

SACCO- VANZETTI

A little more than 50 years ago, on Aug. 23, 1927, the state of Massachusetts executed Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in the electric chair.

The two Italian anarchists were convicted in 1921 of the murder of two South Braintree, Mass., payroll guards.

Unless one is 60 or older, it is difficult to remember the worldwide demonstrations of protest that followed the executions of these men. In New York City a tremendous crowd gathered in Union Square. When the news came that the death-house switch had been pulled, "...the crowd," wrote The New York World, "responded with a giant sob. Women fainted in fifteen or twenty places...men leaned on one another's shoulders and wept."

In Paris, Buenos Aires, Berlin, Sydney, London and other of the world's major cities, the demonstrations were prolonged and violent. The opinion that Sacco and Vanzetti had not been given a fair trial was widespread. The belief that one or both were not guilty was pervasive. The belief that Judge Webster Thayer, who presided over the trial, was a bigot who hated foreigners and radicals was held by many.

Since the deaths of Sacco and Vanzetti, dozens of books and dramas have been written about them, and they still make news. Recently, for example, it was disclosed that in 1927 the Massachusetts State Police wiretapped the home telephone of Felix Frankfurter, a Sacco-Vanzetti defense worker who was then a Harvard law professor and later a Supreme Court Justice.

Perhaps most memorable in this historic, controversial case is fish-peddler Vanzetti's speech on hearing himself sentenced to death. It is eloquent, unforgettable and high drama:

"If it had not been for this, 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 do such a work for tolerance, for justice, for man's understanding of man as we do now 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! The last moment belongs to us--that agony is our triumph."

Dead more than 50 years, Sacco and Vanzetti are still heard.