

Sacco and Vanzetti

On 15th April, 1920, Frederick Parmenter and Alessandro Berardelli, in South Braintree, were shot dead while carrying two boxes containing the payroll of a shoe factory. After the two robbers took the \$15,000 they got into a car containing several other men and were driven away.

Several eyewitnesses claimed that the robbers looked Italian. A large number of Italian immigrants were questioned but eventually the authorities decided to charge Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco with the murders. Although the two men did not have criminal records, it was argued that they had committed the robbery to acquire funds for their anarchist political campaign.

The trial started on 21st May, 1921. The main evidence against the men was that they were both carrying a gun when arrested. Some people who saw the crime taking place identified Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco as the robbers. Others disagreed and both men had good alibis. Vanzetti was selling fish in Plymouth while Sacco was in Boston with his wife having his photograph taken. The prosecution made a great deal of the fact that all those called to provide evidence to support these alibis were also Italian immigrants.

Vanzetti and Sacco were disadvantaged by not having a full grasp of the English language. Webster Thayer, the judge was clearly prejudiced against anarchists. The previous year, he rebuked a jury for acquitting anarchist Sergie Zuboff of violating the criminal anarchy statute. It was clear from some of the answers Vanzetti and Sacco gave in court that they had misunderstood the question. During the trial the prosecution emphasized the men's radical political beliefs. Vanzetti and Sacco were also accused of unpatriotic behavior by fleeing to Mexico during the First World War.

In court Nicola Sacco claimed: "I know the sentence will be between two classes, the oppressed class and the rich class, and there will be always collision between one and the other. We fraternize the people with the books, with the literature. You persecute the people, tyrannize them and kill them. We try the education of people always. You try to put a path between us and some other nationality that hates each other. That is why I am here today on this bench, for having been of the oppressed class. Well, you are the oppressor." The trial lasted seven weeks and on 14th July, 1921, both men

were found guilty of first degree murder and sentenced to death. The journalist. Heywood Broun, reported that when Judge Thayer passed sentence upon Sacco and Vanzetti, a woman in the courtroom said with terror: "It is death condemning life!"

Bartolomeo Vanzetti commented in court after the sentence was announced: "The jury were hating us because we were against the war, and the jury don't know that it makes any difference between a man that is against the war because he believes that the war is unjust, because he hate no country, because he is a cosmopolitan, and a man that is against the war because he is in favor of the other country that fights against the country in which he is, and therefore a spy, an enemy, and he commits any crime in the country in which he is in behalf of the other country in order to serve the other country. We are not men of that kind. Nobody can say that we are German spies or spies of any kind... I never committed a crime in my life - I have never stolen and I have never killed and I have never spilt blood, and I have fought against crime, and I have fought and I have sacrificed myself even to eliminate the crimes that the law and the church legitimate and sanctify."

Many observers believed that their conviction resulted from prejudice against them as Italian immigrants and because they held radical political beliefs. The case resulted in anti-US demonstrations in several European countries and at one of these in Paris, a bomb exploded killing twenty people.

In 1925 Celestino Madeiros, a Portuguese immigrant, confessed to being a member of the gang that killed Frederick Parmenter and Alessandro Berardelli. He also named the four other men, Joe, Fred, Pasquale and Mike Morelli, who had taken part in the robbery. The Morelli brothers were well-known criminals who had carried out similar robberies in area of Massachusetts. However, the authorities refused to investigate the confession made by Madeiros.

Important figures in the United States and Europe became involved in the campaign to overturn the conviction. John Dos Passos, Alice Hamilton, Paul Kellog, Jane Addams, Heywood Broun, William Patterson, Upton Sinclair, Dorothy Parker, Ben Shahn, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Felix Frankfurter, John Howard Lawson, Freda Kirchway, Floyd Dell, Bertrand Russell, George Bernard

Shaw and H. G. Wells became involved in a campaign to obtain a retrial. Although Webster Thayer, the original judge, was officially criticized for his conduct at the trial, the authorities refused to overrule the decision to execute the men.

Eugene Debs, the leader of the Socialist Party of America, called for trade union action against the decision: "The supreme court of Massachusetts has spoken at last and Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco, two of the bravest and best scouts that ever served the labor movement, must go to the electric chair.... Now is the time for all labor to be aroused and to rally as one vast host to vindicate its assailed honor, to assert its self-respect, and to issue its demand that in spite of the capitalist-controlled courts of Massachusetts honest and innocent working-men whose only crime is their innocence of crime and their loyalty to labor, shall not be murdered by the official hirelings of the corporate powers that rule and tyrannize over the state."

By the summer of 1927 it became clear that Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti would be executed. Vanzetti commented to a journalist: "If it had not been for this thing, I might have lived out my life talking at street corners to scorning men. I might have died, unmarked, unknown, a failure. Now we are not a failure. This is our career and our triumph. Never in our full life can we hope to do such work for tolerance, justice, for man's understanding of man, as now we do by accident. Our words -- our lives -- our pains -- nothing! The taking of our lives -- lives of a good shoemaker and a poor fish peddler -- all! That last moment belong to us - that agony is our triumph. On 23rd August 1927, the day of execution, over 250,000 people took part in a silent demonstration in Boston.

The United States system of justice came under attack from important figures throughout the world. Bertrand Russell argued: "I am forced to conclude that they were condemned on account of their political opinions and that men who ought to have known better allowed themselves to express misleading views as to the evidence because they held that men with such opinions have no right to live. A view of this sort is one which is very dangerous, since it transfers from the theological to the political sphere a form of persecution which it was thought that civilized countries had outgrown."

Upton Sinclair decided to investigate the case. He interviewed Fred Moore, one of defense lawyers in the case. According to Sinclair's latest biographer, Anthony Arthur: "Fred Moore, Sinclair said later, who confirmed

his own growing doubts about Sacco's and Vanzetti's innocence. Meeting in a hotel room in Denver on his way home from Boston, he and Moore talked about the case. Moore said neither man ever admitted it to him, but he was certain of Sacco's guilt and fairly sure of Vanzetti's knowledge of the crime if not his complicity in it."

A letter written by Sinclair at the time acknowledged that he had doubts about Moore's testimony: "I realized certain facts about Fred Moore. I had heard that he was using drugs. I knew that he had parted from the defense committee after the bitterest of quarrels.... Moore admitted to me that the men themselves had never admitted their guilt to him, and I began to wonder whether his present attitude and conclusions might not be the result of his brooding on his wrongs."

Sinclair was now uncertain if a miscarriage of justice had taken place. He decided to end the novel on a note of ambiguity concerning the guilt or innocence of the Italian anarchists. When Robert Minor, a leading figure in the American Communist Party, discovered Sinclair's intentions he telephoned him and said: "You will ruin the movement! It will be treason!" Sinclair's novel, *Boston*, appeared in 1928. Unlike some of his earlier radical work, the novel received very good reviews. The *New York Times* called it a "literary achievement" and that it was "full of sharp observation and savage characterization," demonstrating a new "craftsmanship in the technique of the novel".

Fifty years later, on 23rd August, 1977, Michael Dukakis, the Governor of Massachusetts, issued a proclamation, effectively absolving the two men of the crime. "Today is the Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti Memorial Day. The atmosphere of their trial and appeals were permeated by prejudice against foreigners and hostility toward unorthodox political views. The conduct of many of the officials involved in the case shed serious doubt on their willingness and ability to conduct the prosecution and trial fairly and impartially. Simple decency and compassion, as well as respect for truth and an enduring commitment to our nation's highest ideals, require that the fate of Sacco and Vanzetti be pondered by all who cherish tolerance, justice and human understanding."

Name: _____

1. What crime was committed? Where did it take place?
2. Why were Sacco and Vanzetti targeted?
3. What motive was suggested, tying Sacco and Vanzetti to the crime?
4. What was the most pressing evidence against them?
5. What were their alibis?
6. How did prosecutors attack these alibis?
7. What are some factors that damaged Sacco and Vanzetti's case during the trial?
8. Paraphrase Sacco's "between two classes" diatribe.
9. What was the verdict? The sentence?
10. Who actually committed the crime?

11. Many prominent Americans pushed for a retrial of Sacco and Vanzetti. What happened as a result of this?
12. Paraphrase Eugene V. Debs' response to the trial.
13. By 1927, it became clear that the men would be executed without another trial. Vanzetti seemed unfazed, even calling this a positive development. What did he mean by this?
14. What facts later came to light about Sacco and Vanzetti's defense lawyer?
15. What happened in 1977?
16. If we were to conduct a mock trial of this case, would you choose to defend or prosecute Sacco and Vanzetti?
17. In paragraph form below (a single paragraph is fine), describe how you think this case would play out today, in 2012's media saturated market.
18. Finally, reflect on your answer to #17. Would that answer change if their names were not Sacco and Vanzetti, but were instead Mohammed Al-Jawahri and Aziz Sharif?