord”*... (APMR, VI/Pp/5/1-1405, Arco, 7th January 1981).

¹⁷³ *La Nigrizia*, 1(1892)5. Whatever actually happened, it is a fact that the Mission always expressed its gratitude for the collaboration shown by the Greeks. In the specific case of *“Panaioti Trampa, the Greek merchant, [...] as he had given a good service during the Mahdia to some of our prisoners, the grateful mission obtained from the Emperor of Austria a decoration”*. [*La Nigrizia*, 11(1899)166]

aly which he undertook with Francesco Sogaro in the month of July 1892.¹⁷⁴

Until now, no document has been found which shows that he was also able to meet the Sisters community at Casa Madre, an event to which Sr. Elisea Pezzi refers in her work.¹⁷⁵

The Inevitable Difficulties of “the Following Day”...

“In the immense ocean of my tribulations, the thought that you and the two Sisters, companions in misfortune, now pray for me and sympathise with me, is a drop of comfort. Oh, how bitter for me was the separation from them” Only the Lord knows [...]. Truly the loneliness in which I find myself is similar to agony [...].

Until I had news of your arrival, my heart was restless, especially on the second and third day when we were in chains. The doubt that they might catch you was enough to make me feel faint.”

(Teresa Grigolini to Fr. Ohrwalder)

If it was difficult for those who remained in captivity to face the consequences of the escape¹⁷⁶, it was no less easy for those who had re-entered after such a long time and so many experiences, to readapt to such a different environment; an environment, not only not well informed and, perhaps for this reason, possibly also prejudiced, so different from the one they had left behind.

“Here, it is necessary to clarify something”, Fr. Bano writes in reference to this. “The apostasy, even if only verbal, of Ros-

¹⁷⁴ Cf *La Nigrizia*, 4(1892)92; 5(1892)129–141. Such an opportunity was not given, however, to the two sisters who were liberated with him.

¹⁷⁵ Cf PEZZI, E – 1987, pp. 305-306.

¹⁷⁶ Cf *AMN*, 12(2006)165-168: Grigolini to Ohrwalder, Omdurman, May 17th 1892.

ignoli and Locatelli, made a great impression in Europe and in Egypt and especially on Monsignor Sogaro. So too did the so called marriage of the Greeks with the Sisters (even although it was only a subterfuge to save their honour) [...]. It is true that the sisters had only temporary vows [...], and that Fr.Losi [...], during the siege of El Obeid in 1882 had released the Pie Madri from their vows, advising them to renew them daily. Nevertheless, they intended to remain faithful to their religious commitment, at the cost of martyrdom, as they demonstrated also with their blood in the early period of their imprisonment. Sr. Concetta then was a victim of violence. Nevertheless, the impression was huge, and the attitude of the superiors was very severe. Fr. Ohrwalder was considered an apostate because he had perhaps gone to the public prayer in the Square which was obligatory for all men [...]. On his arrival in Egypt, he was asked to make his profession of faith so that he could be absolved from public censure and be reintegrated into the exercise of his priestly ministry”...¹⁷⁷

Maria Caprini and Fortunata Quascè had also, at their time, received similar treatment.¹⁷⁸ Later, both of them had been asked to take up teaching of African girls in the Institute of the Sacred Heart of Mary in Cairo, which at that time was full to overflowing with refugees from the Sudan. Certainly, to offer them the possibility of taking up their occupations of the past was the best way to help them to ‘forget’ all that had happened.

Instead, in the case of Caterina Chincarini and Elisabetta Venturini, we do not know yet in what consisted the “*painful humiliation, as if they were apostates*” which preceded their return to community and to which Sr. Romana Antolini refers.¹⁷⁹ What we know is that they were welcomed, on first arrival, by the sisters who were giving a service in the Austro Hangarian Hospital *Rodolfo*.

Later, once re-established, they had also been able to go to Gessira, where Francesco Sogaro, in 1888, had founded a school and a farm for Africans who had managed to escape from the Mahdia.

¹⁷⁷ L. Bano, vol. 4, pp. 80-81.

¹⁷⁸ Cf AMN, 10(2005)188-189.

¹⁷⁹ APMR, VI/ Pp/5/1-1402.

Liberation of Paolo Rosignoli

Exactly three years after the liberation of Ohrwalder, Chincarini and Venturini, *La Nigrizia* was able to announce in November 1894 that another prisoner had also been saved. The announcement explained:

“Rosignoli Paolo, from Frascati, is the last of our priests who was held prisoner of the Mahdi. The Reverend Father Paolo Rosignoli [...] arrived, after twelve years of painful captivity, in Aswan, a city in Upper Egypt, safe and free. With heartfelt gratitude we express our thanksgiving to God for his re-found freedom! We join with him in his thanksgiving”... (p. 161).

On the 26th of November that year, in fact, a letter from Fr. Geyer from Cairo had informed Francesco Sogaro before anyone else:

“On the 24th of this month, I met Fr. Paolo Rosignoli at Girgeh and then on the morning of the 25th we arrived here. After having giving the necessary political report on Sudan to Wingate Bey, he will return but I don’t know to where, but it should be within the next few days. He is well disposed, humble and timid. He left Omdurman on the 20th of October, arriving in Berber on the 26th. Then he left Berber on the 16th of November, arriving in Aswan on the 29th of November. In Berber he was in great danger and had to remain in hiding for nine days. His liberator is Abdullah Mohammad Homr of the Ababde, an inexperienced youth and it seems to be a great grace that this man, who proved himself to be very brave, was able to save him. Grigolini, Regnotto and Vittoria are well enough. The first is pregnant and cannot therefore attempt to escape at the moment.

Abdalla had given to Fr. Rosignoli a note from Your Eminence and from this he took courage. I am including here the letter which he wrote on Saturday to Your Eminence as soon as he arrived in Aswan, knowing that you were not there”...¹⁸⁰

¹⁸⁰ ACR, A/43/38/35: Geyer to Sogaro. Cairo, November 26th 1894.

Interesting: almost four years later, Sr. Luigina Gandolfi had the same impression. Writing, in fact, to Costanza caldara, she told her, *“I forgot to tell you that Fr. Rosignoli came to accompany us to the boat. He is still very attached to our mission. He told us, with a certain naivety, all the sufferings and struggles he had to endure and which he still endures in order to*

Then Geyer himself wrote to *Propaganda Fide*:

*“Fr. Rosignoli is now making the retreat which he desired so much. Your Eminence is already aware of the weakness shown by Fr. Rossignoli during the long hard trial. He has repented from his error and he shows that he is well disposed to any kind of reparation”...*¹⁸¹

For Francesco Sogaro, Mission Accomplished

Such news, which was long awaited, must have resounded for the ex Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa, first successor of Daniel Comboni, like a recognition of a “mission accomplished” towards the prisoners of the Mahdia. In that November of 1894, in fact, he was already in Italy having returned there for good the previous spring after handing in his resignation from the “grave duty”¹⁸² which, despite everything, he had managed to discharge competently.

Now, with the liberation of the last member of the mission still prisoner and with the Mahdia which was finally giving signs of yielding, he could also accept to retire, leaving *Propaganda Fide* to redraw the new borders of the vicariate providing the premise for another chapter of its history.

decide once and for all to belong to a Congregation, since he is not yet committed to the Salesians. He told us that he will leave next Thursday on the Rubattino for Torino, where, having heard the opinion of his superiors he will finally arrive at the Te Autem. He asked us to pray very much for him.” (APMR, VI/C2/7/2-50: Gandolfi to Caldara. Alexandria, August 8th 1898).

¹⁸¹ APF NS, vol. 31(1894)313: Geyer to Ledòchoski. Cairo, December 12th 1894.

¹⁸² *La Nigrizia*, 2(1895)32.

10. End of The Mahdist Regime

“In two months, Omdurman will be taken and then this immense tragedy which embittered our lives will be over.”

(J. Ohrwalder, April 19th 1898)

Still in Omdurman, awaiting the end of that “*immense tragedy*”, were Giuseppe Regnotto and Teresa Grigolini. With regard to Teresa, even if the change of circumstances in her state of life made it extremely difficult to make any attempt for her liberation, there was still no willingness to renounce this altogether. Already in 1893, for example, she had told her brother Luigi that some of the “*other poor Christians*” who remained in Omdurman were “*on the point of attempting to escape*”. She added, “*In case Monsignor should ask you some money for me, please be charitable and don’t refuse*”...¹⁸³

It seemed so feasible that, on the 22nd of January 1894, Josef Ohrwalder shared with Fr. Grigolini that everything was ready and that Monsignor Sogaro had already paid the initial expenses.¹⁸⁴ However, everything depended on whether Teresa would be able to travel...

This was, in fact, the main difficulty which had to be considered after she had accepted to get married. A first pregnancy, closely followed by others, had not been long in coming and this made it impossible to think of a journey on camel back without the possibility of making some stops.

It would appear that Teresa had still not spoken clearly with her family about what had happened to her. “*I don’t know how and where to start,*” we read, in fact, in the letter of August 4th

¹⁸³ AMN, 12(2006)168-169: Grigolini to her brother Luigi. Omdurman, August 4th 1893.

¹⁸⁴ See, APMR, VI/4/4n/3-5576: Ohrwalder to L. Grigolini. Cairo, 22nd January 1894.

1893, already cited, *“to tell you about my misfortunes. I can only say that they are indescribable.”*

Now, if she had not spoken clearly, Fr. Ohrwalder and Fr. Geyer, both in charge of contact with the prisoners, felt even less authorized to do so.

On the 16th of February 1895, after the successful attempt to liberate Rosignoli and the failed attempt to liberate Teresa, Francesco Geyer felt obliged to write the following letter to Fr. Luigi Grigolini:

“Very reverend Father,

[...]. On the 9th of this month, I paid 250 francs, which a certain Bachit had given to your sister, as she acknowledges in a short letter.

After having read the letter which your sister wrote to you, I also organized with a merchant for her to be paid another sum of money.

I am telling you this so that you might realize that, on my part, I am doing all I can to help your sister.

Now I come to the steps taken to free her from her imprisonment.

On the 17th of February 1894, a contract was drawn up with a certain Hamed Hassab Allah for the liberation of your sister. With the grantee of a rich merchant from Aswan, the above mentioned Arab received from the mission the sum of 1,500 francs as an advance [...] for a long time we awaited news from this messenger. Then a letter arrived from a certain Vittoria, a Greek catholic educated in the mission and an old friend of your sister. In the letter she wrote that the Arab went only as far as Berber and from there, he sent someone else to Omdurman who was unable to conclude the business [...].

Many other attempts were made by the route of the Nile and of Suakin and we awaited the outcome.

*Don't be surprised or distressed. The day will come also for your sister! But, in order that you can be fully informed about the state of things, I have to tell you that the liberation of your sister is much more difficult than that of the others. At the time of the escape of Fr. Rosignoli, your sister found herself in a condition in which it would have been impossible to make the long and dangerous journey. Even now, such a journey with a family would be very difficult. We trust in God and pray much”...*¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ APMR, VI/G/4/4m/6-5573: Geyer to Luigi Grigolini. Cairo, 16th February 1895.

Finally the First Signs of a Solution are At Hand

It would be the victory of the Italian military at Adua on the 1st of March 1896 that would convince the British Government that the time had come to begin military operations to retake the Sudan.

The first step was, therefore, the authorization, transmitted to general Kitchner to advance on Dongola. In November 1896, *Nigrizia* published the news that this city had been retaken. (pp. 165-167)

Following this, it was the turn of Berber which was reoccupied in 1897.

"This is a very important place" commented *Nigrizia*, *"because from this point in the direction of the South [...], the Nile does not present any serious obstacles to navigation."* Worried, *"the Caliph, Abdullahi had abandoned Omdurman and was camped far out on the road to Cordofan"*.¹⁸⁶

1898 finally arrived. On the 8th of April, still on the banks of the River Atbara, the Anglo Egyptian army defeated 12,000 armed troops of the Mahdi, thus opening the road towards Khartoum. *La Nigrizia*, on the 16th of July published further news: *"the movement of the Anglo Egyptian Forces towards the South has begun"*.¹⁸⁷ They managed to reach Khartoum on the following 30th of August. The decisive battle took place at Karari, North East of Omdurman, three days later, that is, on the **2nd of September 1898**.

The Great Announcement

"Glad news!," La Nigrizia wrote in September, *"on the 3rd and 4th of this month the news rapidly spread throughout Europe stirring up great admiration [...], that the hundreds of prisoners, disheartened for long years under the brutal yoke, oppressed by the most sorrowful trials, made the object of mockery and disgrace [...], were finally free. They had been re-*

¹⁸⁶ *La Nigrizia*, 9(1897)134; 146.

¹⁸⁷ *Id.*, 8(1898)122.

stored to civil life, returned to society, to that homeland, to that family for which they had hoped so long in vain”... (pp. 129-130).

Among these prisoners, finally, there was also Teresa Grigolini, despite the fact that for her, unfortunately, to speak of liberation was very relative. The return to normal life did nothing but make even more concrete what she had foreseen on the day on which she accepted to take that “*terrible step*”.

She confessed in her *Memoirs*, “*I had asked the Lord with all my heart the grace that He might take my eyes before I would take this step, but it seems that the Lord did not find me worthy of such a grace. I confess my misery. I thought the Lord had done me an injustice. For an entire year, I cried about my fall, but I cried even more on the day of liberation. I said to myself, all have found their freedom. The sisters had returned to their convent, and all the others to their families and their homelands. Only I did not find neither my convent nor my family and my slavery would last until death*”... (pp. 84-85).

This was a bitter chalice, which Teresa, however, had accepted to drink to the full.¹⁸⁸

The Deep Meaning of This Martyrdom

On the 19th of April 1898, Fr. Josef Ohrwalder, in a letter addressed to Caterina Chincarini and Elisabetta Venturini, defined the Mahdia as “*an immense tragedy which had embittered their lives.*”¹⁸⁹

In reality, and this was true of all the protagonists, he could have had much more to say. It is not by chance that in the same letter, mentioned above, we can read further:

“Suakin drained me of the little strength that Sudan had left me. But it doesn’t matter. I have taken my distance from this world. I no longer have any ambition. I would not know what could give me pleasure. I just rejoice in celebrating the

¹⁸⁸ See, AMN, 12(2006)176 ff: Letter to brother Luigi.

¹⁸⁹ APMR, VI/Pp/5/1-1812: Suakin, April 19th 1898.

Holy Eucharist and asking forgiveness from the Lord for my many sins. For the rest, I am happy and content”...

On their part, after all the fuss created around their experiences, the survivors of the Mahdia, had tried to keep a low profile in order, finally, to live quietly a ‘*normal*’ life.

Most probably, they would have strongly felt the need to integrate, to ‘understand’ what they had lived and its spiritual significance. In that case, only the celebration of the sacrifice of the Cross could help them in such a journey of faith.

From the Experience of the Cross, The certainty that Life will Overcome Death

Also those who were destined to live with them came to realize, gradually as the dust settled and the vision became clearer, that they had ‘**martyrs**’, witnesses, in their midst. Instead of instilling fear or provoking rethinking, the experience that they had been called to live was extremely important for them as it is for all the heirs of the Combonian charism: **the path of mission can never be abandoned.**

There may be pauses and rethinking about the direction to take.

However, the journey must continue till the end, till the last drop of blood will finally be shed thus rendering complete the Passion of Christ (cf Col. 1,24).

In issue number 9 of *Nigrizia* 1898, the issue which we could call “*the bulletin of Victory*”, and which we have already cited, we find written:

“The victory in Omdurman finally opens the door for mission in Central Africa, the doors of Unhappy Africa which have remained closed to the exiled missionaries for the past fifteen years [...]. At the time of writing, the first group is already getting ready to leave soon for Khartoum [...]. There in the shade of the age old palms [...] in the garden of our Institute [...] the venerated remains of two illustrious founders of this mission, Fr. Massimiliano Ryllo and Monsignor Comboni have rested in oblivion and abandon for fifteen years. It was not without a special grace from Providence that those illustrious relics

*remained in that unredeemed soil. From their tombs, the two champions kept vigil for all this time on unhappy Africa.”*¹⁹⁰

At this point, however, it seems legitimate to remember that there were not only two tombs of the Missionary Fathers and Sisters which had remained forever in Sudan.

The sand of the desert of the *Boga*, or the camp of the Mahdists, had enclosed in it the remains of the first three martyrs of the Mahdia. To all of them, we address the prayer which appeared in *Nigrizia* asking our **Fathers** and **Mothers**:

“Keep vigil, oh keep vigil more carefully than ever on that Nigrizia for whose salvation you were sacrificed. Keep vigil on those, heirs of your spirit and your courage who are preparing to follow in your footsteps. Guide their steps. Guide their actions. Obtain for them and for all of the Nigrizia, the treasures and the blessings of the grace of the Divine Heart of Jesus Christ, the one true fount of all good things and of every happiness on earth and in heaven for all mortals.”

¹⁹⁰ *La Nigrizia*, 9(1898)130–131.

Epilogue

The Mahdia According to the Protagonists

Evidently, in order to understand at least a little better what the experience of the Mahdia was for those who lived it, knowledge of what the Protagonist themselves accepted finally to communicate about it becomes indispensable.

Therefore, it becomes essential to take into account the memoirs which have, until now, come to light. There are five works in all; two on the part of the Fathers and three of the Sisters.

1) The first to write already in 1892 was Josef Ohrwalder¹⁹¹ with his ***“Ten years of Imprisonment in the Kingdom of the Mahdi in Sudan”***.

This work, which is historical, is only partially complete because the Mahdia came to an end only six years later, in 1898. In it, the author, who had already provided various reports during his time in captivity subsequently published in *Nigrizia*, recalls also some personal experiences which he lived with his companions in misfortune.

Obviously, he does not recount everything; first of all, so as not to compromise further those who were still under house arrest in the Mahdist territory and secondly, because some details, in particular the forced profession of the Islamic faith and the violence of which Concetta Corsi was a victim, were not to be made known in the public domain. What he recalls, however, is still interesting and reliable.

According to Fr. Bano, Fr. Josef Ohrwalder, *“who was not a writer, was reluctant to write the story of his imprisonment. Fr. Geyer got him to tell him the story in German, and he wrote it and had it published in the same year 1892 in Innsbruck.*

¹⁹¹ In reality, ever since 1887, Fr. Sembianti had sought to convince Fr. Luigi Bonomi to write a new and exhaustive report on the events of the Sudan. This latter was not opposed to the project, but in the end he did nothing (cf ACR, A/26/13/12: Bonomi to Sembianti, Cairo, July 8th 1887).

*An English edition was immediately prepared by Colonel F. R. Wingate [...] and published the same year in England.”*¹⁹²

Even if, the mission did not seem at the beginning, Massimo Zaccaria commented, “*to be attracted to this project, the interest and influence of Wingate was sufficient to convince Monsignor Sogaro of the opportunity and not to block the initiative.*”¹⁹³

On the other hand, the Apostolic Vicar knew that behind Wingate there was the will of England, with its military projects regarding Africa. It was important that public opinion favourable to military re-conquest in Sudan, the principle aim of English colonial politics, be formed and consolidated as soon as the opportune circumstances arose.

Therefore, it is not by chance that in the archives of Khartoum, Fr. Giovanni Vantini found exhaustive reports in English signed by “*Kaimakan*”, [the pseudonym of Wingate], which were evidently the fruit of the evidence of Josef Ohrwalder after his liberation.¹⁹⁴

Published for the first time in 1892 in German, and already translated into Italian in 1893¹⁹⁵, the Memoirs of J. Ohrwalder were published by EMI only in 1998. Currently the book is still easily available and it is a worthwhile read.

2) My Twelve years of Prison in the Midst of the Der-vishes in the Sudan. This work by Paolo Rosignoli was published in 1898 in Mondovi by the bishop’s printing works, with the authority of the ecclesiastical authorities so that it could be sold and “*the proceeds be given to The Professional Institute of don Bosco in Alesxandria, Egypt.*”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹² Bano, L., vol. 4, p. 81.

¹⁹³ Ohrwalder, G., p. 15.

¹⁹⁴ See, Copy of the Italian translation: in APMR, VII/M/1m/1-3542.

¹⁹⁵ See, *La Nigrizia*, 2(1893)51.

¹⁹⁶ Bano, L., vol.4, p. 126.

While Monsignor Roveggio, who was then the Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa had always expressed himself contrary to this publication of the memoirs of Rosignoli, and one could understand why, a work of this kind was, on the other hand, in great demand by the Italian public who had not yet been able to have access to the Memoirs of Ohrwalder.

Once published, however, the book did not merit the apprehension of those who did not want to see it published. “*Completely harmless*” Leonzio Bano defined it, and prudent too, because it did not report “*a single mention of the moral conduct of the author.*” Those memoirs, according to Fr. Bano, can be “*considered a valuable source regarding the conditions of life of the prisoners and of the people of Sudan in those years, and in particular, of the details about the market, where he passed his days.*”¹⁹⁷

The account of Rosignoli, in fact, follows closely that of Ohrwalder. It is a book which one reads willingly, but requires caution should someone decide to use it as a source for historical research. In addition, the work evokes some perplexity and provokes a degree of reservation in who has already studied, from other sources, the events that took place. While, in fact, Giuseppe Ohrwalder could simply omit, without lying, everything related to the abjuration forced out of the missionaries, Rosignoli had to ‘adjust’, more than once, the account in order to avoid saying that, at a certain point, he was separated from the group and, therefore, could not have participated in some events, among which, the encounter with the Mahdi, which he writes about in first person.

3) *My Ten Years of Imprisonment Under the Tents of the Mahdi.*¹⁹⁸ This work by Elisabetta Venturini constitutes a completely different type of document from the previous two. Written by hand in two exercise books around 1920 “*by order of the reverend Fr. Fabbro*”¹⁹⁹, who was at that time the confessor of the Sisters community in Khartoum, these Memoirs will

¹⁹⁷ Ib.

¹⁹⁸ ACR, A/32/19/1.

¹⁹⁹ APMR, VI/ 3g/6–1735: Allegrini to Caldara. Kahrtoum, 9 Marzo, 1928.

soon be published, thanks to the kind authorization granted by Fr. Piergiorgio Prandina, General Archivist of the ACR.

The original document, or its typewritten copy, has been consulted and used by several researchers and so numerous extracts have been published, especially in some texts regarding the Mahdia in the Sudan.

The unique value of this document consists especially in the freedom of expression of experiences that the author underwent, as well as in the recommendation, which she evidently received, to omit nothing, no matter how difficult and painful such a task might be.

Sr. Elisabetta, in fact, was not keen to relive, not even in memory, all that happened to them as young consecrated women during their imprisonment by the Mahdi.

Urged and encouraged by who had made the request "*in obedience*" for this testimony, Sr. Bettina finally decides to tell the whole story, as it remained impressed in her mind, even if sometimes she could not remember dates accurately.

She who, in conscience, could affirm that she "*never pronounced the formula*" can be considered, in a certain sense, the most reliable witness in terms of the actual facts. To consign to history the events which took place during the Mahdia, without taking into account her testimony, would be a serious failing.

4) *Memories of Imprisonment* by Caterina Chincarini

From the time that a note written by Sr. Ermenegilda Morelli was brought to our attention,²⁰⁰ those Memoirs still unknown, of Sr. Caterina, had become the object of unceasing research, which, unfortunately, seemed destined to produce no results.

Then, last week, on April 16th 2011, by happy chance, through some extraordinary circumstances, we were able to identify those "*sheets in protocol written by Sr. Caterina Chincarini regarding the imprisonment*" with the "*Memoirs of the Imprisonment among the Dervishes*" which were stored in our Archives,

²⁰⁰ "*In the Archives of Casa Madre, there should be numerous sheets written in protocol by Sr. Caterina Chincarini regarding the imprisonment. The first forty or fifty have been torn up*"... (APMR, VI/A/5-2723: Morelli to Costalunga. S. Pietro Incariano, July 20th 1968.).

but had been recorded as ‘*anonymous*’ and ‘*incomplete*’.²⁰¹

Since, however, at the time of finding this document, this publication had already gone to the printers, it was decided that it would be better not to change anything in this text which had already been prepared, but to complete the following issue which would be dedicated to the memoirs of Sr. Elisabetta Venturini, with those of Sr. Caterina Chincarini which had just been found.

Fifth and last, but by no means the least because of its importance is the volume published in Issue Number 1 of the *Archivio Madri Nigrizia* (2000), containing the “***Memoirs of the Mahdist Imprisonment***” by Teresa Grigolini.

Like Sr. Elisabetta Venturini and Sr. Caterina Chincarini, Teresa Grigolini, by then Mrs. Cocorempas, was urged, in her case directly by Sr. Costanza Caldara, Superior General of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, to consign to history her own version of the facts, especially those which referred to her own particular case.

The document, which is dated September 1927, is considered today an inimitable text of missionary spirituality. More than a diary of facts, it is the testimony of a very painful spiritual journey undergone by the author, from that unforgettable 12th of April 1884 in Rahad until the day of her death in Mambrotta (VR) on October 21st 1931.

Since the volume is easily available as it is published in Issue number 12 of *AMN*, we shall not comment further on it and instead strongly encourage you to read it.

²⁰¹ APMR, VII/M/1L/3-3587: Memoirs of the Imprisonment of the Sisters during the Mahdia, anonymous and incomplete.

CHRONOLOGY

1842: The Egyptian government creates a governorate of the Sudan, with residence in Khartoum

1846, 3rd April: Gregory XVI creates the Apostolic Vicariate of Central Africa

1848: Mohammed Ali (d. 1849) pushes his military conquests further up to the region of the Equatorial lakes, concluding them with the creation of a new state: Egyptian Sudan. At the end of the same year, on the insistence of the European consuls in Egypt, and especially the English Consul, he opens the door to commerce which soon becomes frenetic, often with negative consequences for the inhabitants of the country.

1857: The Khedive, Said Pascia (d. 1863): son and successor of Mohammad Ali – visits the Sudan, decreeing important reforms, such as the abolition of slavery, the organization of an efficient postal service, the division of the region in provinces governed by a *Mudir* (Director) directly responsible to the government of Cairo.

1867: The Sudanese Muhammad Ahmad (1842-1885), begins his itinerant preaching in all of Sudan, calling for conversion to the practice of true Islam.

1869: Inauguration of the Suez Canal. This was projected by the Italian Negrelli and realized by the Frenchman Lesseps. The isthmus was financed mostly by French, Egyptian and English capital. The eyes and interests of other European powers converged on the operational zone.

1872, 26th May: Daniel Comboni is nominated Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa.

1874: Darfur is also annexed by Egyptian Sudan.

1875: The Khedive, Ismail (1830-1895) is forced to sell to England all the shares in the Suez canal which the Egyptian government possesses.

1877: The same Ismail, through a conversation with the English government, confirms the abolition of public slave trading. Gradually he is obliged to suppress also private trafficking. Gordon Pascia is nominated Governor General of the Sudan. He will then indicate some Europeans (Gessi, Messadaglia...) for other provinces.

12th August: Daniel Comboni is consecrated bishop in Rome. In the meantime, the financial situation in Egypt begins to decline. For this reason, Ismail will be deposed as Sultan in 1879. France and England nominate an inquiry commission of which Austria and Italy also take part.

1878: At the end of March, the first five Comboni Sisters reach Berber.

1880: Muhammad Rauf Pascia (1832-1888) a Muslim, is the new Governor general of the Sudan. He will be substituted by the German Carl C. Giegler in 1882.

1881: July With a letter to the sheikhs. Muhammad Ahmad self proclaims himself the **Mahdi** and proclaims the Mahdia Movement of religious reform which would have an effect on all of the Sudan. This could mean – as it eventually did – starting a ‘Holy War’.

August 11th: the first victory of the Mahdist forces over those of Rauf Pascia. The booty was 200 Remington rifles. The Mahdi leaves the island and positions himself on the left bank of the river.

Several Chiefs of the Baggara tribes unite with him.

Some days later, at Kaua, a place of transit for merchandise for Kordofan, a garrison of 100 soldiers, posted to guard that market, is massacred.

August 30th: worried, Rauf Pascia prepares a contingent of approximately 2,000 men, entrusting command to Muhammad Said, without result.

October 4th: the volunteers of the Mahdi massacre the 400 men of the director of Fashoda, while they had left their positions to drink at the river. The booty was another 400 rifles.

The news spreads, and new volunteers hurry from all of Kordofan.

October 10th: † Daniel Comboni dies in Khartoum

December 9th: On his own initiative, the Director of Fashoda attacks the rebels. This surprise attack in the woods leads to a massacre. New arms, among which there are also machine guns, end up, in this way, in the hands of the Mahdists.

1882: The revolutionary risings encouraged by the Natonlist Party, become the pretext for direct military intervention in Egypt by Britain.

Despite the fact that the Khedive Tawfiq can return to the throne, it is now clear that Great Britain has acquired a predominant political role.

February: Teresa Grigolini can go to Delen for the last time.

April 9th: Religious profession of Fortunata Quaschè in El Obeid.

May 11th: Abd Al Kader pascia, the new governor general of the Sudan arrives in Khartoum.

May 30th: there is another massacre at Birket - 65 kms from El Obeid with victory for the Mahdists.

The Mahdists begin to apply their religious and moral laws.

July: Elias Pascia and other influential people in El Obeid let the Mahdi know that he can march on the city and count on them.

September 8th: After laying in wait for some days, the Mahdists attempt to enter El-Obeid. They are held back but not followed. They return after four days and camp around the city besieging the fortress.

October 27th † **Eulalia Pesavento** dies in El-Obeid, prisoner of the Mahdi.

November 7th: in the same way, † **Amalia Andreis** also dies.

December 11th: After alternating events, Giegler Pascia leaves Khartoum at the head of a battalion of regular infantry, but he returns without any result.

In the besieged city there is famine and disease.

December 28th: Fr. Giovanni Losi dies.

1883, January 19th: El-Obeid is occupied by the Mahdists. The survivors of Delen can be re-united with the sisters coming out of the city which had been besieged.

April- there is the first attempt by Monsignor Sogaro and the

Consul Hansal to pay a ransom.

August 20th: General Hicks is nominated commander of the expedition to Kordofan.

September: The general leaves Khartoum to reach the armed forces encamped around Duem. The decisive battle with the Mahdists takes place in the woods at Kazgil.

The attack begins on the third of November and lasts for three days.

November 5th: Hicks is killed and the victory belongs to the Mahdi.

December 11th: all the personnel of the mission leave Khartoum for Scellal.

December 29th: Marietta Maragase reaches Khartoum with correspondence from the prisoners, which she hands over to the Consul Hansal.

1884, February 8th: There is a new attempt on the part of Gordon to have the prisoners released through ransom.

March 28th: The prisoners make a first attempt to escape.

April 7th: The Mahdist camp moves towards Rahad.

April 12th: Day of mourning at Rahad.

May: by disposition of the Mahdi, the sisters must be married.

August: The Mahdist camp moves again, this time towards Khartoum.

October: The prisoners are settled in the area of the renegades in Omdurman.

December: Fr. Domenico Vincentini, from Dongola, contracts a messenger to send to Omdurman. He will reach there towards the end of the month.

1885, January 26th: With the fall of Khartoum, the Mahdi sets up a new Islamic State in the Sudan.

February- The messenger sent by Fr. Vincentini returns to Dongola, where he is received by Licurgo Santoni. He carries with him the response of Teresa Grigolini.

April: Monsignor Sogaro receives the letter of the Consul Hansal who communicates to him about the '*general defection*' of the prisoners.

June: there is the last attempt with the Mahdi to ransom the prisoners.

June 22nd, The Mahdi dies and the Caliph, Abdullahi, succeeds him.

June 24th: Fr. Luigi Bonomi arrives safely at Dongola.

July / August: there is the failed escape attempt of Elisabetta Venturini.

October 7th: Maria Caprini and Fortunata Quascè begin their flight from Omdurman.

They reach Cairo on the morning of the 9th of November.

The Anglo Egyptian forces establish their headquarters in Aswan.

1886, March 28th: Fr. Josef Ohrwalder leaves El Obeid with his owner.

He reaches Omdurman the following 24th of April.

Concetta Corsi asks him to bless her marriage.

1887, March 24th Isidoro Locatelli reaches Cairo.

June: Teresa Grigolini appeals to Messadaglia to have some money.

October: The first appeal of Concetta to Isidoro Locatelli.

November: the prisoners ask insistently for help.

1890, August: the religious matrimony of Teresa Grigolini.

1891, October 3rd: Concetta Corsi dies.

November 29th –Caterina and Elisabetta escape with Fr. Ohrwalder.

1894, November: the liberation of Paolo Rosignoli.

1896, September 23rd: England authorizes Sir Herbert Kitchner to proceed to retake the province of Dongola.

1897, August 7th: Berber is retaken.

1898, April 8th: the Anglo Egyptian forces defeat, on the banks of the River Atbara, a Mahdist army of 12,000 men. There are reactions from Egyptian ultra Islamic movements.

August 2nd: London authorizes the advance on Khartoum.

September 2nd: the Mahdist Army, formed by more than 40,000 soldiers is defeated at Kariri, North West of Omdurman.

September 3rd: The last decisive battle and the liberation of the prisoners takes place. **This is the end of the Mahdia.**

September 4th: The flags of Great Britain and Egypt are hoisted in Khartoum.

Biographical Index

Abdullahi at Ta'aysi (1846–1899) originally from Darfur, belonged to the tribe of the Baqqara. He would be the first among the followers of Muhammad Ahmad to recognize him as the Mahdi, awaited in the Sudan, as liberator. Thus, he became the most important of the four Caliphs nominated by the Mahdi in 1881, on the example of Muhammad. With this nomination, the new Caliph, who was also the rightful successor, gained for the Mahdist cause, as well as his own, many other Sudanese tribes. In June 1885 at the death of the Mahdi, he became, not without opposition, the highest military and political authority in the Sudan during the Mahdia. In September 1889 when the Anglo Egyptian troops reconquered the country, he managed to escape with a group of followers. He was captured and killed a year later at Umm Dibay- Karat on November 24th 1899.

Bonomi, Fr. Luigi (1841-1927). Ordained in Verona in 1864, he was the curate at Montorio (VR) when he entered the Institute of the *Missioni per la Nigrizia*. Having reached Cairo in September 1874, he left the following month for the Centre. After the Camillian Fathers withdrew from the Vicariate, he remained faithful to Comboni, who appointed him as his representative in Khartoum during his last journey in Europe. He was imprisoned during the Mahdia, while he was superior of the community of Delen. He was helped by Licurgo Santoni in 1885 to escape from El-Obeid. Three years later, Monsignor Sogaro, on the request of the Holy See, sent him to Eritrea as chaplain of the Italian troops. He died in Asmara, where he is still remembered with great veneration, after having called also the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*.

Cromer, Sir Evelyn Baring (1841-1917). First Count of Cromer, he was considered one of the greatest servants of the British Empire. Coming from a background of Banking, it was his qualities and skills as a financier that got him noticed first in India and then in Egypt, where he had the opportunity to demonstrate his remarkable qualities as a diplomat and administrator. He was nominated diplomatic agent in Cairo on the vigil of the catastrophic expedition of General Hicks (1883). He

was not responsible for this, but he could be considered responsible for what followed. As an intermediary between the ministers of the Khedive and those of the Queen of England, he did not have, however, full freedom of action, therefore, he can not be held responsible for what happened afterwards with Gordon and the fall of Khartoum. According to some, however, he was the all powerful proconsul and to all effects, the real Lord of Egypt for almost quarter of a century.

Dobale, Fr. Antonio (1849–1881). Among the 11 African children which the Mazza Institute had welcomed in 1860, there was also the 11 year old Antonio Dobale, born in Sarago (Galla). Daniel Comboni had rescued him from Aden with certain difficulties “*because his owner, an Englishman named Greek, [...] did not want to leave him.*” (Wr. 875).

In 1877, Antonio was among the pupils of propaganda Fide, with Giovanni Farag (Wr. 4593). On the 24th of April 1878, Daniel Comboni asked “*to ordain the cleric **Antonio Dobale** a priest for Central Africa*” (Wr. 5086). He felt that his presence in the Vicariate would be ‘*very useful*’. On the 6th of April 1881, Fr. Antonio found himself, in fact, at Malbes, where, unfortunately, he died on September 16th of the same year. (see Wr.7146).

Geyer, Francesco Saverio (1859–1943). Born in Bavaria, he entered the Institute of the Missioni per la Nigrizia in November 1880, eight days after the last departure of Daniel Comboni for Africa. At the death of this latter, the student was entrusted by the rector with the task of writing the first biography which was published in Verona in 1882.

Ordained Presbyter in the same year from Luigi Canossa, he left immediately for Cairo, from where, the following month, Monsignor Sogaro took him along with him on the visit to Sudan. Again with Monsignor Sogaro, Fr. Geyer travelled to Aswan at the end of 1883 to await the arrival of refugees from the Sudan and to prepare for them the house at Scellal. On the fall of Khartoum on January 26th 1885, Fr. Geyer was sent to Wadi Halfa to collaborate in the attempts to free the prisoners of the Mahdi. It was he who first received Maria Caprini and Fortunata Quascè, as soon as they had crossed the border. The following year, still for the same reason, he went to Suakin, where he remained until 1888.

Having returned to Egypt, he was nominated by Sogaro as his

deputy. After the nomination of Monsignor Roveggio, he returned to Verona to make his noviciate among the *Sons of the Sacred Heart* remaining from 1896 till 1897. Fr. Geyer was superior in Bressanone, when on September 11th 1903, he was elected Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa and consecrated bishop. After the first world War, he was obliged, being German, to resign. He left Khartoum in August 1921.

Giegler, Carl Christian (1844-1921). Of Bavarian origin, he worked in the Sudan from 1873, collaborating in the implementation of a telegraph system. He was nominated Inspector general against slavery in Sudan and later became Vice Governor of the country.

"He is a man that I don't like", Gordon would have confided, however, to Licurgo Santoni (p. 276). Giegler did not, in fact, leave good memories of his management, especially with regards to the Mahdist uprising. In 1882, after having provoked the resignation of Rauf Pascia, he was charged with the administration of the Sudan while it awaited a new Governor. Convinced that the Mahdi was not dangerous, he gave assurances that there was no need to send reinforcements from Egypt. The consequences of this were tragic. According to Major Gozzi, for example, if he had not interfered with the dispatches that reached Khartoum, the outcome of the war could have been different (p. 189). A free thinker, he had always demonstrated himself to be *"hostile to the late Monsignor Comboni and his Mission"*, Monsignor Sogaro explained in his letter of April 4th addressed to Cardinal Simeoni and he added: *"I inform Your eminence of these circumstances because they explain that man's actions, and if we have them – the letters of the prisoners which had been deliberately retained – it is due perhaps to the fact that he left for holidays in Europe."*

Gordon, Charles G. (1833–1885). An English official of the Royal Engineers, he first carried out special missions in Bessarabia, in the Caucas and then in China. After having been English consul in Galatz, he served in Egypt. In 1873, the Khedive nominated him Governor of Equatoria, until 1876 when Gordon himself stepped down.

"The new governor", Daniel Comboni wrote on May 5th 1875, *"seems to me equal to the task before him [...]. I spoke with him about slavery and on this issue he professes the most human sentiments."* (Wr. 3568)

In 1877, Gordon was nominated Governor General of all of the Sudan and entrusted with the particular task of suppressing slavery. *“The Vicariate’s position should for this reason alone be considered improved”* Comboni confided to Cardinal Franchi on April 5th 1877, *“as the latter [Gordon] is English and his religion is Protestant, anyone can see that the exercise of Apostolic activity will be far freer in the future, and therefore more effective. That is all the more to be hoped, both because he has always professed, and he professes with me, an intimate and sincere friendship, further because his relations with my missionaries are also based on real esteem and friendship”*... (Wr. 4501-2). *“Gordon Pascia”*, he wrote the following year to Mitterruntzner, *“is the terror of slavery. Since he arrived here (June) he has seized thirty six slave caravans. He favours me greatly and always comes to see me. He has decided to entrust the government hospital in Fashoda (capital of the Schilluk territory) to our Sisters of Verona [...]”*... (Wr. 5389).

Gordon renounced his position in 1880, after the deposition of the khedive Ismail. After the English occupation of Egypt in 1882, and the defeat of General Hicks in the Sudan by the Mahdists, he was called to London in 1884 where he received the mandate to return to the Sudan and proceed with the evacuation of the Egyptian troops and find a solution to govern the country better. He was once again nominated Governor General, but with a role which was not at all clear. He arrived in Khartoum in February of 1884, accompanied by Lieutenant Stewart. After having attempted, futilely, to dialogue with the Mahdi, he tried to strike alliances with the chiefs of the local tribes returning authority to them and giving them freedom of action, including that, considered inevitable for the moment, of resuming the slave trade. Having asked, again futilely, for troops to defend Berber, Gordon decided to send Stewart, who, unfortunately, was massacred with all his men. When the British government agreed finally to send reinforcements, this time to Khartoum, it was too late. The city fell to the Mahdists on January 26th 1885, and Gordon himself was killed. He left a diary regarding the siege of Khartoum. (Woolwich 1883 – Khartoum 1885).

Hanriot, Fr. Leone (1847–1894). Originally from Namur, he entered the institute in Verona in 1878 and he was sent to the mission of Kordofan. Superior in Khartoum after the death of Daniel Comboni, he retreated with all the personnel of the mis-

sion on the 11th of December 1883. From December 1885 till October 1887, he remained in Suakin, Aswan and Wadi Halfa, in order to assist in the escape of the prisoners. Superior in Gersa from the end of 1889 till 1894, he was then sent to Massaua, where he died some months later.

Hansal Martin Ludwig (1823 –1885). Born in Moravia, he transferred to Sudan in 1835, following Monsignor Knoblecker for whom he acted as secretary. In 1862, he was nominated Austro-Hungarian Consul, with the particular mandate of following the problems of the mission, which was under the protection of the Austrian government. In his historical report of February 15th 1870, addressed to Monsignor Luigi Ciurcia, Daniel Comboni defines him “*an excellent layman of Vienna [...] teacher and musician*” (Wr. 2077). The new consul, in fact, would always demonstrate himself “*a true friend and servant of the mission*” (Wr. 3201). Among other things, he declared himself ready to “*end slavery in Nuba*” (Wr. 6702). Surprised in Khartoum by the Mahdist attack on the city, he was killed in January 1885.

Hicks, William (1830-1883). A member of the British military forces, he began his career in India in 1849. In 1867, he moved to Africa, where he took part in the Anglo-Abyssinian war. In 1883, he was put in command of the expedition which was sent to stop the advance of the Mahdists, who were already in control of El-Obeid. In the month of September, this expedition was able to leave Khartoum. However, it never reached the capital of Kordofan since General Hicks and his 12,000 men were massacred in the area of Kazgil.

Kitchener, Horatio Herbert (1850–1916). He was a British official, member of the Intelligence Service of the expedition which in 1884-5 was supposed to come to the help of Gordon in Khartoum. He was nominated Governor General of the coast of the Red Sea in 1886. He was wounded in a battle with the Mahdists near to Suakin in 1888. In 1889, he participated in the battle of Taski against the Mahdists. Nominated Commander of the Egyptian Army in 1892, he guided the troops in reconquering the Sudan, of which he became the Governor General for a year from January 19th till December 1899. [see, AC, 2(2000)92-93]. In 1902, while passing through Khartoum, he officially opened

the *Gordon Memorial College*, which later became the University of Khartoum. From 1909 till 1914, he was still Consul general in Egypt, and after that, War Secretary during the European conflict of 1914.

Locatelli, Isidoro (born 1852). He entered the Missionary institute in 1879 as a brother. In 1880 he reached Cairo with El-Obeid as his destination. Unfortunately, when the city surrendered in 1883 due to hunger, he pronounced the formula of adhesion to Islam and therefore, together with Paolo Rosignoli he was separated from the other missionary prisoners.

In 1884, in Rahad, he accepted, however, to collaborate in the simulated marriages of the Sisters, becoming officially 'married' to Concetta Corsi. Instead of respecting her and protecting her, however, as he should have, at a certain point, he raped her, causing her to become pregnant. It is not known whether their child had already died when Locatelli, in March 1887, managed to escape, with the intention of then helping the others to do the same. Unable, however, to do anything to help, because of the heightened measures of security after his escape, he returned to Italy where he entered into another marriage and disappeared into anonymity.

Losi, Fr. Giovanni (1838-1882). From the diocese of Piacenza, he entered the Missionary Institute of Verona in 1872 and left for Africa in September of the same year. With Daniel Comboni, he reached Khartoum in 1873. He was superior in El-Obeid and Gebel Nuba. Twenty days after the death of Daniel Comboni, he was nominated the interim General Superior of the Vicariate, despite the fact that he was known to be one of the worst slanderers of the deceased bishop. Daniel Comboni, while appreciating him very much as a missionary, was often perplexed about him, as can be seen from the *Writings*: 2426, 3685, 4226, 6168, 6462-68, 6520, 6682, 6685-87, 6797, 6840-44, 6907-10. The testimony of Fr. Josef Ohrwalder on occasion of the death of Sr. Maria Colpo is also interesting (see, ACR, A/20/44/4: Ohrwalder to Comboni, El Obeid, 21st September 1881).

Mariani, Gabriele (1853-1882). He was a carpenter from Muggio (MI). He entered the Combonian Institute following the advice of Fr. Marinoni of the PIME, in 1879. He then left for Cairo in November of the same year. Daniel Comboni defined him “

a pearl", and spoke about how he would have liked to have another thirty like him. (See, 6595).

He was assigned first to El Obeid and then to Delen, where he was imprisoned. He died in the mahdist camp on October 31st 1882.

Maragase, Marietta (1848-1905). She was a slave of Nuban origin who was rescued in Cairo by Fr. Nicolo' Olivieri and entrusted to the sisters of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, in Cremona until she completed her education. On return to Africa with Daniel Comboni in 1869, she was sent away from the institute in Cairo because of her conduct. She then decided to return to El-Obeid, perhaps in the hope of finding her family of origin and she managed to reach El Obeid in 1880, in the company of Dr. Raffaele Alfieri from Naples. Finding herself alone during the Mahdia, she proved to be extremely generous and courageous towards the missionaries and in particular towards the Sisters, so much so that she was given the name '*Combatti*' [which means 'fighter']. She managed to leave the Sudan with her adopted daughter, Sciarfa in 1887 and they could be seen together in the colony of Africans at Gesira in 1888. She died in Helwan on August 13th 1905.

Messedaglia, Giacomo Bartolomeo (1846 - 1893). Originally from Venice, he was a traveller and map maker. He had left the Italian army in 1869 to move to the Orient. Reaching Cairo in 1876, he was employed by the Egyptian Army. In 1878, he became a collaborator of Gordon in Sudan and was nominated the first Governor of Dara and then Governor of Darfur. He left this office in 1880, when he was substituted by Slatin. He returned to the Sudan in 1882 together with Lieutenant Stewart. In 1884 -85, he worked in the Egyptian Intelligence Service in Korosco and Wadi Halfa. In 1887, having left his service in the army, he established himself in Upper Egypt as War Correspondent for the Italian newspaper, *La Riforma* of Rome. He returned to Italy in 1891 and died in Pisa two years later.

Muhammad Ahmad, the Mahdi (1843 – 1885). He was born in the region of Dongola and came from a family which claimed to be descended from that of the Prophet Muhammad. When his parents transferred to Khartoum, the boy had every possibility of deepening, as it had always been his desire, the study of the Qur'an.

When, in 1871, he moved with his brothers to the island of Aba, to the South of Khartoum, the young man already possessed the title Sayh, which he received in Berber, and this authorized him to open his own school and teach his own thinking or doctrine, which he had developed during his stay in Berber and then also as he came into contact with the realities he encountered during his itinerant preaching.

In 1880, after a memorable encounter with Abdullahi, whom he indicated as his successor, he began to apply to himself the characteristics of the Mahdi, revealing to his disciples and friends that he had also had visions, which contained revelations, of which the third, in 1881, was the decisive one.

The 'Holy War' provoked by his Mahdia began in that same year of 1881.

El Obeid, the capital of Kordofan, was conquered in January 1883. Khartoum instead, fell two years later. He established himself at Omdurman, the new Capital of his kingdom and he died only five months later on June 22nd 1885.

Ohrwalder, Fr. Josef (1856 -1913). He was born at Lana in Tyrol and entered the missionary Institute in Verona in 1875. He was ordained Presbyter in Cairo at the hands of Monsignor Comboni and in 1880 left for the centre, with a first destination at El-Obeid and a second at Delen. He was on Mount Nuba when on the 17th of September 1882 he became a prisoner of the Mahdists together with all the other personnel of the mission. All that he lives after that is known through his memoirs, published for the first time in 1892 and translated into Italian in 1998 under the title: *My ten years of Prison...*

Returning to Sudan after the end of the Mahdia, Fr. Ohrwalder was Parish Priest in Omdurman where he was known for his holiness. He died there suddenly on August 7th 1913.

Rauf Pascia (d. 1888). He became Governor General of the Sudan in 1879, after Gordon and he was ordered by the Khedive to "*protect the Mission*" (Wr. 6194) and to collaborate with Comboni in all that he possibly could (see Wr. 6435). Daniel Comboni also called him "*my great friend*" (Wr. 6518). When he knew that the bishop would have gone to Kordofan for the pastoral visit, the governor wrote to the local Pascia asking him to assist in all that was required. (Wr. 6564). In the letter of Rauf, translated by Comboni for Cardinal Simeoni, one can read:

“To His Excellency Mohammad Said Pascia Director of Kordofan and Procurator of the Affairs of Darfur,

Since His Excellency Monsignor Comboni, Bishop of all the Catholic Churches which are found in Sudan, and our friend, is a person who merits all veneration, respect and honour, and in two days time will leave from here to visit the Churches there, at his arrival in our territory, receive him with all the dignity that our rules of respect command and offer him your friendship, respecting his high rank as we do, as he is a dignitary of his religion and we must honour him also because he is considered in the world a wise man and he is esteemed by all. So, treat him in such a way that he will be satisfied. When he wishes to leave for Mount Nuba, procure for him everything he needs to undertake the journey comfortably. Make sure that he is received by all with great honour so that when he comes back here we can find him satisfied.” [AP SC Afr. C., vol. 9 f. 126; See ANNALI 25(1881)27–28] He was a Muslim, but obviously not *fanatical* (Wr. 6677) as Comboni himself called him. He was against a ‘*holy war*’ and from August 1881, he tried, unsuccessfully, to have the Mahdi arrested. (see Wr. 6942).

After the defeat of December 9th 1881, he asked for reinforcements from Cairo, but his appeal was rejected and he was considered incapable of facing a situation which was not considered to be very serious. On the suggestion of Giegler, it was easier to recall him and have him substituted. This was in March 1882. He died in Minya in 1888.

Regnotto, Fr. Giuseppe (1849–1926). Originally from Boschiesia Nuova (VR), he entered in Verona as a layman in 1876. He left the following year for Cairo and then for Sudan. Luigi Bonomi held him in great esteem, as did Comboni. He was in Delen when, in 1882, he became a prisoner of the Mahdists with the rest of the community. From El-Obeid, where he was detained until 1886, he then transferred to Omdurman remaining there until the end of the war. Released by Fr. Losi in 1882, from the oath that bound him to the Institute, he later decided to marry a young Catholic Abyssinian, Maria al-Kal. The matrimony produced four children and so “Beppo” remained in the Sudan for the rest of his life at the service of the mission, even after the end of the Mahdia. He died in Khartoum on the third of June 1926.

Rosignoli, Fr. Paolo (1850–1919). He studied at the Mastai College in Rome and reached Cairo in June 1880, so that he could then proceed to El-Obeid with Daniel Comboni. In March 1882, after the death of the Bishop, he asked to repatriate but this was not granted by the rector in Verona. After being taken prisoner by the Mahdists, he was able to escape only at the end of 1894. Unfortunately, his conduct, not always exemplary during imprisonment, was attributed erroneously to Fr. Ohrwalder who, for this reason, lost his reputation. After having asked to be released from his obligations with the Vicariate of Central Africa, he sought to enter a Religious Institute. Accepted by the Salesians, at the end he did not remain, returning to the Roman clergy. He died in Rome in 1919.

Roversi, Alfonso (1852-1882). He was originally from Minerbio (BO). He had chosen a military career, but without success. Sent on indefinite leave, he left for the Sudan around 1880. From 1881, he was appointed the “inspector for slavery” in the province of Gebel Nuba, on the suggestion of Daniel Comboni himself (cf Wr, 7215). Despite the fact that with the Mahdia he immediately declared himself ready to convert to Islam, he did not manage to survive the challenges of the Mahdist camp and he died of dysentery around El-Obeid.

Rylo Maksymilian (1802-1848). He was a Lithuanian Jesuit, who had entered in Rome in 1820 and had then left for the Orient on special confidential missions in Mesopotamia and Syria. He founded the Asiatic College in Beirut (1841), the precursor of the celebrated St. Joseph’s University. In 1844 he was nominated Rector of the Urban college of propaganda Fide.

After the renunciation of Casolani, he was nominated pro Vicar of Central Africa on the 18th of April 1847 (Wr. 2031). Arriving in Khartoum in February 1848, he bought a huge territory for the mission (Wr. 2039). He became ill due to the strain of travelling and died on June 17th 1848. His was the first tomb which was opened in the garden of the mission. (Wr. 2037).

Santoni, Licurgo A. (1846–1914). He arrived in Egypt with his father while still very young and he remained for approximately 35 years. In 1865, when the Viceroy Ismail brought the postal service under the state, Santoni was also employed. In 1878, he accompanied Gordon in Sudan and organized the postal serv-

ice of the military expedition of 1884-85, becoming the director, for twenty years, of the postal Service in Upper Egypt and Nubia. Having lived in various places, he can be considered very knowledgeable about the country, and therefore, his work, "*Upper Egypt and Nubia 1863 – 1898*" is of particular importance. He was on very friendly terms with the Catholic Mission and he was a sincere admirer of Comboni and of the comboni missionaries and he played a decisive role in their favour during the Mahdist imprisonment. For getting personally involved in the liberation of Fr. Luigi Bonomi he received the title of Cavalier from the Italian Government. He retired in 1898 but for some years acted still as the general secretary of the Khedival Geographical Society.

Slatin Rudolf Karl (1857–1932). He was an Austrian in the service of the Egyptian and Sudanese Governments. In 1878, he was invited by Gordon, then the Governor of Sudan, to collaborate with him as inspector of finances. In 1879 he was nominated governor of a part of Darfur, and two years later of the whole province. "*The young Slatin Bey of Vienna, Daniel Comboni wrote at the time, has an excellent heart, is generous and very sociable and lively.*" (BNMT, fondo Cora, no. 45: Comboni to Dabene. Khartoum, March 5th 1881)

In March 1884, he surrendered to the Mahdi and he became a Muslim, having to reside as a prisoner in Omdurman. He managed to escape in 1895 and became the director of intelligence in the Egyptian army under Kitchner. He was Inspector General of the Sudan from 1899 till 1914, but had to resign because of the first World War. He visited the Sudan again in 1931. Fr. Josef Ohrwalder always showed him great respect and friendship. It seems that he asked him advice regarding the religious marriage of Teresa Grigolini. The *Memoirs* of R. Slatin: *Fer e feu au Soudan*, translated into French and Italian in 1898, was written in German in 1895.

Sogaro, Francesco (1839–1912). He was a religious of the Stimmatine Congregation and originally from the diocese of Vicenza. He was Parish Priest of S. Giorgio in Verona when, in September 1882, he was nominated by Rome as the successor of Daniel Comboni for the Vicariate of Central Africa. He left Italy as soon as he could and arrived in Egypt on January 19th 1883, the exact day on which El Obeid fell. Two months lat-

er, Monsignor Sogaro managed, however, to reach Khartoum, but without taking up residence there because of the Mahdia. It was from Cairo, in fact, that he followed all stages of the war, working very hard for the liberation of the prisoners and opening in Gesira an agricultural colony for the refugees from the Sudan. In 1894, he presented his resignation and was succeeded by Antonio M. Roveggio.

Speeke, Fr. Luigi (1852-1887). He was of Belgian nationality. He entered the Missionary Institute in Verona in 1880 and he left for Africa four years later. In 1885-6 he was sent to Suakin first and then Aswan where he was entrusted with the task of assisting the prisoners. He died on August 4th 1887.

Stambulieh, Giorgi (1840-1926). He was of Syrian origin and was the English Vice Consul (see Wr. 5711) and also the bursar of the mission. He passed over to the side of the Mahdi becoming his trusted man, before the siege of El-Obeid. Despite this decision, he never forgot his personal friendship towards the missionaries and the Sisters, doing all he could for their survival. At the fall of the Mahdist state he remained in the Sudan and died in Khartoum.

Vicentini, Fr. Domenico (1847–1927). He was a religious of the Stimmatine Congregation from Verona. He was requested by Francesco Sogaro, on his departure for Africa, for a temporary service for the mission. Arriving in Khartoum in December 1883, and immediately obliged to leave again with the others, he was given the task of remaining as close to the new border of Mahdist Sudan as possible, in order to maintain contact with the prisoners, provide for their necessities and make every possible attempt to free them.

Recalled to Verona by his superiors, he then asked to enter the congregation of the Scalabrinian Missionaries in 1900, becoming Superior General in 1905.

Wingate, Sir Francis Reginald (1861–1953). He was a British Colonial General and Administrator. He began his career in the British Army in 1880. Three years later he was assigned to the Egyptian army, where he became the Director of intelligence Services, and therefore had an important role to play in all the phases of regaining the Sudan. The relationship between Sog-

aro and Wingate was always characterized by a high level of collaboration, so much so that on various occasions there was even an exchange of information.

In 1899, on succeeding General Kitchner, Wingate was nominated General Governor of the country, an office which he held until 1916. Following this, from 1917 till 1919, he was the British High Commissioner in Egypt. In carrying out all his activities, Wingate demonstrated that he was remarkably competent. This was also because he knew Arabic well. [see, AC, 2(2000)123]

Wolseley, Sir Joseph Garnet (1833-1913). He was a British fieldmarshal. He was sent to Egypt in 1884. As Commander in Chief, he directed the operations for the liberation of Khartoum. That is, he was authorized, but did not manage, to free Gordon and unblock the siege of Khartoum. The operation failed due to the considerable difficulties in communication and also because all the ciphered code in the possession of Stewart fell into the hands of the Mahdists. (Gozzi, p. 370). For the Wolseley report of January 12th 1885, see Gozzi, p. 367.

Zubayr, Ramah Mansur: He belonged to the tribe of the Baggara, of whom he became also the chief. He was famous as one of the biggest slave traders in the Sudan (see, Wr. 6288), managing to have the monopoly on all of Bahr al Ghazal, where he practically cleared the population through his raids. In the space of twenty years, he was able to make such a fortune that the Government of Cairo was worried and at a certain point, confiscated his wealth. Therefore, Gordon, who had fought much against him, even although, he considered him one of the most competent men in Sudanese affairs, created a huge stir when he asked the khedive to allow Zubayr to return to the Sudan as his ally against the Mahdists. In reality, one had to admit, too late, that Zubayr would have been the most likely man to be capable of preventing the fall of Khartoum.

In 1885, suspecting that Zubayr maintained secret relations with the rebels in Sudan, the government of Cairo relegated him for some years to Gibraltar. (Santoni, L. p. 264).

An idea of the volume of business controlled by Zubayr and linked to human trafficking, can be got by studying, Zaccaria, M – *“Il Flagello dei Schiavisti”*: Romolo Gessi in Sudan (1874-1881), Ravenna, 1999 (see Santoni, L., p. 264; 297-300; 304; Gozzi, p. 276; Wr. 5582, 5712).

Abbreviations

AC	=	Atti capitolari
ACR	=	Archivio Missionari Comboniani – Roma
AMN	=	<i>Archivio Madri Nigrizia</i>
ANB	=	Archivio Novacella – Bressanone
ANNALI	=	Annali della Associazione del Buon Pastore
APF	=	Archivio Propaganda Fide – Roma
APF LD	=	Archivio Propaganda Fide – Lettere e Decreti
APF NS	=	Archivio Propaganda Fide – Nuova Serie
APMR	=	Archivio Pie Madri Roma
AP SC	=	Archivio Propaganda Fide – Scritture e Congressi
CAIRINT	=	Cairo Intelligence Department, NRO, Khartum
NRO	=	National Records Office
S (W)	=	Gli “Scritti”, di Daniele Comboni

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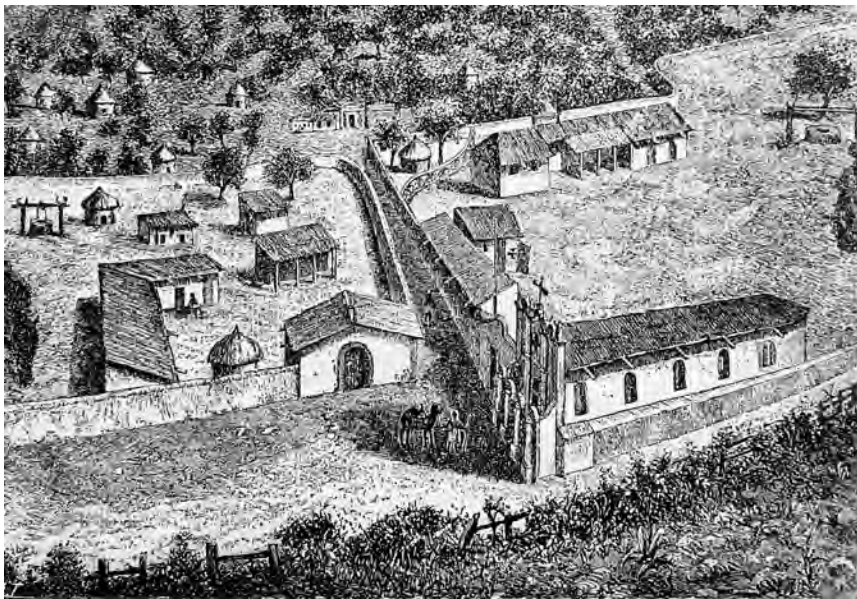
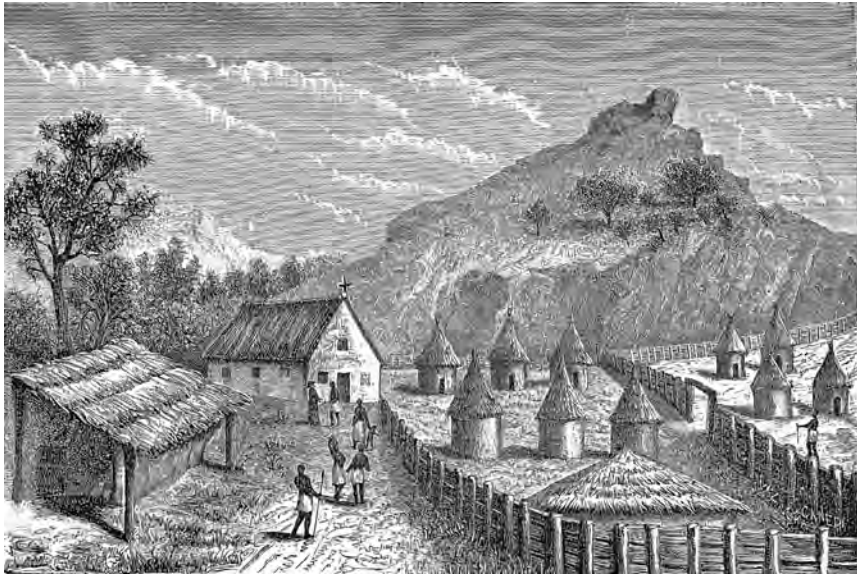
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Illustrations



Missionary stations at Delen and El-Obeid
before their destruction by the Mahdists (1882 – 1883)



Sr. Eulalia Pesavento and
Sr. Amalia Andreis,
the first two martyrs
of the Mahdia





Last portrait
of General C. G. Gordon



Muhammad Ahmad,
called the *Mahdi*

From: Delebeque-Giardini, *Gordon e il dramma di Khartum*, 1940



The great lake of Rahad on which the Mahdi camped in 1884.
In the photo there is an image of the land recently bought by the
Mission in order to create a catechetical and spirituality centre.
The centre is already operational.



The Cavalier Licurgo Santoni
who actively participated in the liberation of the prisoners
From: Santoni, L. – *Alto Egitto e Nubia*, 1905, p. IV



Sr. Maria Caprini and Sr. Fortunata Quascè
on their arrival in Cairo after their escape from Omdurman

محمد سلمان جیو مریم نجینہ
Pietro *Tecpa* *Maria* *Fortunata*
Marator *Grigolini* *Caprini* *Rose*

یوشو فرم اللہ عبد اللہ
Giuseppe *Domenico Locatelli* *Polinaris*
Regnato *Spudora*

عبد اللہ یوسین صباح الخیر
Luigi *Giuseppe* *Paolo*
Bonomi *Croalder* *Rosignoli*

نصر بنول فاطمہ
Charterina *Venturini* *Elisabetta*
Likarisi *Corsi* *Conetta*

The double 'signature' with which the prisoners were alleged to have signed the letter of the Mahdi



Sr. Concetta Corsi, the third victim of the Mahdia.
Below on the right is the corner of the alley where,
according to tradition, Concetta used to sit with her child and beg

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Suor Elisabetta Venturini

Suor Caterina Chiaccerini.

Don Giuseppe Odrwalder.

I MISSIONARI CATTOLICI SALVATI DALLA PRIGIONIA DEI MAHISTI NEL SUDAN (da fotografia dei fratelli Abdullah di Cairo, inviataci dal nostro corrispondente F. Bonola).

The cover page which *L'illustrazione italiana*
decides to dedicate to the freed prisoners



The photo which Monsignor Sogaro had taken
in Cairo in 1891 with the prisoners who had been freed by then



Teresa Grigolini with her husband and son Giuseppe,
immediately after their liberation in 1898

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