

## **The Vanzetti Knife – A Family Treasure**

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An object we call The Vanzetti Knife has been in my family for more than 100 years. It belonged to Bartolomeo Vanzetti, a fish peddler in Plymouth, Mass., in the 1910s. He was arrested along with Nicola Sacco, a shoemaker, for the murder of a guard and paymaster during the 1920 robbery of the payroll at a shoe company in nearby South Braintree.

Today, Aug. 23, 2022, is the 95th anniversary of the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, which historians now recognize as a massive miscarriage of justice. Their biggest sin was that they were Italian immigrants and anarchists when many Americans were biased against Italians and radicals, a time during which a wave of strikes and terrorist acts had aroused hatred against communists and foreigners.

At their trial in 1921, the evidence against them was conflicting and unreliable. But there is strong evidence that anti-Italian and anti-immigrant prejudice influenced the judge, jury and prosecution. They were convicted of first-degree murder, and despite six years of appeals, received a death sentence. [This sparked worldwide outrage](#), protests and bombings. Celebrated writers, artists and academics, such as H.G. Wells and future Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, campaigned unsuccessfully for clemency or a retrial. Albert Einstein signed a petition against their execution.

What's the significance of the knife?

Vanzetti sold fish door to door out of his pushcart in North Plymouth, an enclave of Italian immigrants. One of his favorite customers was my Italian-American grandmother, my Nona. She'd invite him to sit on the shady porch of her farmhouse, bring him a glass of cold water, and sit with him. According to family lore, he'd bounce my mother, an infant at the time, on his lap. In gratitude, he saved Nona the best fish and gifted her that knife to cut it.

On the day of his execution, Nona was filleting a fish with his knife when it slipped and cut her hand. Coming to the porch where the family was sitting, she said in her Italian dialect, shaking her knife: "*Mio dio, c'al curtél ch'e al gha na maledizion!*" Meaning, "My God, this knife has a hex on it!"

Like this story, the knife was passed down through generations, from Nona to my mother and to my older sister Georgi. It's a cherished vestige of a hardworking, kind man who was killed for his beliefs and heritage. Because of the fish seller's relationship to my family, I became obsessed with the story of Sacco and Vanzetti. I've carried it throughout my life. In high school in New Bedford, I wrote a report about the case for my history class. My passion helped me win a scholastic award for it.

While preparing that report, I received my acceptance to NYU in 1966. I traveled to New York to be interviewed for their special program, clutching a book on the case when I arrived. A leftist professor grilled me about U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. I didn't give a good analysis and feared I blew my chance of getting into the program.

To my relief, he mercifully changed subjects, asking me about the book I was carrying. I gave him an enthusiastic account of anti-foreign, anti-anarchist sentiment, and of course, the knife.

I got into that special program.

While a student at NYU, I saw the off-Broadway musical, ["Sacco-Vanzetti,"](#) which depicted their story in a sensitive, honest way. This was generally before musicals dealt with such dark subject matter, so it was unusual. When I told my supposedly progressive friends about it, they teased me, mocking the show with a sing-songy, vaudeville-like routine: "I'm Sacco...he's Vanzetti...I eat pasta...he eats spaghetti."

Their ridicule and stereotyping insulted the men, my family and heritage. I retreated to my dorm room, wrote a glowing review of the show, and submitted it to my college newspaper — which published it. I felt I did my small part to spread the word about their case.

On the 50th anniversary of their execution, Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis proclaimed Aug. 23, 1977, as Sacco and Vanzetti Memorial Day. He stated their trial was "permeated by prejudice against foreigners and hostility toward unorthodox political views," and "any stigma and disgrace should be forever removed from [their] names." I felt a satisfaction I'd long awaited.

The case remains controversial to this day. I believe that's because it brings up issues that still trouble us: unfair treatment of minorities in our judicial system, denial of civil liberties, and intolerance of immigrants.

Whenever I get into a debate about the death penalty, I always raise the Sacco and Vanzetti case. I'm still haunted by their story.

When my mother died, my sister Georgi wanted the knife. Since she's the elder sibling and a historian, she deserved it.

My sister may have the knife, but I have the story.



Bartolomeo Vanzetti, left, and Nicola Sacco, anarchists who were convicted of murder and executed on Aug. 23, 1927. (Photo: Boston Public Library)