

Christmas with Iva
Chapter 16

PHANTOM SPIES, PHANTOM JUSTICE —

Elizabeth T. Bentley, Harry Gold, Roy M. Cohn, Irving H. Saypol,
Judge Irving R. Kaufman, J. Edgar Hoover,
and the Rehearsal for the Rosenberg Trial

or

How I Survived McCarthyism

by Miriam Moskowitz

On September 29, 1949 a federal jury convicted Iva Toguri d'Aquino of a single count of treason for having broadcast Japanese propaganda to American and Allied servicemen during World War II.

Born in America of Japanese immigrant parents and a graduate of the University of California, Los Angeles, Iva Toguri (later Iva d'Aquino when she married) sailed to Japan in the summer of 1941 to visit a sick relative. By the end of that year she was stranded in Japan when war broke out between that country and the United States and she could not get home.

d'Aquino refused to renounce her citizenship so she was denied a ration card. As a result of near starvation she ended up in a hospital with beriberi and malnutrition. When she recovered somewhat she obtained a job with the Domei News Agency, a Japanese listening post where she typed news from Europe (such as Winston Churchill's speeches). She was also ordered to broadcast a radio program on Japan's "Zero Hour," which was beamed to American and Allied troops in the Pacific, the scripts for which she had to type. The scripts were created by allied POWs then being held in Japan and with whom she had contact. They consisted of light banter – disc jockey chatter – which contained satirical references or "insider" jokes which the Japanese would not understand but which Allied combatants would certainly recognize.

Iva testified that she had not composed those scripts; they had been written by the POWs and that she was not anti-American nor was she disloyal to her native country. American soldiers in the Pacific dubbed her "Tokyo Rose" but she was one of several women who made those broadcasts.

After the Japanese defeat in 1945 the U.S. military detained her and then released her for lack of evidence. In 1949 d'Aquino was re-arrested (still in Japan), charged with treason and returned to the United States to stand trial. She defended herself as best she could but she was unprepared for the waves of anti-Japanese racism that engulfed her. Her conviction was based on the testimony of two witnesses. (Years later those witnesses recanted.)

In September 1949 Iva d'Aquino was sentenced to ten years and a fine of \$10,000 and she was hauled off to the Federal Reformatory for Women in Alderson, West Virginia to do her time. In the meantime, Iva's husband, Felipe d'Aquino, of Japanese/Portuguese heritage, was not allowed to be with her and she could not leave. Ultimately the marriage dissolved.

At Alderson, Iva found that prison handed her more of the ordeal she had already endured. Her sister inmates were as misinformed as the American public had been and they were equally judgmental and certain that justice had triumphed in the government's case against her

The following year, 1950, I was wrongfully convicted of conspiracy to obstruct justice in a case with overtones of Soviet espionage, and I was sentenced to two years and a fine of \$10,000. I, too, ended up in Alderson. Iva and I were lodged in different cottages and we had different work assignments. She was the dental assistant at the infirmary which was at one end of the campus and I worked in the storehouse at the other end so we came in contact with each other infrequently. Nevertheless, the fleeting contacts we had were civilized and perhaps cordial. The bond we shared was that I, too, was enduring the harassment of sister inmates so I understood how difficult it was for her at Alderson..

Iva, petite private, the same age as I (early thirties), endured the taunts and hostility with quiet forbearance. When one of the women whispered – loudly enough for her to hear – “Jap spy” as she joined them in the dayroom after supper, she never again joined them in the dayroom. When someone jostled her in the corridor out of sight of warders, she pretended it was her own clumsiness that made her fall. When coffee got spilled on her in the mess hall she quietly wiped it up and asked permission to sit at another table. She found solace attending Mass Sunday mornings until a peer group sat behind her and, sotto voce, hissed “Jap spy” and “Jap whore” as she made her responses to the liturgy. She stopped going to Mass.

In her free time Iva found a creative outlet in the arts and crafts shop. I put in an appearance now and then to design and etch copper coasters or simple silver bracelets – the easiest task I could handle because I was so clumsily endowed. But Iva truly had a depth of talent. She was good with her hands, she had an imaginative sense of color and design, and she was deft with tools. In the beginning she used colorful fabric scraps to make collages, then she worked at leather carving. She made some nice hand-bags which she put up for sale in commissary. She was lucky and sold a few (to visitors) and the income from that gave her the funds to buy other supplies. Then her big project – she spent several months designing and loom-ing a colorful 3-foot by 5-foot throw rug. It transformed her room, it banished the institution drab, the clinical antisepsis, it splashed her room with gaiety and charm and made the premises distinctly hers. It also gave her a special, quiet pleasure.

She found that rug cut to shreds one Saturday afternoon when she had gone up the hill to Commissary.

You could not have watched her if you had been there; you would not have wanted to witness such awesome pain. She did not cry out or carry on – the wound was too profound. She just seemed to shrink into herself, now ever more remote and withdrawn.

As time wore on she seemed to put it behind her but she did not return to the arts and crafts shop. She also never forgot she was part of this prison landscape. In the communal bathroom in the morning she greeted her sister inmates pleasantly as they made their ablutions and she hoped the day would go well for them – but she walked alone to the mess hall for meals and never paired off as most of the other women did.

Over time you knew life was moving on for her as it was for all of us; the inmate population was constantly changing as some women disappeared and new ones entered. And the new ones found her presence acceptable as the old ones had not, and she responded to their tentative overtures cordially but with caution.

The healing was evident when she ambled over to the arts and crafts shop one Saturday afternoon in the fall when she was off work. She fingered the swatches of fabric and the leather scraps and played with them and folded them into funny shapes and you knew ideas were flooding through her and her life was moving back on track. As November bore on she became more engrossed – like old times. She took those scraps of colorful fabric and bits of leather and shaped them around tongue depressors. Then she fashioned them into whimsical, witty figures with flowing robes and jaunty, ridiculous hats. She added faces with adroit strokes of color and they registered merriment or goofiness, or they were lugubrious expressions of what she was privately thinking. She made one after another, eighteen of them, each different, brought them to her room and hid them away in her dresser drawer and no one knew they were there except the officer who ran a periodic room check. They were, after all, just harmless little dolls, obviously destined to be gifts. And eighteen of them matched the number of women in Iva's cottage.

As December approached, Iva sketched and mailed off the annual Christmas cards to her family. She also made an extra eighteen cards, decorated each with the name of a cottage inmate, then taped each card to a figurine. And she did all that secretly and quietly and no one knew.

On Christmas Eve Iva lingered in the bathroom so that she would be the last to be locked in for the night. When her sister inmates were all abed and locked in she gathered her bundle of Christmas offerings, skipped silently through the two floors of the cottage—the officer on duty that night monitored her – and deposited a jaunty figurine with a personalized, hand-decorated card at the door of each inmate. Then she whisked herself back to her room, was locked in -- and perhaps she went to sleep.

The next morning, Christmas morning, she remained in her room. She couldn't bear the cries of "Merry Christmas!" floating through the building and everyone's longing, including her's for home and dear ones – no other day on the calendar would be so freighted with such longing. She heard the outbursts of surprise and laughter as the women found her gifts but she was too modest to accept their thanks so she hid in her room until breakfast call when she hastily washed and dressed. And, as always, she walked alone to the mess hall and never paired off as the other women did. Iva was ever the class act.

All this happened a long time ago but there may still be a woman somewhere, of somewhat advanced age, in the hills of Kentucky or on the shores of Maine -- or in the pockets of despair somewhere in America – who remembers a desolate Christmas long ago and a young woman of infinite grace who turned it into a moment of joy and perhaps love when both joy and love were in rather short supply.

(Iva d'Aquino received a presidential pardon in 1977 – for a crime she did not commit. She lived to be ninety years old and died in 2006.)