

THOMAS NELSON PAGE

A Letter

AMERICAN EMBASSY

ROME

August 27, 1914

Rosewell Page, Esquire,

Richmond, Virginia.

My dear Rosewell,

I avail myself of the opportunity to send a bag by a ship sailing tomorrow from Naples to get a line off to you for the benefit of all of you, Frank's people included, to tell you all I know about myself here and Florrie and the children at Banchory in Scotland.

We are almost as completely shut in here as if Italy were at war instead of being a neutral country, as she is at present. In fact, except as regards fighting, and the horrors of killing and maiming which I admit is a vast exception, the conditions here are substantially those which prevail in the countries of the belligerents. Railroads, telegraphs, food supplies, and things essential for a country such as petroleum, coal, et cetera, are all strictly under direct and vigilant government control, and no news comes in or goes out except such as this and other Governments are willing to have go forth.

You will understand how close is this vigilance when I tell you that since I left Scotland until to-day when I received a letter from Minna dated the 11th, I have received only two letters dates, respectively, the 1st and 6th of August, and one telegram through the American Embassy in London

on the 14th. I have written or telegraphed every day but question if one of them has been received, except one sent to the American Embassy London to be forwarded.

The news of Mrs. Wilson's death came to me about ten days after it had occurred, in the form of a rumour that some one had seen it in an English newspaper of the 7th of August has he passed through England¹.

Only on yesterday we forwarded a telegram to Mr. Wilson from the Embassy in Berlin expressing sympathy, which showed that the news had reached there only then.

I feel inexpressibly sorry for the President that he should have had this terrible personal sorrow in the midst of all the burden which he already bears.

For some time after my return, we were overwhelmed with a current of our people who were trying to get home, and who were without any means whatever as the Banks, under Government Decree, had suspended all payments, and even with the best security, no one could get cash whatever. This situation has been relieved. Our Government has acted with great liberality and despatch, and abundant funds have been provided me, and I suppose other Embassies also, to meet the needs of our people.

The great body of Americans who were in Italy seeking an immediate return, have been sent home in Italian ships whose accommodations were no doubt much plainer than the people were accustomed to, as they were merely emigrant ships, with divisions knocked-up roughly to secure some privacy; but they were safe, and were the best we could secure.

A good many have gone North, preferring to take their chance under the English flag, in larger vessels, to sailing from here in such ships as we could obtain.

Immediately upon my arrival here on August the 5th, I appointed a Relief Committee composed in part of resident Americans and in part of sensible men selected from the travelling public, with our Military Attaché, Col. Dunn, as its Chairman, and they did splendid work, relieving the Embassy of much of the detail and leaving it free to conduct the correspondence and arrange other matters which the present exigency made very laborious.

The whole Embassy staff has applied itself unremittingly from early in the morning until late at night in keeping the work up, and while I do

not want to boast, I question if it could have been done better in any other Embassy.

The American Consuls in Italy, too, have done their part with great zeal and efficiency, and I feel a great pride in the ability of our people to measure up to such an extraordinary and strained situation, and I feel a pride also in the resolute and good-humoured way in which our American travellers of all degrees of wealth or poverty have faced a situation which is absolutely novel and frequently distressing. I have hardly ever heard a woman whine or a man growl, and at one time there appeared an imminent danger of their being turned out into the street. The appearance of this danger was soon dissipated, however, and the Italians, including all sort, – hotel-keepers, pension-keepers and merchants, – have been most considerate, kind and sensible in their dealings with our people. In rare instances I have heard of an hotel-keeper who was illiberal, or of a dealer of some kind who was inclined to take advantage of the needs of the people, and charge exorbitant rates for letting them have money; but these were quickly stopped.

Of the Americans who remain here at present, most of them seem desirous to wait on the chance of getting better accommodations than the ships I have referred to; but I am trying to get them to go home. Others want to make their way north.

The Government's action in sending ships and money here relieved, not only the actual wants; but the apprehensions of the people, and though the work has been extremely onerous [sic], and we are all often so tired at night that we can scarcely drag along, the work has been interesting and we have felt that we were really helping our people, and demonstrating that an Embassy was of real value.

The political situation here has been very interesting and to appearances it has been somewhat critical. It is too delicate a matter to talk about much; but according to the press it looks as though Italy would now remain neutral, and as though the fight would be a long one.

It is a most terrible war that it is possible to conceive of, and nothing like it has ever occurred; not even the Napoleonic wars covered so vast a field and constituted a universal cloud of danger.

The general opinion in Europe, outside of the Imperial allies' countries, seems to be that the Emperor of Germany could have prevented the war.

However this be, he has stirred up a whirlwind which I doubt if it is in the power of man to allay. France and England recognize that they are fighting for their existence and that great, vast force that exists in the twilight of what we call Russia, and which seems absolutely immeasurable and indefinable [sic], having been set in motion, no one can foretell what power can stop it. It would not surprise any thinking man to find the whole map of Europe essentially changed when the smoke of battle clears away.

Among the mysteries of the situation is that which lies on the far eastern horizon, and I find that this Oriental mystery seems to have occasioned a sort of dread in the minds of many persons who would not be able to give any reason for their fears, except the simple fact.

But to turn to our own personal affairs: I am trying to get in touch to-day, as I have been for two days past, with Florry in Scotland. Minna wrote me that she had mashed her hand very badly and seemed to suffer very much from it, and I know that she takes all of this trouble in Europe so seriously to heart, and like myself, is unused to this separation which we are undergoing, that I wish to hear how she is.

I have been wondering how in the world to get her back to Rome towards the close of September, and I have not yet arrived at a conclusion satisfactory to myself just how to do it.

Nothing has been heard of Tom Lindsay in East Africa; but Sir Rennell-Rodd the British Ambassador tells me there will be no trouble about his getting a boat from Mombassa [sic] as the boats coming up from Cape Town are running regularly along the East Coast.

I often think of you all and wonder how you are coming on. It has been so long since I have heard anything from any of you that I frequently speculate at night how you all may be.

Our house in Washington has been leased to the new Italian ambassador, Count Cellere², who sails on the 7th of September and should arrive there about the 22nd or 23rd.

When you write, let me know how the crops come on, both at Oakland and Mont Air, and go ahead and do the best you can for me with my property, making such arrangements as seem to you and Ruth to be proper. I do not wish to spend any more money that I can help on them; but I do not wish to have them go down so as to lose the value of what I have already put in them.

I will ask you to send this letter on to Frank, so that they may know in Fairfax how well we are. I am comfortably situated in our Embassy in the Del Drago Palace, where I have Russell Train, our naval attaché as my house guest and Alfred to look after us. We really occupy only our bedrooms and the dining-room, and Alessandro, Alfred's assistant cooks for us and gives us our breakfast and occasionally, as we desire it, our supper.

I have not opened up the rest of the apartment; principally upon the ground of economy, as it would require a fuller corps of servants and entail additional trouble as well as expense.

I have an automobile, though I do not get much opportunity to use it, and it interested me the other day to have one Ambassador's come to me and ask me to get some gasoline, as he was unable to secure it himself. Fortunately I was able to lend him a reasonable quantity, as I had laid in provisions in advance.

I am on very friendly terms with all of my confreres and like them all personally, as I hope they do me.

Italy seems to have prepared herself for "eventualities" however determined she may be to maintain her neutrality, and my chauffeur was ordered out with his class not long since, so I had to obtain a new chauffeur who in turn I understand may also soon have to go to join the colors. It is said that Italy has been very short of supplies, and she has sent to America for coal, grain, shoes, &c., – at least this is what I hear and believe. It is in fact a great opportunity for America to establish a great trade, not only with Europe but with South America, and if she fails to avail herself of it, our people are not as clever as I think them.

Give my love to all my friends, and especially don't forget old Charlotte, whom I hope you will take good care of, and feel sure you and Ruth will, not only for me; but for yourselves; also help Sally Marshall and old Davy and any of the other servants that may need help, and charge it to me.

My love to all my friends in Richmond, and to our kin in Lexington and Charlottesville. I hear that Aldermann³ is in Genoa and I telegraphed him yesterday to know if I could be of assistance to him.

With best love to you all, including those at Pinecote.

I am,

Your affectionate brother,

Thom. Nelson Page

Notes

¹ Ellen Axson Wilson died on August 6th, 1914. President Woodrow Wilson married Edith Bolling Galt a year later.

² Count Vincenzo Macchi di Cellere, Italian Ambassador to the United States, 1914-1919.

³ It is actually Edwin A. Alderman, an academic from North Carolina and first President of the University of Virginia, who visited Italy with his wife in the summer of 1914. See Virginia Heritage: <http://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaxtf/view?docId=uva-sc/viu04035.xml>