

I

Who Was Zenon Vantini?

*'A figure one would like to learn more about.'*¹

In a hotel in the rue Racine, a busy street in the Latin quarter of 'old Paris', Zenon Ruffino Gio Battista Luc Vantini died on 4 October 1870. He was 73 years old and had been ill for a long time. He was buried the next day. His death was noted in many newspapers, in the United Kingdom and France, for Zenon had been well known as a hotelier and entrepreneur connected to the early railways which had spread across Britain and France some 30 years previously.

On the same page as the announcement of Vantini's burial in the *Journal des Débats Politiques et Littéraires*, on 8 October, there appeared a half-page notice giving advice to the inhabitants of Paris. It was entitled: '*Prescriptions et secours contre incendie en cas de bombardement*'. It was important, the notice advised, not to exaggerate the danger, as the number of areas subjected to bombing with shells was limited and the houses in central Paris were built in such a way as to be difficult to demolish. Nevertheless, it would be advisable to evacuate the top floors of buildings and to place mattresses against the windows of the lower floors in case of bombs falling in the streets. Blankets, sheets or large sponges soaked in rainwater should be kept at hand in case of fire. To reduce the chance of death during a bombing raid people should take shelter behind a wall or a piece of heavy furniture or lie flat on the floor.² To explain: surrounded by the threat of mass destruction to his adopted city, Vantini died during the Siege of Paris, which lasted from 19 September 1870 to 28 January 1871.

The siege was the final stage in the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War, part of the struggle for German unification under Bismarck. By the time of Zenon's death, the emperor of the French, Napoleon III, had been defeated in battle and imprisoned by his enemies, the Prussians. The bombing of Paris did not start in earnest until January 1871 but even before that there was great suffering in the city which was sealed off inside its circle of high walls. The details are memorable: no-one was allowed in or out of the blockaded city, food supplies were cut off, many of the animals in the zoo were eaten, including two elephants, and butchers sold cats, dogs and horses for human consumption. Lack of milk meant that infant mortality in the city soared.

As well as fathering a family of daughters, Zenon Vantini had made many business contacts over the years. One would have expected his funeral to be attended by people from all over Europe. At his interment, however, there could be no large congregation such as gathered at his wife's funeral seven years later, when mourners travelled to Geneva from France, Italy and England. Zenon's burial was attended only by those family and friends who were trapped within the walls of Paris.

Vantini's end was perhaps a fitting finale to an eventful life punctuated by the major political and military crises which brought turmoil to France during the nineteenth century. Born on an island which was being fought over by the British and French, aide to Napoleon, survivor of the battlefield of Waterloo, active participant in the July Revolution of 1830, victim of the February Revolution of 1848, he reached his final closure in a city under blockade. It was fortunate that he missed the violent denouement of the Siege of Paris. Yet those who might have come to Paris to pay their respects would have had very different memories – of a colourful, witty and ebullient father, an entrepreneur of large and sometimes crazy ideas, an energetic, resolute and ambitious businessman.

Vantini's life as reconstructed in this book consisted of three phases: his early connection with Napoleon; his work as a domestic servant; and his career as hotel and business entrepreneur. The first and second phases of his life are separated by a period of ten years when we know little about his activities. The second phase is the time when he is most easily accessible to the modern historian, as a result of the surviving written record in the correspondence archives of one of his employers.

That was also the point in the story of his career that I first became aware of his existence. For a period of over 20 years, between 1820 and 1840, Zenon worked as a domestic servant in England, including, from 1832 onwards, as house steward to a famous aristocrat, the second Duke of Sutherland, the head of one of the richest families in the United Kingdom.

I was working on the Sutherland Papers on a major project, looking at the servants of Trentham, the family's house in Staffordshire, with the aim of trying to see them as rounded entities, with changing careers and families and tragedies just like anyone else. Almost by chance, one of my choices of employees to investigate was a Monsieur Vantini. In the printed catalogue of the Sutherland Papers, Zenon Vantini was described as 'a clerk or accountant employed by the 2nd Duke of Sutherland to deal with some household financial business'. Yet when I took a quick look at his account books, several of which have survived, I thought this odd.³ In the 1830s no professional clerk employed by the Sutherlands (or more to the point by their chief agent James Loch) would have had such small, cramped, ill-formed handwriting, or used a pale ink, poor grammar and bad spelling. Then I realised that Vantini was no professional clerk but the family's house steward, who held the highly demanding position of head of the whole servant household. My project was published in book form, with a chapter on Vantini.⁴ I was left feeling, though, that there was much, much more yet to be discovered about him, so I continued researching.

I found that I was not the first person to be curious about Vantini. In Lancashire, a local historian called H. Peters had become fascinated by the man. A folder in the Lancashire County Archives in Preston, dated 1974, begins with these words written by Peters:⁵ 'Vantini is a figure one would like to learn more about; if this is shared by someone else the contents of this folder may serve as a base for a new start.'

I was struck by this sentence. I felt almost that back in the 1970s Peters had left the folder for me personally. It told me that he had tried assiduously to track Vantini down, even to the point of writing to the French ambassador in London, all to no avail. The mystery, the lure, was this: it appeared that a year or so after Vantini left the Sutherlands he was working in the town of Fleetwood, on the north Lancashire coast, as a hotel proprietor. During that time, an almost throw-away comment of his, made to a friend who later recorded it in print, became for Peters one of those tiny specks of light in the darkness, a single hint that Vantini had been born on Corsica and had worked for Napoleon.⁶ Peters' failure to make progress in tracking down the man any further was partly because one of Vantini's claims (that he had been born in Corsica) was misleading, but mainly because, working in the early 1970s, Peters had no access to the full power of the internet. Reading his folder fifty years later in the Lancashire Archives, I understood his frustration.

Today, from various family history websites, it is easy to find out that Vantini was, in fact, born not on Corsica but on nearby Elba in 1797, of an ancient Elban family. His father had benefited from an early association

with Napoleon Bonaparte in France, and Zenon owed some of his education to that connection. His teenage service to Napoleon himself came at a time when the defeated emperor's career had ended abruptly, with exile on Elba. That part of Vantini's life came to a climax in 1815, on one of the most famous battlefields in Europe, at Waterloo. After a few years he emigrated to England to take up at least two positions as house steward, after which he became the proprietor of the first railway-built hotel in the world, at Euston, followed by hotels in Fleetwood, Manchester, Folkestone and Paris. He was also manager of the first purpose-built railway refreshment rooms, and inventor of the first fully-organised and fully-guided foreign package holiday. Vantini thus played an active part in the period of immense social change at the beginning of the railway era in Britain and it is therefore this phase in his life which is of particular note to social historians.

One of the threads which joined all these achievements was an expertise in arranging travel, whether it be for an emperor's mother, a wealthy duke on a Grand Tour or a middle-class holidaymaker. He nurtured an extraordinary vision, of creating a whole network of catering establishments linked to each other and to the new railways which were being built across Europe. It was an idea which eventually took him into a very different world from his life in service, requiring entrepreneurial innovation, tough decision making and financial risk taking in the new commercial context of Britain and France. Despite some failures, it was a world where he left a legacy of significance, worthy of recognition. Yet, though the importance of the early railway hotels and of railway excursions has been explored recently by academics, the man Vantini has barely been identified and his place in history never explored in full.⁷

As I gradually came to be familiar with the research into Napoleon on Elba and with Vantini's part in that story, modest though it was on the larger scale of things, the various aspects of Zenon's life all slowly began to fit, to make sense. One could see how early experiences may have aided Vantini's later service with the Sutherlands and with his career as a businessman. His life shows how individuals who came into contact with Napoleon could be profoundly affected by the great man's mere presence, could be given new personal perspectives, perhaps new ambitions and new expectations of their longer-term futures (not always achievable). In other words, to think big. This might well have been especially true of those 'ordinary' youngsters who were in his personal service, otherwise never destined to become famous and therefore difficult to dig up from the past.

Vantini was a prime example of how wars disrupt lives and how migrants can make a major contribution to the countries in which they settle. He was an immigrant several times over – from Elba to France, then

England and, finally, on his return to France. As such he had a complicated, disjointed life. This presents a problem, for complex careers can deceive historians who study only one stage in a lifetime of entrepreneurial activity. Considered separately, the various phases of a life can mislead. Here I have put together the three major parts of Vantini's story, not in chronological order but rather beginning at the point at which I was most familiar with him and at which he was most accessible (i.e. during his time with the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland), then following on in the hunt to make sense of the pattern of his life. Each phase was set in very different contexts, all joined by the experience of service, by innovative ideas and a large ambition. At each transition there remained only a small hint, at first easily disregarded, acting as a vital clue to where he had come from. The story is ragged, incomplete, with several major gaps in our knowledge; but that is the nature of history. As with any good puzzle, there are still unanswered questions which intrigue.

In addition to life events, there are several important issues which are subjects of debate. What were his achievements, his legacies or disasters, for which we should remember him today? Does his life tell us anything about the processes of social change caused by the spread of new technology or the increase in individual migration caused by international war and national upheavals? What people or connections exerted a lasting influence on him, driving his ambition and determination? How far was he affected by his involvement in the various revolutionary events which afflicted France during the nineteenth century? To what extent was Vantini's whole life known to others, or were his appearances in other people's lives as disjointed as they seem to us today? In the final part of this book, I have tried to pull together all these disparate threads and to examine Zenon Vantini as a whole, a talented but flawed man whose contribution to the new commercial and social world of Europe has hitherto been hidden. I hope I have achieved his placement somewhere in the pantheon of business figures of the Victorian age. In the long view, he was a component part in the early years of an industry which arguably revolutionised Britain and Europe as much as did even his hero, Napoleon.