



The Legends of Sakae Osugi and Noe Ito



The saga of Sakae Osugi and his circle is likely familiar to Japanese audiences, less so to Western ones. Since its telling in **Eros plus Massacre** is notable as much for its creative divergence from the accepted facts as for its adherence thereto, a little historical background may be helpful.

"For Kropotkin one feels respect, but not attraction. There is a man much dearer to me... a born anarchist, one so constitutionally rebellious that he would have remained a rebel even in an anarchist society. A man who was neither regular nor ordered in his habits, who lived a life bohemian and unruly. I can not help but smile to myself when I reflect upon the life of our ancestor, Bakunin." -Sakae Osugi

In Bertrand Russell's *Autobiography*, he recalls a trip he and his wife Dora made to Japan in 1921, where they met Noe Ito. *"She was young and beautiful... Dora said to her: "Are you not afraid that the authorities will do something to you?" She drew her hand across her throat, and said, "I know they will sooner or later."*

Sakae Osugi, one of the great legendary figures of Japanese radicalism, might have been writing about himself in the above quote. Born into a military family which, by late in his youth, had marital connections to the highest echelons of the armed forces and government, Osugi's early ambition for an army career was thwarted by the profound streak of rebelliousness that dominated his character. Caught between a distant disciplinarian father and an overindulgent, yet contentious mother, young Sakae's stage was set for a lifetime of attention-grabbing antics. As a child, he led a gang that challenged other groups of ruffians to brutal sorties of rock and stone-throwing. Expelled from Kadet school for homosexual behavior and knife-fighting (though he'd later claim that, afraid he'd murder his opponent, he left his knife in its sheath), he went to Tokyo to study languages, eventually learning English, French, Italian, German, Russian, and Esperanto. A developing cosmopolitanism, and concomitant identity crisis, led him to pursue a variety of interests of foreign origin, including Christianity, Socialism, and Anarchism -- the last of which offered the arena in which he'd win great renown as activist, theorist, writer, and magazine and newspaper editor and publisher.

While the basis of Osugi's understanding of Anarchism came from reading Bakunin and Kropotkin, supplemented by evolutionary theory and anthropology, under the influence of Nietzsche, Bergson, Max Stirner, and Georges Sorel, he developed his own complementary theory of ethical egoism, which he believed would be the basis of a functioning anarcho-syndicalism: the mainspring of all freedom was the self in rebellion against class-society. Spiritually crippled selves could not function ethically in relation to each other. There was no perfect Petri dish forthcoming in which fully evolved selves would be nourished into being. Therefore, it was up to each member of the proletariat to realize their freedom through self-development. If intuition is brought into play, to every ego subconscious desires and impulses are revealed, and if the will causes these to be acted upon, self expands. If this process develops through a feedback-loop, psychic, and consequently social health ensue.

"When we consider the freedom and creativity of the ego, we feel that we must let it be the basis for individual and social progress. As Nietzsche says, the self, meditating and acting freely, is an eager arrow speeding to the target. We must seize and develop, then, the mysterious impulse which contains this self and the entire future. Freedom and creativity are not outside of us nor in the future. They are within us now."

This line of thought was both a reflection of Osugi's character, and a theoretical structure which would lure him on to further and more ostentatious "developments of self" not designed in the least to endear him to anti-individualist Japanese authorities. He spent several years in prison during his 20's, but after the aftermath of the High Treason Incident, in which

twelve of his fellow radicals were executed, he kept his activities largely outside the realm of jailable offenses. The authorities knew of his actions at all times, however. He was constantly followed by police, and seems to have developed with them a symbiotic, cat-and-mouse relationship -- he would by turns befriend them, keep them informed of his itinerary, send them on errands. Then, when necessary, and with great aplomb and dedication to craft -- they'd be given the slip.

Osugi's theories regarding liberty and the expansion of self naturally led to the path of Free Love. Marriage, monogamy, and jealousy were all products of societies based on hierarchy and the preeminence of property rights. Expanded selves would love each other as they saw fit without formal ties. Married himself since 1906 to Yasuko Hori, Osugi began in 1915 an affair with Ichiko Kamichika, a young woman associated with the Seito-sha (Bluestockings) feminist organization. Within months, he'd begun another, simultaneous affair with Noe Ito, editor of Seito, the Bluestocking magazine, and wife of Jun Tsuji, a writer with a reputation alternatively Dadaist, nihilist, and bohemian (and who would later gain fame as a *shakuhachi* player) and father of Ito's two sons. Osugi claimed to have equal feelings for all three women, and dictated rules by which each would maintain her or his own household and income, thereby banishing motivation for jealousy. Unfortunately, Kamichika was the only solvent member of the group, and found herself supporting the others. Additionally, Osugi and Ito seemed to share a compatibly frenetic temperament, and appeared to be drawing closer, contributing further to Kamichika's isolation. Matters came to a head at the resort town of Hayama, where Osugi had gone, supposedly alone, to attend to some translation chores away from the big city. After he was joined by Kamichika, who was surprised to discover Ito already there, tension mounted amongst the trio. Ito returned to Tokyo the next day, and that night, a little after 3 am, Osugi found himself awakened by a knife-wielding Kamichika, who slashed his throat, puncturing his trachea.

In the ensuing scandal, from his hospital bed Osugi found himself excoriated and shunned for "immorality" by fellow radicals who felt he was giving the movement a bad name. Yasuko Hori soon decided this a good time to bow out of the picture, and as Noe Ito had left Jun Tsuji several months before the Hayama stabbing, there were now no obstacles between her and Osugi. She would bear Osugi four daughters -- the first ten months after the stabbing -- and a son, born a little over a month before the murder of his parents.

As international political events unfolded in those tumultuous years, Osugi found himself partially returned to the radical fold, though now with a reputation for outrageousness and scandal courting. This reputation no doubt only increased his irksomeness to authorities and their acolytes, for in 1923, his and Ito's legends would be sealed in a shocking instance of government power run amok.

Two minutes before noon, September 1, 1923, a catastrophic earthquake struck the populous region of Kanto, which contained both Tokyo and Yokohama. One and ten percent, respectively, of the houses in these cities were immediately destroyed. Fires swept through the region, eventually damaging or completely decimating three quarters of the houses, as well as much of the downtown districts and government buildings in the two metropolitan areas. Two million people were displaced, and over 150,000 deaths, injuries, and missing persons were reported. The government had already been in complete disarray -- the Prime Minister had died the previous week, and a replacement, Admiral Yamamoto, was hastily found. He declared martial law, and thousands of army troops swiftly poured into the cities.

Shortly after the disaster, known as the Great Kanto Earthquake, rumors became rampant that Korean immigrants were responsible for the countless fires which had rendered so many homeless. Vigilante violence swept through Tokyo and Yokohama, and as many as 6,000 Koreans were lynched. A few of these vigilantes, as well as a number of left-wing union activists, were arrested as troublemakers, and handed over to the military police (*Kempeitai*). This group, numbering nine in total, were all killed. Prominent radicals largely managed to remain unharmed during this period, but there were exceptions -- Osugi and Noe Ito, among them. They, along with Osugi's visiting six-year-old nephew Munekazu (who had been born in Portland, OR) were arrested on September 16 by Captain Amakasu and his *Kempeitai* detachment. All three of their bodies were found dumped in an abandoned well four days later. All had been strangled, and Osugi and Ito's bodies were covered with bruises, the results of having been severely beaten.

It is still not known for certain whether Amakasu (who served three of a ten-year prison term for his actions) acted as a self-appointed "patriot" -- behavior not at all frowned upon in militarized Japan -- or, if has been often charged, he carried out orders from on high. Regardless, their horrific deaths, conjoined to their tirelessly bold exertions and fierce personas, contributed to the legends which had begun to develop around them even before their demise.

