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Vanzetti's Last Statement

W.G. Thompson

1928

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The following document, which is not printed to prolong an argument, has no bearing upon the official record of the tragic case to which it forms the natural epilogue. But in human records its extraordinary character gives it a place unlike any other known to us. — *The Editors*

Monday, August 22, 1927

Sacco and Vanzetti were in the Death House in the State Prison at Charleston. They fully understood that they were to die immediately after midnight. Mr. Ehrmann and I, having on their behalf exhausted every legal remedy which seemed to us available, had retired from the active conduct of the case, holding ourselves in readiness, however, to help their new counsel in any way we could.

I was in New Hampshire, where a message reached me from Vanzetti that he wanted to see me once more before he died. I immediately started for Boston with my son, reached the prison in the late afternoon or early evening, and was at once

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taken by the Warden to Vanzetti. He was in one of the three cells in a narrow room opening immediately to the chair. In the cell nearest the chair was Madeiros, in the middle one Sacco, and in the third I found Vanzetti. There was a small table in his cell, and when I entered the room he seemed to be writing. The iron bars on the front of the cell were so arranged as to leave at one place a wider space, through which what he needed could be handed to him. Vanzetti seemed to be expecting me; and when I entered he rose from his table, and with his characteristic smile reached through the space between the bars and grasped me warmly by the hand. It was intimated to me that I might sit in a chair in front of the cell, but not nearer the bars than a straight mark painted on the floor. This I did.

I had heard that the Governor had said that if Vanzetti would release his counsel in the Bridgewater case from their obligation not to disclose what he had said to them the public would be satisfied that he was guilty of that crime, and also of the South Braintree crime. I therefore began the interview by asking one of the two prison guards who sat at the other end of the room, about fifteen feet from where we were, to come to the front of the cell and listen to the questions I was about to ask Vanzetti and to his replies. I then asked Vanzetti if he had at any time said anything to Mr. Vahey or Mr. Graham which would warrant the inference that he was guilty of either crime. With great emphasis and obvious sincerity he answered no. He then said what he had often said to me before, that Messrs. Vahey and Graham were not his personal choice, but became his lawyers at the urgent request of friends, who raised the money to pay them. He then told me certain things about their relations to him and about their conduct of the Bridgewater case, and what he had in fact told them. This on the next day I recorded, but will not here repeat.

I asked Vanzetti whether he would authorize me to waive on his behalf his privilege so far as Vahey and Graham were concerned. He readily assented to this, but imposed the condi-

tion that they should make whatever statement they saw fit to make in the presence of myself or some other friend, giving his reasons for this condition, which I also recorded.

The guard then returned to his seat.

I told Vanzetti that although my belief in his innocence had all the time been strengthened, both by my study of the evidence and by my increasing knowledge of his personality, yet there was a chance, however remote, that I might be mistaken; and that I thought he ought for my sake, in this closing hour of his life when nothing could save him, to give me his most solemn reassurance, both with respect to himself and with respect to Sacco. Vanzetti then told me quietly and calmly, and with a sincerity which I could not doubt, that I need have no anxiety about this matter; that both he and Sacco were absolutely innocent of the South Braintree crime, and that he (Vanzetti) was equally innocent of the Bridgewater crime; that while, looking back, he now realized more clearly than he ever had the grounds of the suspicion against him and Sacco, he felt that no allowance had been made for his ignorance of American points of view and habits of thought, or for his fear as a radical and almost as an outlaw, and that in reality he was convicted on evidence which would not have convicted him had he not been an anarchist, so that he was in a very real sense dying for his cause. He said it was a cause for which he was prepared to die. He said it was the cause of the upward progress of humanity, and the elimination of force from the world. He spoke with calmness, knowledge, and deep feeling. He said he was grateful to me for what I had done for him. He asked to be remembered to my wife and son. He spoke with emotion of his sister and of his family. He asked me to do what I could to clear his name, using the words "clear my name."

I asked him if he thought it would do any good for me or any friend to see Boda. He said he thought it would. He said he did not know Boda very well, but believed him to be an honest man,

and thought possibly he might be able to give some evidence which would help to prove their innocence.

I then told Vanzetti that I hoped he would issue a public statement advising his friends against retaliating by violence and reprisal. I told him that, as I read history, the truth had little chance of prevailing when violence was followed by counter-violence. I said that, as he well knew, I could not subscribe to his views or to his philosophy of life; but that, on the other hand, I could not but respect any man who consistently lived up to altruistic principles, and was willing to give his life for them. I said that if I were mistaken, and if his views were true, nothing could retard their acceptance by the world more than the hate and fear that would be stirred up by violent reprisal. Vanzetti replied that, as I must well know, he desired no personal revenge for the cruelties inflicted upon him; but he said that, as he read his story, every great cause for the benefit of humanity had had to fight for its existence against entrenched power and wrong, and that for this reason he could not give his friends such sweeping advice as I had urged. He added that in such struggles he was strongly opposed to any injury to women and children. He asked me to remember the cruelty of seven years of imprisonment, with alternating hopes and fears. He reminded me of the remarks attributed to Judge Thayer by certain witnesses, especially by Professor Richardson, and asked me what state of mind I thought such remarks indicated. He asked me how any candid man could believe that a judge capable of referring to men accused before him as "anarchistic bastards" could be impartial, and whether I thought that such refinement of cruelty as had been practiced upon him and upon Sacco ought to go unpunished.

I replied that he well knew my own opinion of these matters, but that his arguments seemed to me not to meet the point I had raised, which was whether he did not prefer the prevalence of his opinions to the infliction of punishment upon persons,

at this last meeting he did not suggest that the result seemed to justify his view and not mine.²

however richly he might think they deserved it. This led to a pause in the conversation.

Without directly replying to my question, Vanzetti then began to speak of the origin, early struggles, and progress of other great movements for human betterment. He said that all great altruistic movements originated in the brain of some man of genius, but later became misunderstood and perverted, both by popular ignorance and by sinister self interest. He said that all great movements which struck at conservative standards, received opinions, established institutions, and human selfishness were at first met with violence and persecution. He referred to Socrates, Galileo, Giordano Bruno, and others whose names I do not now remember, some Italian and some Russian. He then referred to Christianity, and said that it began in simplicity and sincerity, which were met with persecution and oppression, but that it later passed quietly into ecclesiasticism and tyranny. I said I did not think that the progress of Christianity had been altogether checked by convention and ecclesiasticism, but that on the contrary it still made an appeal to thousands of simple people, and that the essence of the appeal was the supreme confidence shown by Jesus in the truth of His own views by forgiving, even when on the Cross, His enemies, persecutors, and slanderers.

Now, for the first and only time in the conversation, Vanzetti showed a feeling of personal resentment against his enemies. He spoke with eloquence of his sufferings, and asked me whether I thought it possible that he could forgive those who had persecuted and tortured him through seven years of inexpressible misery. I told him he knew how deeply I sympathized with him, and that I could not say that if I were in the same situation I should not have the same feeling; but I said that I had asked him to reflect upon the career of One infinitely superior to myself and to him, and upon a force infinitely greater than the force of hate and revenge. I said that in the long run the force to which the world would respond was the force of love

and not of hate, and that I was suggesting to him to forgive his enemies, not for their sakes, but for his own peace of mind, and also because an example of such forgiveness would in the end be more powerful to win adherence to his cause or to a belief in his innocence than anything else that could be done.

There was another pause in the conversation. I arose and we stood gazing at each other for a minute or two in silence. Vanzetti finally said that he would think of what I had said.¹

I then made a reference to the possibility of personal immortality, and said that, although I thought I understood the difficulties of a belief in immortality, yet I felt sure that if there was a personal immortality he might hope to share it. This remark he received in silence.

He then returned to his discussion of the evil of the present organization of society, saying that the essence of the wrong was the opportunity it afforded persons who were powerful because of ability or strategic economic position to oppress the simple-minded and idealistic among their fellow men, and that he feared that nothing but violent resistance could ever overcome the selfishness which was the basis of the present organization of society and made the few willing to perpetuate a system which enabled them to exploit the many.

I have given only the substance of this conversation, but I think I have covered every point that was talked about and have presented a true picture of the general tenor of Vanzetti's remarks. Throughout the conversation, with the few exceptions I have mentioned, the thought that was uppermost in his mind was the truth of the ideas in which he believed for the betterment of humanity, and the chance they had of prevailing. I was impressed by the strength of Vanzetti's mind, and

¹ It is credibly reported that when, a few hours later, Vanzetti was about to step into the chair, he paused, shook hands with the Warden and Deputy Warden and the guards, thanked them for their kindness to him, and, turning to the spectators, asked them to remember that he forgave some of his enemies. — W.G.T.

by the extent of his reading and knowledge. He did not talk like a fanatic. Although intensely convinced of the truth of his own views, he was still able to listen with calmness and with understanding to the expression of views with which he did not agree. In this closing scene the impression of him which had been gaining ground in my mind for three years was deepened and confirmed — that he was a man of powerful mind, of unselfish disposition, of seasoned character, and of devotion to high ideals. There was no sign of breaking down or of terror at approaching death. At parting he gave me a firm clasp of the hand and a steady glance, which revealed unmistakably the depth of his feeling and the firmness of his self-control.

I then turned to Sacco, who lay upon a cot bed in the adjoining cell and could easily have heard and undoubtedly did hear my conversation with Vanzetti. My conversation with Sacco was very brief. He rose from his cot, referred feelingly though in a general way to some points of disagreement between us in the past, said he hoped that our differences of opinion had not affected our personal relations, thanked me for what I had done for him, showed no sign of fear, shook hands with me firmly, and bade me good-bye. His manner also was one of absolute sincerity. It was magnanimous in him not to refer more specifically to our previous differences of opinion, because at the root of it all lay his conviction, often expressed to me, that all efforts on his behalf, either in court or with public authorities, would be useless, because no capitalistic society could afford to accord him justice. I had taken the contrary view; but

² I afterward talked with the prison guard to whom I have referred in this paper. He told me that after he returned to his seat he heard all that was said by Vanzetti and myself. The room was quiet and no other persons were talking. I showed the guard my complete notes of the interview, including what Vanzetti had told me about Messrs. Vahey and Graham. He read the notes carefully and said that they corresponded entirely with his memory except that I had omitted a remark made by Vanzetti about women and children. I then remembered the remark and added it to my memorandum. — W.G.T.