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Peter Enria Remembers

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Included in the copious documentation that comprises the chronicles and annals of the early history of the Salesian Society in the Salesian archives in Rome, there is a treasure trove of diaries, journals, memoirs, and daybooks which chart the ebb and flow of the early years of the Oratory of Saint Francis of Sales. Regrettably few of these writings have seen the light of an English translation except in excerpts all too occasional and far too brief. Among them is Pietro Giuseppe Enria's brief autobiographical account of his childhood years and his later experiences at the Valdocco Oratory.

It was a happy day for those who treasure the Salesian past when John Baptist Lemoyne persuaded Peter Enria to recall his first encounter with Don Bosco as a child and to recount his years of growing up at the Oratory. These reminiscences were gathered in his personal memoir, from which Don Bosco's first biographers generously drew in chronicling the early years of the Oratory.

Enria's *pro memoria* reveals some fascinating and little-known recollections of the man who befriended him as a child and rescued him from becoming just another anonymous statistic of the cholera epidemic which savaged Turin in 1854. The following English version of Enria's reminiscences is being offered to our English readers in selected excerpts for the first time.

Pietro Giuseppe Enria (1841-1898) was born in the small village of San Benigno Canavese near Piedmont's capital. Orphaned by a cholera epidemic at the age of thirteen, he was taken in by Don Bosco in the already crowded Oratory of Saint Francis of Sales. There he was to spend most of his life, making his vows as a lay brother in 1878. His was a truly multi-talented personality: an able musician, a sought-after entertainer, he was frequently called upon to perform numerous tasks from cook to artist to teacher. But it was as Don Bosco's nurse that he would demonstrate his greatest talent—ministering to the sick with tender compassion and skill. It was Enria who cared for Don Bosco around the clock during the Saint's last illness. When death came for Don Bosco, it was he that although deeply aggrieved would not allow anyone to view the lifeless body of his beloved Don Bosco until he had carefully washed and shaved him.

Brother Enria outlived Don Bosco by ten years, finally succumbing to a painful illness on June 21, 1898. He used to spend his final days in meditative prayer in the silent shadows of the church of Mary Help of Christians. His greatest pleasure was being taken to Valsalice, where Don Bosco at the time was buried, and passing happy moments remembering the man who had been a father, a mentor, and a friend. This, in part, is his story:

My name is Pietro Giuseppe Enria. I was born in San Benigno Canavese on June 20, 1841. My father's name was Giuseppe; my mother was called Pasqualina. Both came from the town of Montanaro. I was baptized by Don Benone, and my godparents were Giuseppe and Maria Roncalione. At the age of seven I was confirmed by Bishop Luigi Moreno of Ivrea. My confirmation day was a very happy one, but the joy of that event was to be short-lived because my mother died shortly after, leaving my widowed father with three children to raise. I was the oldest in the family.

Shortly after my mother's death, father remarried. My new stepmother was a very religious person and loved all of us like her very own children. In 1852 we moved to Turin where my father's

brothers lived and worked. We rented some rooms near a factory which produced ceramic goods and kitchenware.

During our first year in Turin, God blessed our family and everything went very well. In fact, my father had more work than he could handle. Even though I was only eleven, I worked alongside my brother in the plant. We were all quite happy. Things could not have been better.

But one day, unexpectedly, people in our neighborhood began to take sick with a high fever. Malaria had struck our area. I remember that all six of us soon became ill, and our house looked like a small hospital ward. Since I was the oldest child, the task of caring for my younger brothers fell upon me. But the burden of looking after my brothers, added to the lingering effects of a previous illness, soon exhausted me and I became sick again. This time it was very serious. In fact, it seemed that my end was near, and I remember that people were beginning to gather around my bed praying for me. But I soon recovered. The rest of my family was not so fortunate for they remained ill for a long time.

Two years later in 1854 all Italy was struck by a cholera epidemic.¹ It ravaged Turin very severely. Since our family lived close to the marshlands of the Stura river which empties into the Po, the entire area became a natural breeding ground for the epidemic. Our family was among the early victims of the deadly scourge. One of my uncles was the first to die. A few days later my father and stepmother were both stricken. She died soon after. Since I was the oldest—I was twelve at the time—the work of looking after my father fell upon me. It was a sad and painful experience.

¹ During the nineteenth century five major cholera epidemics ravaged the Italian peninsula, claiming 680,000 victims and inflicting great suffering on the population. The second of these epidemics (1854) recounted by Peter Enria made its appearance first in the port cities of Nizza, Marseilles, Genova, and Naples. In the Kingdom of Sardinia (Piedmont), 3220 people lost their lives. Cholera was generally preceded by fever, typhus, dysentery, measles, and influenza which rampaged unchecked in epidemic waves, shattering the flimsy defenses of the then medical pharmacopoeia of the times. When cholera struck, death came quickly. The last cholera epidemic of the century (1893) claimed the fewest victims (about 3,000). This decline in the mortality rate is attributed to better nutrition and environmental conditions, such as the draining of stagnant waters, the paving of city streets, the enclosing of sewers, and especially the first practices of piped water for drinking purposes.

The task of taking care of the sick members of my family was too much for me. My aged grandmother would sometimes attempt to help, but her old age and her infirmities prevented her from bringing us much relief. You can well imagine how we all prayed to be delivered from this heavy cross and implored God and his Holy Mother to come to our assistance. It was a moment of extreme need for all of us.

But the epidemic did not abate. A raging fever continued to afflict everyone, and the poisonous air that surrounded us seemed destined to destroy us all. Moreover, the little money that remained, and the impoverished condition that we had been reduced to, gave us little hope for survival. But when things were darkest, divine Providence came to our aid.

One day as I was assisting my ailing father, two very impressive-looking gentlemen entered the room. I later learned that they were Count Carlo Cays and Count Daiano. They gave us immediate help and showed great concern for our welfare. Before leaving they placed a medal of the Virgin Mary around my neck and around that of my father. They did this with such loving kindness that I could not hold back my tears. I found it hard to believe that such outstanding gentlemen in the community would have gone out of their way to assist us. Never would I have dreamed that one day I would be able to include one of them, the generous Count Cays, as a personal friend and my Salesian confrere.

Ten days later two other men came to our humble home. I have since forgotten their names, but I learned that they were members of a committee that had just opened a temporary shelter to care for children orphaned by the cholera epidemic. They spoke to my father, asking him if he was willing to let them lodge several of his children in a facility that had been turned into a temporary orphanage. My father turned to me and asked if I was willing to go. Without a moment's hesitation I said yes. To me this was a sign that Our Lord and His Blessed Mother were again coming to our aid.

A few days later my brothers and I were taken to this provisional shelter located next to a Dominican monastery. If I recall correctly, this happened during the end of August. There were about a hundred of us, both boys and girls and even a few infants being nursed by some kindhearted women. I must say that for the time we were cared for there, we were treated with great love and kindness. I later discovered that the person who had headed the orphans'

committee was none other than Commendatore Dupre, a member of the Turinese aristocracy and a most exemplary Catholic.

During my short stay in that shelter, we were well fed and cared for. But as I said earlier, the place was being used by the orphans of the cholera only as a temporary home. Word soon got around that we would all be split up into different groups and parceled out to various institutions. Some of the places I heard mentioned were: the Cottolengo Institute and Don Cocchi's school. Then the name of a certain Don Bosco was brought up. I remember someone asking me where I would have preferred to go. But I knew little about this great city, and the names that were mentioned were all strange to me. Yet, for some reason I still cannot explain, I blurted out that if I had any choice, I was going to choose Don Bosco's place to stay. Providence would again intervene in my behalf and grant me my wish.

It happened that when the cholera epidemic peaked in Turin in 1854, Don Bosco had generously volunteered to house fifty children who had lost either their father or mother or both. But he did far more in those trying days than just take in a group of orphans. He also sent some of his older boys to assist the sick and the dying. Remarkably, not a single boy among the hundreds that lived at the Oratory or attended it during the day or those that cared for the stricken victims of the epidemic, came down with the disease.

I remember that it was during the novena of the Nativity of Our Lady that Don Bosco paid his anticipated visit to our shelter. We were lined up, all one hundred of us, so that our visitors could select those children they would take with them to their new home. I affirm that all that follows is true because I, Pietro Enria, was among the lucky ones singled out by Don Bosco to go with him. But it was also a sad occasion for me and my brothers because we learned of the death of our father.

Now this is how divine Providence acted in my behalf. While all the orphans were lined up awaiting the arrival of the visitors who would decide our fate, I observed that the director of our orphanage was advancing toward us. He was accompanied by a priest who seemed to have a smile for everyone. He suddenly stopped right in front of me. I became nervous and tongue-tied, not because I was afraid, but because there was something about this

strange man that fascinated me from the start. It was a fascination that would remain with me for the rest of my life.

The priest stood before me and asked my name and where I lived. My stammering answers must have betrayed my nervous excitement, so he continued to speak to me softly and gently.

"My name is Pietro Giuseppe Enria," I said.

"Would you like to come with me?" he asked. "I know we can be friends—not only now, but even when we're in heaven together."

I did not hesitate a moment. "Sure," I said. "I would like to go with you very much."

"And this little fellow holding your hand," he continued, "is he your brother?" "Yes, sir," I answered. "Fine, tell him to come along too." Then he smiled and walked on. My eyes followed him and watched as he talked with some of the other boys, all the while smiling and asking them questions.

I can't explain it, but the kindness he showed each of us that day really touched my heart. I marveled at the way he was able to make himself loved before one really got to know him. It then struck me that I hadn't even learned the priest's name, nor where he was from. (Who would ever have believed that Don Bosco would stop one day and single out a poor country boy like me—someone he had never met before—and offer him his friendship and a home on the spot?)

A few days after his visit to our shelter, some of us were brought to the Oratory of Saint Francis of Sales, and I was in that number. It turned out to be a very lucky day for me and one that I will always remember (it was either the 6th or 7th of September).

Don Bosco and his mother were awaiting us at the Oratory entrance, and from that moment on we were shown nothing but loving kindness. It was only then that I recognized that the priest who had welcomed us so warmly was none other than the one who had visited us a few days earlier. When I learned that Don Bosco's Oratory was the place that had been designated for me to stay, I was happy beyond belief. The fond hope that I had expressed to my little friends of wanting to go with Don Bosco had actually come to pass.

Don Bosco recognized me as soon as he saw me. "Remember, Peter", he told me, "I want us to be friends, and friends we will be if you try to be as good and truthful as you can during your stay here."

Nor will I ever forget his wonderful mother. She loved all of us like her very own children. She never played favorites. Somehow each of us was convinced that we had a special place in her heart. If Margaret Bosco was a mother to us all, her son was the father many of us did not have or had lost in the cholera epidemic. Whenever Don Bosco was among us, he gave us a wonderful sense of security. The reason for this was that we trusted him completely. He opened his heart to us and shared all his little secrets with us.

We used to say among ourselves that if Don Bosco had any sins, he would probably have shared those with us too.

There were times when he even shared his dreams with us and relate them to us. Personally, I considered them more like visions than dreams because, even though I was only a child, I believed that Don Bosco was a real saint, and his dreams were nothing more than God's way of revealing the future to him so that he could care for us.

I remember one night—it was either in 1854 or 1855—that he described to us a very strange dream that he had the night before.² He had dreamt that the king's page, dressed in the red

² It was during the parliamentary debates concerning the Law of the Convents that Don Bosco's so-called "Funerals-at-Court Dream" occurred (November, 1854). This bill, introduced by Urbano Rattazzi (*Le Legge Rattazzi*), was signed into law by King Victor Emmanuel II on May 29, 1855. With the passage of the Law of the Convents, some 334 religious communities in Piedmont, comprising 5,500 religious members, were suppressed by the government. Those expelled from their religious institutes, monasteries, and convents represented about two thirds of Piedmont's religious communities. Those religious (priests, lay brothers, nuns) who were engaged in teaching, preaching, or hospital work were exempt from the newly passed law.

Don Bosco anticipated the disastrous consequences that would have been visited upon religious life in Piedmont if the bill, then being debated, were passed. He made several attempts to warn the King of the dire consequences that would befall the Royal Family should the bill become law.

How Don Bosco, who viewed those deaths as a visitation from God for the injuries inflicted upon his Church, was able to predict with such accuracy the untimely deaths of several members of the Royal House of Savoy (who were neither sick nor dying), defies human explanations.

livery of the royal court had suddenly burst into his room. In a voice full of foreboding he announced to Don Bosco that the king's palace would soon be the scene of several funerals. On the following evening this mysterious messenger reappeared and cried out that several members of the Royal House [of Savoy] would soon meet their death. In fact, a few days later, we learned that the Queen Mother Maria Teresa and the King's wife, Queen Maria Adelaide, as well as the King's brother, Prince Ferdinand of Genoa, and another young prince, whose name escapes me at the moment, all died suddenly.

I first entered the Oratory during the novena of the Nativity of Mary. I was just thirteen at the time, but I will never forget that happy and memorable day. Soon after my arrival, Don Bosco apprenticed me to a blacksmith in the city. I liked the work, but after three years the heavy work as an apprentice at the forge began to affect my health, and so I had to leave.

But divine Providence did not forget the man who had taught me my trade. Hard times had forced him to close down his smithy. Reduced to struggle to survive he had been forced to hire himself out as a day laborer to support his family. One day, just by chance, I ran into him in the city. As soon as I recognized him, I told him who I was, and we stopped to chat for a while. I asked how he was feeling and how things were going. I was just making conversation. But I quickly saw that he was embarrassed, and in a halting manner told me that lack of work had compelled him to shut down his blacksmith shop. Now, he said, he worked wherever he could find a job. It was not an easy change for him because he was getting on in years; in fact, he was now almost seventy. I tried my best to cheer him up.

Suddenly a thought occurred to me. "Why don't you come to the Oratory with me," I said. "With your experience as an

Some historians, among them Denis Mack Smith, adopting a more secular view, see such explanations as "a superstitious fear of supernatural retribution".

For a detailed account of this episode see *The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco* (English version), Volume V, 119-127. Regarding the onslaught upon the religious orders in Piedmont, historian E. E. Y. Hales avers that this law confirmed Rome in the conviction that the whole movement which was now coming to be called the Risorgimento was essentially an anti-Catholic movement. See E. E. Y. Hales, *Pio Nono* (New York, 1954), 178.

ironworker, I'm sure that Don Bosco will find some kind of job for you. Besides, I know that he is thinking of beginning a blacksmith shop at the Oratory to train apprentices. Now that the church of Mary Help of Christians is under construction, all the years you have put in as an ironworker will prove very helpful for him."

He was overjoyed to learn this, and told me that if that was indeed the Lord's will, he would work for Don Bosco at the Oratory as long as he had the strength to do so.

As soon as I got back to the Oratory, I told Don Bosco about how I had met up with my old master and how he was struggling at odd jobs to support his family because he had fallen on hard times. Just as I expected, Don Bosco decided to hire him on the spot. He had not forgotten the solid, God-fearing man that he was. And he still remembered him as the skilled craftsman who had turned out admirable products in wrought iron as well.

My old master was excited and elated to learn that Don Bosco had agreed to take him on. Later he would often tell me that working at the Oratory, at a job he loved to do, was heaven for him. Though he was already seventy years of age, he went about his tasks like a man half his age. He poured out all his skill and energy into casting the iron fixtures, window frames, and other metal accessories that were needed for the new church. I regret to say that he did not live to see the completion of Don Bosco's grand church of Mary Help of Christians. He was stricken at his work one day, and the last words he was able to gasp were words of gratitude to Don Bosco for having befriended him at the Oratory. The passing of John Baptist Garando (for that was my master's name) was a sad day for me.

At the Oratory Don Bosco used to spend as much time as he could in our presence every day, a day which began with early morning Mass. You can be sure that he was always the first one in church. I can still remember that first winter when we still had Mass in the small church of Saint Francis of Sales. It sometimes got so cold that a thin layer of ice would crust over the water in the cruet. In fact, the cold would at times be so severe that the metal of the chalice was freezing to the touch, and Don Bosco was unable to hold it for long in his hands. But there was never a word of complaint. It seemed that all he thought about was the welfare of his boys. Though we knew that he had a lot on his mind, whenever he was among us he was always his usual jovial and cheerful self.

It was only years later that I learned of the many humiliations and indignities he went through for our sake. Sometimes, for example, when he went to the homes of the rich to solicit funds for our Oratory, the door was often slammed in his face. He bore these rejections with dignity and saintly humility. But he got his revenge by having us pray for the people who rebuffed him. It seemed to me that he even thrived on these rebuffs because he would not hesitate to return to the palatial homes from which he had been repulsed only a few days before. More often than not, this next time he would be treated with respect and courtesy, and sometimes he was even invited to dinner. He always accepted these invitations, especially in the homes of the nobility, because a handsome gift—in the form of a thousand lire note—would be awaiting him, half hidden under his plate. These donations would often come just in the nick of time because the baker's bills, considering the number of boys he was feeding, just kept climbing.

I remember hearing his mother at times attempt to address him with a stern face, urging him to set a limit on the number of boys he kept taking in at the Oratory. She tried to explain to him that there was just no more room for them to sleep and that they had run out of beds and blankets. In fact, my little brother and I had run into that very problem when we arrived at the Oratory. Since there were no more beds available we had to sleep on a pile of leaves with just a thin blanket between us. Despite these harsh conditions we were as happy as though we were sleeping on feather beds. It did not take long for Don Bosco to provide us each with a bed and some clean clothing.

More than once I overheard Don Bosco tell his mother: "You've got to stop worrying. Divine Providence has taken care of all our needs up to now and we will not be abandoned. In spite of all the hardships we've had to endure, have we ever lacked for anything?" Meanwhile they continued to take care of the children lodged and fed at the Oratory as though they were indeed their own. One of the most touching scenes I can still recall occurred at night, after most of us were asleep. Mother and son would wait until we had fallen asleep and then walk quietly between the beds, selecting the torn clothing we used to keep at the foot of our beds. They would then sit for hours in a corner of our dormitory, under a glimmering lamp, sewing and mending our torn jackets and trousers. When we awoke in the morning we would find our clothes mended and ready to wear.

Don Bosco used to begin his day with early Mass followed by the hearing of endless confessions. After breakfast he would go to his room to take care of his correspondence and to speak to the visitors who were awaiting him. Meanwhile, his mother spent her day doing things that needed her attention. If any boy had to remain in bed because of illness or for whatever reason, Margaret would nurse him like an anxious mother.

When Don Bosco was called away for any length of time she would take over until his return. She was often assisted by Father Borelli [Borel] who was often at the Oratory helping out, especially on feast days when he would preach to us and hear confessions. All the children loved Father Borelli, "the little priest", as we used to call him. But the thing we always used to look forward to was when he and Don Bosco would team up and entertain us with their dialogue-sermons. Don Bosco would be in the pulpit and Father Borelli used to sit on a bench with us. The two would carry on a conversation, full of wit and humor in the Piedmontese dialect which all of us spoke and easily understood. Without our realizing it, they were teaching us our Christian doctrine and explaining the truths of our Faith. Such a practice, regrettably, has become a thing of the past.

Every evening we said our prayers in common, outdoors if weather permitted. After prayers Don Bosco would speak to us briefly before sending us off to bed. How often he used to warn us of the harm that bad language and bad companions could do to us if we were not careful. He had every reason for talking to us that way. In those days young working apprentices like myself saw and heard just about everything that was mean and vicious. Many of the Oratory boys were exposed to moral dangers in the workshops and in the factories. Had it not been for Don Bosco's tireless warnings and constant counseling that he gave us after evening prayers, I am sure that many of us would not have been able to resist those corrupting influences.

In my own case I can say that more than once I had to leave the shop where I was working to get away from the foul talk and vicious conversations that went on there. I was only fourteen at the time, but most of the workers in the smithy were adults. I especially remember two of them; their filthy talk reflected the way of life they lived. They never lost a chance to ridicule religion and joked about the most shameful things without the slightest embarrassment. They

had the morals of animals. But their foul ways in time caught up with them. The younger of the two died at an early age, wasted away by his own debauchery. I occasionally see his companion. However, he no longer works at his trade and is reduced to selling matches on the street. He looks gaunt and old beyond his years. Even his own parents won't have anything to do with him.

Don Bosco was acutely aware of the dangers that confronted young apprentices in the workplace. That is one of the principal reasons that he opened up his own workshops at the Oratory. He began with a modest tailor shop, then followed that up with a shoemaker's shop. Next a carpenter shop was started,

Several more shops were later added until the number we now have was reached. As I said before, these Oratory shops were started because Don Bosco wanted to keep us out of harm's way while we learned a trade for our future livelihood. He loved us so much that he could not bear the thought of his boys being abused by the vicious conditions that existed in the city's factories and workplaces.

Don Bosco showed this love for us in many ways. I remember, for example, the first death of a boy at the Oratory. Don Bosco was so overwhelmed with grief that he cried openly like a child. This sad, and for me very memorable, event followed a dream that he told us about one evening after prayers. I don't remember the circumstances too well, but I do recall his telling us that one of us would be called to eternity after the next full moon. This disclosure during the month of September, though puzzling to us, did not alarm anyone because there was nobody sick at the time.

When December arrived, one of my companions named Gurgo took ill. I also remember that by the time of the Christmas novena he was well on the road to recovery. But unexpectedly he began to vomit black blood, and no medicine or doctor was able to pull him through this grievous attack. Fortunately for him he was well prepared for eternity. On Christmas eve, from the little pulpit he used to speak to us after prayers, Don Bosco announced his passing to us. I remember he was very calm and even compassionate when informing us of Gurgo's death, telling us that he was confident that our companion was probably already in heaven. He ended this sad announcement by reminding us that since no one knows the day nor the hour of his death, we should always live in such a way as to be prepared to meet our Maker.

One wonderful thing about Don Bosco that will always remain with me was his unlimited patience. This was especially evident when he had to put up with youths who were in desperate straits. I remember one particular boy, whose name escapes me at the moment, who was brought to the Oratory by the police. He had been found huddled in a corner in Piazza Castello shivering and hungry. This happened several years after my arrival at the Oratory. I believe it was about the year 1857.

Don Bosco took the boy in and after a few days found him a job with a blacksmith in town. The youngster did well for the first few weeks, but he soon became so unruly and unmanageable that the blacksmith fired him. Don Bosco gave the boy the benefit of the doubt and found him another job. In less than a week he was fired again. Don Bosco's patience, though tested, never wavered. For the next two years, whenever the youth lost his job, Don Bosco would keep finding him a new one. It is no exaggeration to say that he must have made the rounds of every blacksmith shop in Turin, and in the process the unruly boy wore out everybody's patience except Don Bosco's.

Anyway, on the day he was discharged by his last employer, the boy sought out Don Bosco for help as usual. He arrived at the Oratory during the noonday meal and went straight into the dining room where Don Bosco was having his lunch. Without as much as an explanation, he insisted that his benefactor find him another job. With the patience of a saint Don Bosco ignored his arrogant demand. Looking up from his plate, he told the boy: "How about having lunch with me?" "I already ate", came the curt response. "Well, then, we'll take care of your problem as soon as I've finished eating." "I can't wait, let's settle the problem right now."

After a long pause, and overlooking the boy's rudeness, Don Bosco spoke to him in a calm but direct tone. "Don't you think it's about time you realize that you can't hold a job because you drive everybody crazy. Do you know how many times you have been fired? If you don't change your ways, son, you'll never be able to hold a job and earn a living."

In a snit the boy turned his back on the priest and stalked out of the Oratory determined never to return. For the next few years he tried to make it on his own, drifting from job to job, even going abroad in search of work. As in the past, failure was his lot.

Some time later he was back in Turin, unemployed and in ill health. Shortly after he was hospitalized.

One day he took leave of the hospital and appeared at the Oratory. During his enforced isolation he had time to reflect on the many occasions he had treated so shabbily the man who wished him nothing but good. He had returned to apologize for all the trouble he had caused him in the past. Don Bosco assured the troubled young man that he was genuinely glad to see him and that he had been in his prayers all this time. Then he added: "Remember, when you recover your health, the Oratory is still your home and you will always be welcome here because Don Bosco is and has always been your friend."

Hearing this, and realizing all the grief he had put the priest through all these years, the young man broke down in tears. "I have to get back to the hospital now, but if God helps me regain my health, I will be back and will make up for all the trouble I've caused you, you'll see."

Don Bosco blessed him before he left. It would be the last blessing he would receive from the man who had treated him with nothing but kindness and patience all his life. A few days later he was dead. But he died full of remorse and resigned to his fate. I know all this because he had told me his story on the day he came to the Oratory on hospital leave...

Peter Enria was a young adult when war broke out between the Piedmontese-French alliance and Austria in 1859. At the Oratory Don Bosco was hard-pressed not only in raising funds to feed and lodge the hundreds of youths who lived at the Oratory, but also to contain the excitement and the spirit of fervent nationalism that war preparations had generated. The unrest in the capital and the tension created by the approaching war with Austria had Turin in a turmoil. The youths who lived at the Oratory and who frequented it during their off-hours did not escape unscathed. Emotions ran high, cries for a united Italy affected especially the older boys of the Oratory. To them war was a glorious adventure, and they lived out their fantasies in the war games they played with deadly seriousness. Enria remembered:

In 1859³ the capital of Piedmont was again gripped by a flare-up of war fever, similar to the one it had experienced ten years earlier during the Revolution of 1848. This time, the youth of Turin, now more numerous, staged their own far-from-playful war games.

Nearly every Sunday they massed by the hundreds in the open fields on the city's outskirts and engaged in furious mock battles. These scuffles were waged with deadly seriousness. The belligerents armed themselves with clubs and stones instead of guns and bullets. I witnessed several of these make-believe battles, and believe me they were frightful to behold.

One Sunday afternoon Don Bosco entered our little church for his customary catechism instruction. To his surprise he found only a handful of the school's boarders waiting for him. "Where is everybody?" he asked. Nobody knew. So he went outside looking for them. They were easy to find. All Don Bosco did was to follow

³ The year 1859 was a turbulent year in Italy's drive for unification. After Cavour had forged a French alliance with Emperor Louis Napoleon at Plombières, he succeeded in provoking Austria into declaring war. The Austrians had sent an ultimatum demanding that Piedmont stop her military preparations within three days or face the consequences. The warning was ignored. On April 26, hostilities officially began. With the arrival of French troops on Italian soil, Turin became the center of war preparations and the central staging area for the second war of independence.

It was inevitable that Don Bosco's Oratory should feel the fallout of war mobilization of those hectic days. In fact, the Oratory buildings narrowly escaped being seized for military purposes. Hardly had the *Convitto* been commandeered by the Piedmontese military, that an investigative committee descended upon the Oratory to examine its possible use as an army hospital. As Don Bosco toured the facilities with the officials, he must have spent a few anxious moments. He attempted to deflect their plans by advising them that the Oratory "lacked many comforts and its stairs and corridors were too narrow for their purpose." Lemoyne inexplicably added that when Don Bosco had built the Oratory, he had "anticipated this possibility". A conclusion that seems more than a bit stretched.

However, the biographer did accurately capture the mood of the populace during those anxious days. "In the public squares of various towns, volunteers of the Garibaldi militia kept drilling, as the worried populace looked on, awaiting developments in nervous silence. Meanwhile Turin was being deluged with inflammatory pamphlets and newspapers, and war demonstrations were the order of the day." No doubt sparks from these inflammatory "developments" helped ignite the dangerous war games played out in Peter Enria's account.

the noise and din which led him directly to the Via della Giardiniera (near the present site of the church of Mary Help of Christians). There he came upon the battle scene. A sham battle was in progress, being played out with alarming earnestness. About 300 youths, ranging from fifteen to eighteen years of age and divided into two "armies", were brawling against each other.

Without hesitating for a moment and without fear for his own personal safety, Don Bosco marched right into the thick of battle. Though the air was thick with rocks and stones, he was not hit. I can attest to all this because, sheltered behind a tree and at a safe distance, I witnessed all that I am describing. To me the fact that he was not harmed in any way I can only explain that Our Lady's mantle must have shielded him. There is no other explanation.

When Don Bosco reached the center of the battlefield he was quickly recognized. Rocks in hand everyone halted his fire. With that wonderful and amiable way of his he waved to the two warring armies to gather around him. He didn't scold anyone or raise his voice; he just spoke to them in a gentle persuasive manner and urged everybody to return back to church with him. To my amazement everyone did. No one tried to hide or slip away. Like conquered armies they dropped their stones and followed him into church where he carried on with his usual catechism instruction as though nothing had happened...⁴

⁴ Pietro Enria's *pro memoria* autobiographical account is listed in the Salesian Archives as: AS 110 Enria, *autogr.*