

PARIS/TOKYO

“I wanted her flesh so badly. I simply wanted to eat her.”

ISSEI SAGAWA INTERVIEW FOLLOWING HIS RELEASE IN JAPAN

ISSEI SAGAWA KOBE CANNIBAL



A Crime That Shocked Two Continents
In June 1981, the Paris police were summoned to the edge of the Bois de Boulogne, where two suitcases had been pulled from a lake by startled bystanders. Inside were the dismembered remains of **Renée Hartevelt**, a Dutch graduate student studying literature at the Sorbonne. Within days, the investigation led to a quiet, diminutive Japanese student living in an affluent Paris suburb: Issei Sagawa, a man whose polite manners and scholarly ambitions seemed profoundly at odds with the horror unfolding in the news. When officers arrived at his apartment, the crime scene stunned even seasoned investigators. They found human tissue in the refrigerator, books stacked neatly against bloodstained walls, and photographs of the victim. The juxtaposition—order beside savagery—underscored the psychological fracture that defined the case.

A Life of Privilege, Alienation, and Obsession
Born in Kobe in 1949, Sagawa grew up in a

wealthy, politically connected family. Physically small and chronically frail, he often described himself as feeling “insignificant,” any sense of value overshadowed by his own stature and by the expectations placed upon him. By adolescence, he developed intrusive fantasies involving violence and cannibalism—desires he later claimed were rooted in feelings of inadequacy. Despite academic promise, he remained socially isolated. In the 1970s, while studying in Japan, he attempted to attack a woman but was stopped before he could harm her. In 1977, Sagawa moved to Paris to pursue a PhD in comparative literature. Professors described him as quiet, bright, and unremarkable—an impression he cultivated deliberately while nurturing dark and deeply disturbing fantasies in his mind.

The Murder of Renée Hartevelt
At the university, Sagawa befriended Hartevelt, a fellow student, admiring her intellect and warmth. On June 11, 1981, he invited her to his apartment for what she believed was a recording session for a poetry project. While



she sat at his desk reading, Sagawa shot her from behind with a hunting rifle. Over the next two days, he mutilated and cannibalized parts of her body, photographing each stage. He then placed her remains in two suitcases and threw them into a lake. However, the suitcases remained partially afloat near the shore—which led to his swift capture.

An Outcome That Sparked Outrage
French psychiatrists deemed Sagawa legally insane and unfit for trial. Rather than face prosecution in France, he was deported to Japan in 1984 with the expectation of continued psychiatric detention. Instead, Japanese doctors soon declared him sane and no longer dangerous, arguing that France’s refusal to hand over case evidence impeded prosecution. Since he could not be tried again for the same crime, Sagawa walked free within months—a decision that ignited widespread anger.

For decades afterward, Sagawa remained a figure of morbid fascination in Japanese media. He wrote books, gave interviews,

and appeared in documentaries, provoking criticism that he profited from a crime that had devastated a family and embarrassed two nations’ judicial systems. He spent his final years in a Tokyo care facility and died in 2022.

Ethical and Legal Controversy
Sagawa’s life after release raised uncomfortable questions about the relationship between mental illness, legal jurisdiction, and media sensationalism. Today, the case is remembered not just for its brutality, but also for the systemic gaps that allowed Sagawa to live freely for decades after committing a murder that shocked the world.

Opposite left and Above left: Sagawa in the custody of the French police after his arrest in Paris on June 15, 1981; **Top, right:** Sagawa was a constant source of fascination for journalists and filmmakers around the world, and he conducted many interviews.