

CHAPTER ONE

Childhood on the Rock

Albert Joseph Angel Sanguinetti was born in Gibraltar on 3 October 1923. Flamboyant yet fastidious, social and bookish, canny but generous, careful of detail though careless of convention, he was a fascinating compound of that tiny colony of huge repute. Taken from Spain by the British under the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, this curiously small community, clutching a monolithic promontory of up-ended Jurassic limestone, is famous for its role as garrison, naval base, and sturdy outpost, locking up the entrance to the Mediterranean in the interest of British naval control. Those are its starchier, gunboat features. Its real flavour is an accumulated population of Spaniards, Italians, Portuguese, Maltese, Moors, Jews, and indeed the British. It was from this compact cosmos of peoples that shot Albert Sanguinetti's star. He dropped the name "Angel" on his confirmation—a name he may have taken some ribbing for as he grew up—and replaced it with John. Childhood pictures suggest a profile more cherubic than angelic. It was not a characteristic that even his warmest friends would say he developed in later life.

Sanguinetti came from an Italian line. His father, Alberto, was born in 1886 and was the great-grandson of Mateo Sanguinetti, later called Matthew, a ship's captain from Genoa who settled in Gibraltar with his wife and son around 1812. The Gibraltar Census Return of 1834 shows Matthew Sanguinetti, a 62 year old in shipping, living with

his two sons at 13 Road to the Lines. This was very close to the Moorish Castle on the western side of the Rock of Gibraltar (the famous 426-metre-high monolithic limestone promontory, from which the territory gained its moniker “the Rock”), overlooking the town of Gibraltar and the bay, and the Spanish town of Algeciras. Being in shipping, it might have been expected of him to live in Catalan Bay, which is on the eastern side of the Rock and where many of his fellow Genoese had developed a distinct fishing community, but he chose to live on the opposite side, closer to the army and naval bases as well as the developing business centre. This may have been a reflection of his aspirations and would have been more advantageous to his sons’ occupations in leather and carpentry.

It would have been a very serious decision for Matthew to uproot his family from the long traditions of Genoa and move to a new community. However, Gibraltar was very familiar to Genoese traders. Ships from Genoa were often there to register under the British flag. The British had made a series of agreements with Ottoman satraps along the North African coast, and the flag granted the Genovese protection against Barbary pirates. So, the captains came and went and sometimes settled. The great wealth and power of Genoa in the Middle Ages had rested in its trading ships and fighting fleet so these ship captains had become “captains of the people” and a form of inherited nobility.

It was this *ancien regime* which the French occupation under Napoleon was abolishing in Genoa. By 1805, France had annexed it to its own Empire. Men were being forced to enlist in the French Army, so many families left to avoid this. Gibraltar was seen as a refuge and a place of opportunity. British command of the Mediterranean was ensured by the victory at Trafalgar in 1805, and the years following were a booming period as the inhabitants found ways around the blockades set up by both Napoleon and the British. The dockyard was also fully stretched with repairing damaged ships, and a new Naval Victualling Yard developed at Rosia Bay. Matthew moved to Gibraltar at the same time as Sanguinetti’s

maternal family, the Garzias, who also uprooted and began a new life there. Giovanni Baptista Garzia from Finale, on the Gulf of Genoa, arrived in Gibraltar about two years earlier than Matthew, in around 1810.

Matthew's son Anthony married twice. His second wife was Francisca Rivano. The Rivanos, also Genoese, afford the earliest traceable ancestor of Albert Sanguinetti. In the archive of St Mary the Crowned Cathedral in Gibraltar, the first local birth for the Rivano family is recorded for 1700. Several generations later, Francisca's second child was James, Sanguinetti's grandfather, born in 1846. He was only six years old when his father Matthew died. At 22 years old, he married Martina Damedo in St Mary the Crowned, and they had eleven children. James became a successful carpenter and cabinet maker. His business grew, and he moved closer to the main trading area of the town. He died at the age of 63 in 1910. A carpentry business located on Main Street is still operating under his name and those of his sons.

Alberto, Sanguinetti's father and eighth of the eleven children, was born in 1886 and married Mary Garcia (the spelling had altered) in 1922, which united these two prominent families in the Gibraltar community. Alberto developed his own trade, dealing in leather, but went on to build up a portfolio of house and business ownership. His brother Avelino also had a shop in the centre of the town on Main Street called "The Green Room", established in 1870, selling goods including leather, bicycles, motorbikes, pianos, and gramophone records.

Charles Garcia, Sanguinetti's maternal great-grandfather, developed a tobacco business called "Carlos Garcia, Enijo Gibraltar". Advertisements for it can be traced in old trade directories, and tobacco wrappings from the period carry the trademark of "Carlos Garcia". Tobacco was a very prosperous trade in Gibraltar, even when the other aspects of its economy had difficulties. Prosperity lay in the Spanish trade which was developed to include cigars. In 1814, "only about thirty-one people were employed in rolling tobacco leaf".¹ By 1850, about 2,000 people were employed, including whole families,

in crowded tobacco factories. Conditions were unhealthy, the wages were very low and the few families who organised the trade “were disproportionately rich”.²

In 1841, Charles married Magdalena Pisharello, aged 20. She gave him eight children, the third of which, John Baptist (their first son and Sanguinetti’s grandfather), was born in 1846. He continued his father’s trade in tobacco, deliberately starting at the bottom as a tobacco chopper and working his way up. By 1891, his business was so prosperous that he needed to expand his workforce. While he had still been chopping tobacco, he married Mary Gordon and had 11 children. Mary Gordon brought into the Sanguinetti family a connection of which Sanguinetti was always proud. She was a descendant of William Gordon (1854–1922) who had been the US Consul in Medellin and a representative of British companies in Colombia. From him, Sanguinetti inherited a gold Mayan cross. In fact, the Gordons had arrived in Jerez, Spain, around 1750, Scottish Jacobins escaping the Hanoverian succession in Britain. They became prosperously involved in the sherry trade. Lord Byron records a happy meeting with a Mr Gordon who showed him around his vaults in 1807, and by 1809, they were partners in Sandeman & Co. There are now two marquises and a count in Spain with “Gordon” names.

Mary Garcia, Sanguinetti’s mother, born in 1890, was the youngest of Mary Gordon’s children. Mary married Alberto on 12 December 1922 in the Gibraltar Registry Office. One of her brothers, John, and one of her sisters, Enriqueta, were witnesses. They would remain close to her and her family throughout her life. John (“Uncle John”), along with their sister Victoria (“Aunty Vicky”), was to play a pivotal role in Sanguinetti’s upbringing and in the financial support for the family. The name of “Uncle John” was widely used of John Garcia by family members regardless of whether he was a true uncle or not, a tradition that was to be followed by Sanguinetti himself, as he too became known as “Uncle Albert” by children of his close friends and associates.

Unfortunately, things had gone terribly wrong in business for John Baptist, leaving Mary, John, and their nine other siblings destitute. John took over what was left. Having sampled poverty, he was more determined than most to succeed. By making astute use of the many contacts he had established throughout the years, his business flourished. He purchased prime loose tobacco from North America and Cuba and produced a favoured blend of cigarettes in Gibraltar that was exported throughout Spain and North Africa.

He managed to establish a good customer base and sold cigarettes to well-established traders. His major client was Spanish entrepreneur Juan March Ordinas with whom he had a very close connection. Indeed, there is clear evidence of a long-standing friendship between the two found in their correspondence dating from 1915,³ and an invaluable outcome of this was that the family would become March's agents in tobacco. Such was the degree of connection between Juan March and John Garcia that some of March's vessels were registered in Gibraltar in the name of John Garcia, to benefit from being flagged as British and coming under the protection of the Royal Navy.

Juan March began life as a tobacco smuggler. He was an unusually perceptive and swift businessman and interloper who often ran his affairs in the margins of the law. He prospered under the Spanish monarchy, was imprisoned by the Republic, and fled to Gibraltar. He generously financed Spanish leader Francisco Franco and the Falangists, and arranged troop airlifts during the Civil War. He acted as a go-between for the British and Franco to keep Spain out of the war, and declassified documents from the United Kingdom show that he funnelled US\$10 million from the British to Madrid for that purpose. Even before the war, March was writing to Garcia that "honourable English merchants came to see me in my house in Palma on behalf of the English government seeking my moral assistance in certain matters which were of interest to the English government".⁴ With the Nationalist victory in 1936, March regained his influence through the favour of

Franco, and in 1944, he became a supporter of Don Juan de Borbon. He owned newspapers and funded political parties, and his business empire became huge. He was believed to be the seventh richest man in the world after the Second World War. It is telling that the title of Pere Ferrer Guasp's book on him published in 2004 is *Juan March, la cara oculta del poder (Juan March: The Hidden Face of Power)*.⁵ Over his life, March also put together a very large and valuable art collection.

Some of the funds which were to accrue to Sanguinetti later in life had their origins in the tumult of modern Spanish history, though his uncle made his money in other ways too. When John Garcia returned from Madeira after the Second World War, he had retired from the tobacco business and dedicated his time to managing his properties and providing mortgages to commercial entities in Gibraltar. He already owned a residential building at Engineer Lane, and little by little, he purchased numerous buildings at Cooperage Lane, located between the entrance to the Main Street and Irish Town in Gibraltar, where most of the tobacco activity was located. He ended up owning all of the buildings on the south side of Cooperage Lane and its corner building at the entrance to Main Street. He developed these buildings into offices and housing in 1952. It was quite an ambitious project in those days and it proved successful. John Garcia became quite a wealthy man. The Sanguinetti families came to represent a considerable collection of properties in Gibraltar and these holdings helped give Sanguinetti standing in a closed fortress city where status was incredibly important. This is memorialised in the prominent and distinguished family tomb in North Front Cemetery, dating from 1870, which Sanguinetti himself regularly visited and showed to any visitors whenever he was in Gibraltar, out of an abundance of pride in his family.

Albert Sanguinetti's later life as a lawyer was largely dedicated to the common man, but from childhood, he was fascinated by aristocracy and princely style. Even if it was only to chuckle over, it pleased him that he might have had distinguished origins. As well as in Genoa, the name of

Sanguinetti has been one to conjure with in Bologna, where the most recent owners of the sixteenth century Palazzo Aldi Sanguinetti are a family of note. Sanguinetti declared himself to be a cousin of Doria Sanguinetti, whom he called upon in the Palazzo on sea voyages home later in life.

His most striking claim to grand connection on his father's side was being a descendant of a pope. The pope in question, Leo VI, was not one of the most distinguished, or even discernible, successors of St Peter. In his *The Popes: A History*,⁶ John Julius Norwich does not even waste ink on Leo by naming him. His reign lasted for about eight months between 928 and 929 AD and he was murdered by Marozia Theophract, who had the louche distinction of being mistress, mother, and grandmother of popes. She virtually controlled the papacy for about a decade, and Leo was enthroned as a fill-in stooge until her appalling son, not then even ordained, became of age to occupy St Peter's throne.

Little is known of Leo except that his family name was Sanguine. They were of good Roman stock and his father was a notary apostolic to the Vatican. The family owned a residence in Rome called the Tower of Sanguine, and Sanguinetti spoke of a ruin in the city that bore his coat of arms. In his brief reign, Leo VI managed to make a call to arms to defend Rome against Arab raiders and, though it is surprising there would be any call for it, forbade castrati to marry. In fact, much later, during his time in Hong Kong, Sanguinetti told Oswald Cheung, QC, that he was descended from a pope. Cheung shot back: "Well, now we know why you are such a bastard."⁷ Unusually, there is no record of the customary, sharp Sanguinetti riposte.

Further, if a papal connection was not enough, Matthew Sanguinetti's wife, Maria Guiducce, was said to have been descended from Cardinal Guiducce, Archbishop of Toledo and Primate of Spain. This claim seems to have been clinched for Sanguinetti by the Cardinal's epitaph in Toledo which bears the words "Natural de Gibraltar".

Sanguinetti did not grow up in a family as numerous as his father's and grandfather's. He was the oldest of four, the only son and brother to his sisters—Maria Lourdes, born in 1925, Marie del Pilar, who came along two years after that, and finally, in 1933, when Sanguinetti was nine, Teresa. The family home was on Engineer's Lane, just off Main Street and close to the centre of the town. It was owned by John Garcia who lived across the road at Gavino's Passage with his unmarried sister Vicky. Sanguinetti and his siblings were close to their uncle and auntie, and they were forever going in and out of the Garcia household.

James Gordon, Sanguinetti's nephew, recalls that Uncle John was a distinguished-looking man, tall and slim, very well dressed and, in later years, with a shock of white hair. He did not marry and have children so he became close to his nephew. Sanguinetti was very comfortable spending time in Gavino's Passage where he was very clearly cared for. Eventually, he ended up living there, although he maintained the usual relations with his immediate family across the street. He really liked what the Garcia household had. John Garcia was able to afford a high standard of comfort, including a large house with many quality pieces of art, domestic helpers to take care of Sanguinetti, and even a chauffeur at the boy's disposal. There is no doubt this way of living influenced his personal style, and from an early age, he had a great interest in everything historical. He had a love for antiques and works of art, and devoured books, particularly on history.

Even in his original home at Engineer's Lane, Sanguinetti never knew want. The family employed a nanny, a maid, and a washer woman, and his sisters had their own dressmaker. In their earliest years, they also had a private tutor. His father, on the other hand, was of the "pennies maketh pounds" persuasion and put great store in the value of small money. His sister Maria Lourdes recalled that while their mother was generous to the women who came to the house to sell flowers and vegetables and to the water carriers, these people would

time their visits for when Alberto was not at home. To his nephew, James, Sanguinetti described his father as strict. The relationship does not seem to have been close.

The Sanguinettis and the Garcias clearly lived more comfortably than many Gibraltarians, who, on the whole, put up with cramped flats, built around a communal courtyard with water delivered by carriers in barrels. Streets in the city centre were narrow, and there were markets everywhere. The Spanish crossed the border for the day each morning to run fruit and vegetable stalls. Some of those who crossed the border chose to stay.

Similarly, there were many Jews who had crossed the seas to the Rock for good. One of the lesser-known lights in the Gibraltar cosmos are the Sephardic Jews from Morocco. When Spain periodically refused to supply food to Gibraltar, it turned to Morocco.⁸ The Sephardic Jews there, expelled from Spain in 1497, happily supplied provisions but some wanted to settle in Gibraltar. One of the Treaties of Utrecht, which ended the War of the Spanish Succession in 1713 and ceded Gibraltar to Britain, said that Jews and Moors could not reside in Gibraltar, and the British authorities tried to enforce this. However, the Moroccan ruler, in turn, threatened to stop the food supply so this provision of the treaty was abrogated. There is now an influential Jewish community in Gibraltar, and one of the greatest Gibraltarians, Sir Joshua Hassan, the first Chief Minister and father of self-government, is a member of it.⁹ It was John Garcia, perceptive and beneficent, who lent Hassan the required funds to set up his chambers, which are now the largest in Gibraltar.

Given the variety of peoples who had by this time congregated in Gibraltar, the town was a cacophony of languages and dialects. In the Sanguinetti household, Spanish was the predominant language, but Albert was taught English at school. This was another mark of exception, for only the best private schools used English. Most of the population spoke Spanish with varying grasps on English, and the older

generation had hardly any at all. It was not until after the war, when the authorities realised the importance of a collective identity, and the loyalty that came from it, that English was taught more thoroughly to the entire population.

To say that Sanguinetti grew up bilingual is an understatement of his prodigious ability to master new tongues. He even began learning Latin from an early age by the grace of a detailed fascination with the Catholic Church.

Gibraltarian cuisine was as varied as its tongues, having Spanish, Italian, British, and North African influences, and the family would themselves make frequent visits across the border to Spain in their Uncle John's car, stocking up on provisions. Uncle John was one of the first people on Gibraltar to purchase a car, but he never learned to drive and used a Spanish chauffeur, Antonio, to take him around the Rock to visit family and to travel into Spain.

When the children outgrew their private tutor, the girls went to a private school, and Sanguinetti attended Christian Brothers Preparatory Private School at Line Wall Lane, in the centre of the town, at a location that is now a bank. The fees were paid by his Uncle John. He was a day boy.¹⁰ First established in 1835, it was the school of choice for better off families but also had a reputation for strictness and the use of the strap. One British lawyer who spent some of his childhood on the Rock recalls in his blog: "The Christian Brothers ran the school with a rod of iron or more accurately, with straps of leather, which they applied generously to over exuberant boys."¹¹ In later years, Sanguinetti would chafe against excessive authority, a rebellious streak that might have had its beginnings here. However, the Christian Brothers provided him with a classical education, which also expanded on his Church Latin.

Sanguinetti's fascination with the church is not altogether surprising. The family was devoutly Catholic and went to Mass every Sunday at the Cathedral of St Mary the Crowned as well as on prominent holy days in the Church calendar. Sanguinetti was baptised and took his first holy communion there. When he