

Reflections on the Way to the Gallows

Kanno Sugako

1911

This is written as a record of the period from the time the death sentence was pronounced to the time I mount the scaffold. I shall write things down candidly and honestly in a straightforward fashion without any effort at self-justification.

In the women's prison in Tokyo, January 18, 1911. Cloudy. Needless to say, I was prepared for the death sentence. My only concern day and night was to see as many of my twenty-five fellow defendants saved as possible.

I boarded the prison carriage just before noon. From the window of the carriage I could see in the dim sunlight saber-bearing figures solemnly standing guard en route. They seemed to presage the verdicts of the trial, and I waited impatiently for the court proceedings to start at 1:00 p.m.

The time came. We climbed up to the second floor, then to the third floor, and then down again to the second floor to the courtroom of the Supreme Court. The security measures along the corridors and in the courtroom during the proceedings were extremely tight. The court was packed with people — lawyers, newspaper reporters, and spectators. I tend to get dizzy easily, so I felt a bit faint, having climbed many stairs and because of the stifling presence of the crowd in the courtroom. After I calmed down, I looked around at my fellow defendants. They were all sitting circumspectly, looking worried. They looked as if they were afraid to smile at each other. A pride of hungry lions. Their nails and teeth had been filed and smoothed down. There they sat before me. Twenty-five sacrificial lambs.

Soon the judges entered through the left door at the front of the court-house. Will it be life or death? Many of the defendants' hearts must have beat faster. The clerk read the names of the defendants. Chief Justice Tsuru Jōichirō said a few words of instruction. Then, contrary to the usual procedure, he left the verdicts to the end and proceeded to read the lengthy arguments, sipping occasionally from a glass of water. As he continued to read, it became clear that he was arbitrarily linking even those who were clearly innocent to Article 73 of the criminal code. His sophism became increasingly blatant. My concern increased and finally overwhelmed me like a tidal wave. But until he read the verdict for each defendant, I kept hoping against hope that some, even one person, would receive a minimal sentence. But, ah, it was all in vain. ... It was all over. Except for Nitta Tōru, who was sentenced to eleven years in prison, and Niimura Zenbei, who was given eight years, the remaining twenty-four of us were sentenced to death.

From the beginning, I feared that this would be the case, but the trial was conducted in such an unexpectedly meticulous fashion that I began to hope that it would be relatively fair. The verdicts came as a shock. I was so angry and upset that I felt as if my entire body were on fire, and I began to tremble.

Reflections On Way To Gallows

Clemens Wendtner



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