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'Politicians who fail to battle injustice and neglect to defend the people's interests are only exploiting them, using them as a stepping stone to get elected,' Shin'ichi Yamamoto says. 'Such politicians have already succumbed to the dark side of power.'

The dismissal of Ishimatsu Yoshida's third petition for a retrial cruelly dashed his hopes. [He had been unjustly convicted of a murder that he did not commit.]

Soon World War II ended, and Japanese society saw tremendous changes. However, Yoshida's determination to prove his innocence didn't change.

After his release from prison on parole, he married and took up residence in his wife's hometown in Tochigi Prefecture. There, he proclaimed his innocence to every person he met.

His efforts finally bore fruit in 1952, when some 600 local citizens signed a petition calling on the District Legal Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Justice to investigate Yoshida's case. Eventually, a meeting was arranged between Yoshida and one of his accusers at the Tokyo Legal Affairs Bureau.

And in 1957, he petitioned a fourth time for a retrial. But this petition, too, was rejected.

Yoshida decided to make a direct appeal to the Minister of Justice and went to the ministry offices in Tokyo. The security guards ordered him to leave the premises, but he refused, clinging to the carpet and crying out his innocence.

His undaunted efforts to clear his name widened his circle of supporters and gained him the assistance of the Human Rights Protection Committee of the Japan Federation of Bar Associations. In November 1960, he submitted his fifth petition to the Nagoya High Court, and the decision for a new trial was handed down in April 1961. However, the Nagoya High Public Prosecutor's Office filed an objection, and in 1962, the High Court turned around and rescinded its decision.

This prompted Yoshida to file a special complaint with the Supreme Court, which overturned the Nagoya High Court's decision. Yoshida's retrial was finally set to begin.

The first session took place in December 1962. On Jan. 31, 1963, the prosecution made its closing argument and once again demanded life imprisonment for Yoshida. But when the judge handed down his decision on Feb. 28, Yoshida was at long last exonerated.

By then, almost 50 years had passed since his arrest. He was 83.

After announcing his decision, the presiding judge said with deep feeling: "This court owes the defendant—no, let us call him Mr. Yoshida with all due respect—a profound apology for the travesty of justice that our predecessors in the legal system perpetrated against him.

"Mr. Yoshida, for half a century you have continued to proclaim your innocence, enduring all manner of attack and persecution along the way. While expressing my utmost respect for your noble attitude throughout your long crusade—and for your matchless, invincible spiritual strength and vigor, which are truly deserving of praise and admiration—I wish you all the best for your remaining years."

It was extraordinary for a judge to make such an apology in court. But how could anyone ever compensate Yoshida for the pain and suffering of five decades spent trying to proving his innocence?

Shin'ichi Yamamoto applauded the exoneration of Ishimatsu Yoshida, who came to be known in Japan as "The Count of Monte Cristo of the Showa Era." Shin'ichi himself had been falsely accused of a crime and imprisoned, though only for a brief time, and had fought a protracted four-and-a-half-year legal battle to prove his innocence. This gave him a keen understanding of Yoshida's pain, sadness and anger.

The indomitable commitment of Yoshida, who fought to the very last to clear his name, shines with eternal brilliance. His example teaches us that human rights cannot be protected without a fight.

Shin'ichi was overjoyed that Yoshida's innocence had finally been established. But he was also deeply troubled realizing that there must be many other Ishimatsu Yoshidas out there who, falsely accused of crimes they did not commit, had been disgraced, ostracized, imprisoned or had even lost their lives. And while Yoshida was falsely convicted due to the gross errors of people in the judicial system, there was no doubt that countless innocent people were set up by the authorities in an attempt to discredit them and suppress their activities.

Shin'ichi spoke forcefully at the Nagoya Komei-kai meeting: "I, too, was overjoyed when I heard the announcement of Ishimatsu Yoshida's innocence. At the same time, I was horrified to think of how many people are plunged into misery and suffering by oppressive authorities.

"State authority should be used to protect the people. That's what governments are for. But state authority tends to have an inherently demonic aspect that seeks to control people, make them subservient and even violate their human rights.

"I hope that the Komei-kai members will always keep a sharp eye on the authorities and, should the authorities reveal a devilish aspect, have the courage to fight with their lives for the happiness of the people and human rights. Politicians who fail to battle injustice and neglect to defend the people's interests are only exploiting them, using them as a steppingstone to get elected. Such politicians have already succumbed to the dark side of power.

"I hope that all Komei-kai members will bravely engage themselves in the struggle to protect human rights."

The Nagoya meeting brimmed with an enthusiastic spirit to clean up and reform the political world. When it was over, Shin'ichi continued long into the night to ponder the insidious nature of authority. He had a feeling that as the Komei-kai gained the support of more and more people throughout Japan, the established political parties would begin putting pressure on the Soka Gakkai, its main supporting body.

Daisaku Ikeda appears in the
novel as Shin'ichi Yamamoto.
The events take place in 1963.