

## **The Trial and Death of Socrates**

*Socrates is one of the most well known philosophers in all of World History. He studied and thought about many things just for the purpose of gaining knowledge about the world around him. He claimed that he was the wisest of the wise because he knew that he did not know everything there was to learn. He made many people angry however and he was brought to trial in what has come to be known as one of the most unfair trials in the history of the world.*

Early one morning in 339 B.C. a quiet group of students gathered in the meeting place where their friend and advisor, Socrates, had stood trial a few week's before. An Athenian jury had sentenced their friend to death, and at sunset a cup of poison would silence him forever.

### **Socrates as Teacher**

Socrates lived in poverty rather than charge his students any money for being with him. Wearing the same clothes every day, he usually walked the streets of Athens in bare feet. He had no wish to buy things, wanting only to own the truth. It was said he raised thousands of questions but answered none of them. He asked questions of everyone he met and forced his student to use their minds to think about things. He never took himself or others too seriously, but his intelligence and sharp tongue- which he used to defend his strong sense of right and wrong- would cost him his life.

### **Troubled times**

Athens surrendered to Sparta at the end of the Peloponnesian war in 404 B.C., and the Spartans forced the Athenians to replace their democratic government with a group of 30 tyrants, 2 of whom had studied and knew Socrates. The tyrants took away valuable property and executed hundreds of Athenian citizens. Although Socrates did not support these rulers, it was well-known that he also disliked democracy.

When the 30 tyrants were forced to leave Athens in 403 B.C. the city's democratic government was brought back to power. Because of his connection to the tyrants and his criticism of democracy, the new rulers felt Socrates was a bad influence, especially since he had made fun of those in power and other high ranking Athenians.

The Athenian rulers, fearing that Socrates' constant criticism and hatred for authority would upset the peace of the city, warned him many times to stop his teaching and his criticism of the government. He refused to do so. Finally, the leaders brought the 70-year old philosopher to trial, accusing him of denying the existence of the gods of Athens. A more serious charge, however, was that he had ruined the youth of Athens by teaching them to disrespect and disobey their parents and those in power.

### **Athenian Trials**

A trial in ancient Athens was very different from a modern day trial. To make sure that there was a quick decision by the courts, each case had to be presented and a decision made in one day. Since there were no judges or lawyers accused people, who could be charged with a crime

and brought to trial by anyone, were expected to defend themselves without a lawyer. Their innocence or guilt rested in the hands of a jury that could range from 101 to 1,000 citizens. (There were always an odd number of jurors to prevent tie votes.) The jury voted by dropping different colored stones, white for innocent, black for guilty, in large jars. The person who brought charges against the person suggested the punishment they should get if that person was found guilty. If he was convicted of the crime the accused also suggested what his punishment should be.

### **The Case of Socrates**

The 501 jurors at Socrates' trial listened as the philosopher's accusers made the argument that he had denied the existence of the gods and that he was an evil influence on the youth of Athens. Knowing that he had little hope of being found innocent, he explained that the real reasons for his trial were rumors that he believed himself to be superior to and smarter than other men. It was true, he said, that the fortuneteller of Delphi had called him the wisest man of all. Socrates did not understand this fortune until he had realized that his wisdom was in admitting that he did not know everything there was to know. Many men in Athens, who called themselves sophists, would never admit that there was something in the world that they did not know because they claimed that they knew the answer to every question. Rather than telling everyone that he thought he knew everything, he claimed that he made his young students see the mistakes in their thinking, which made him enemies.

He continued his defense by saying that he never denied that the gods existed. He had worshipped in the temples many times. He said that the jury should realize that he saw himself as a "gadfly" (a fly that irritates and draws blood), a critic who annoyed the city's leaders by pointing out what was wrong in society. Far from corrupting the youth of Athens, his entire life, he said, was an example of simple living and the search for truth. Socrates told the jury, "convict me or not; but whichever you do, understand that I will never change my ways, not even if I have to die many times.

By a vote of 281 to 220 the jury found Socrates guilty. Since his accusers had asked for the death penalty, Socrates was expected to ask the jury for exile (leaving Athens never to return), which they certainly would have given him. But the old wise man instead shocked the jury by asking for a reward instead of a punishment. He asked them to have the government provide him with free meals for life, an award given to Olympic champions. When the jury became angry, friends begged Socrates to change his mind. Faced with Socrates' refusal to change his mind, the jury voted 361 to 140 in favor of the death penalty. The philosopher did not fear death and told the court, "The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our separate ways- I to die and you to live. Which is better god only knows.

### **Carrying Out the Sentence**

Executions usually took place within 24 hours of a death sentence, but Socrates' death was delayed several weeks. During the weeks of waiting, friends and family visited the condemned man. Some of his wealthier students bribed the officials of the prison to allow Socrates to

escape, but the old man refused. The jury's decision was wrong he said, but the law must be obeyed. To run away would make it seem that he had abandoned his beliefs.

On his last morning alive Socrates' chains were removed and he said goodbye to his weeping wife and children. He spent the rest of the day as he had most others-teaching. But this day, his lesson centered on death. He told the students that all philosophers should look forward to dying. Once the soul was free from the demands of the body it could find true wisdom in the next world.

Although it was usual for the poison to be administered after sunset, Socrates bathed before sunset and then called the jailer to prepare the deadly poison. Socrates drank the hemlock and walked around his cell until his legs grew numb. He told his grieving friends to stop crying like hysterical women, and lay down upon his bed. As the chill of death crept from his legs to his heart, his breathing slowed and then stopped.

### **The Legacy (something left behind for others) of Socrates**

Socrates' teachings were continued by his students, especially Plato, whose writings tell us most of what we know about Socrates. Socrates spent his life examining his own ideas and trying to discover the truth about many things. His contribution became an important part of the tradition of Western Civilization. This tradition reminds us to think for ourselves and to stand up for what we believe is right.

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Socrates is considered a hero?
2. Tell how trials in Ancient Athens were different from modern-day trials?
3. If the jury was wrong in sentencing Socrates to death why did he refuse to escape? **NOTE: he gives two reasons for it.**
4. Socrates' death has been called a suicide. Do you agree or disagree? **EXPLAIN your answer.**
5. Most of our knowledge of Socrates comes to us from one source, his student Plato. Why should this make historians cautious in writing about Socrates?