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Carolyn Ashbaugh
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Haymarket Widows

Carolyn Ashbaugh

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The Haymarket trial and its aftermath brought tragedy and grief into the lives of women whose husbands, brothers, sons and comrades were imprisoned and executed. These family members and friends of the men who stood trial for a murder which none of them committed suffered immeasurable loss. Although the personal tribulations of many of these women have not been recorded, it is clear that they all suffered the emotional loss of a partner, close relative or friend, as well as the financial loss of that person's income.

The workers' movement helped support the widows and children of the Haymarket martyrs through the Pioneer Aid and Support Association, founded on December 15, 1887. The widows received \$8 a week plus \$2 each for the first two children and \$1 for a third. Anarchists and sympathizers from all over the world contributed to this fund; a single rally in Havana, Cuba, raised nearly \$1000 for the purpose. The Association also collected funds to erect the Haymarket Martyrs Monument at Waldheirn (Forest Home) Cemetery.

But for the martyrs' female family members-Lucy Parsons, Nina van Zandt Spies, Christine Spies, Gretchen Spies, Maria Schwab,

Johanna Fischer, Elise Friedel, Mrs. Engel, Mary Engel and Mrs. Fielden-life would never be the same.

Meta Neebe, wife of defendant Oscar Neebe, died during the ordeal. At her death in March 1887 she was only in her mid-thirties, and many-including her doctor-attributed her death to the stress and anxiety caused by her husband's incarceration and trial. The Chicago Tribune for March 13, 1887 reported that her funeral "called out more sympathy and excited more interest than any event that has occurred in the neighborhood since it was reclaimed from the prairie," and added that it was, indeed, "in some respects, the most notable funeral demonstration Chicago has ever seen."

Mrs. Fielden was described as someone who had never taken a streetcar downtown by herself prior to her husband's arrest; she had major adjustments to make during Samuel Fielden's seven-year imprisonment. Johanna Fischer was left with three small children to support after Adolph Fischer's execution. Mary Engel and her mother lost father and husband, George Engel. Mrs. Engel continued to run her husband's toy-shop after his arrest. The Engels may have fared better economically than several of the other families, as the women were able to operate the family business.

Maria Schnaubelt Schwab, herself an active member of the International Working People's Association, would eventually lose her husband to tuberculosis contracted in the Illinois State Penitentiary at Joliet, despite Michael Schwab's pardon and release by Governor Altgeld in 1893. As a result of the Haymarket events, she did not see her brother Rudolph Schnaubelt for another thirty years, when she visited him in Argentina.

Little has been written on the later activity of the Haymarket widows, sisters and friends, but we do know that several of them remained active, in one way or another, in the anarchist movement.

In 1888 Christine Spies, August Spies' mother, published a 182-page compilation, *Reminiscenzen von Aug. Spies*. The last page announced the availability of the English-language Autobiography of

“Coxey’s Army” of the unemployed on their ill-fated March on Washington. In 1905 she helped found the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in Chicago. Later she took part in William Z. Foster’s short-lived Syndicalist League of North America, though she stayed on good terms with her Wobbly friends, and continued to write for the IWW press.

A featured speaker at the anarchist Free Society Forums in Chicago in the 1920s, she also appeared at forums and meetings organized by the IWW, the Proletarian Party and, especially in later years, the Communist Party, as well as at the bohemian Dill Pickle Club. For many years she was a familiar sight at workers’ demonstrations and on Chicago street-corners, where she sold her *Life of Albert R. Parsons*, *Famous Speeches of the Chicago Martyrs* and other anarchist and revolutionary publications.

Especially active in labor defense, she wrote and spoke on behalf of Tom Mooney, Sacco and Vanzetti, the Gastonia and Scottsboro defendants. In one of her last public appearances, in 1941, she addressed strikers at International Harvester, successor to the old McCormick Reaper Works where the police shooting of workers had resulted in the fateful Haymarket meeting in May 1886.

Lucy Parsons and her companion George Markstall, with whom she had lived since around 1910, died in a fire at their Chicago home in March 1942. They were cremated and their ashes buried together in a grave close to the Haymarket Martyrs Monument at Waldheim.

August Spies, published by Nina van Zandt Spies, and listed mailing addresses for two leading anarchist publications: *The Alarm* and Johann Most’s *Freiheit*.

In May 1901 the Chicago anarchist weekly *Free Society* urged its readers to contribute to a fund recently started by the Central Labor Union to help support Christine Spies, who was then 70 years old. The June 16th issue reported that the paper had collected over ninety dollars for this purpose, and noted that several CLU members had volunteered to provide for her.

Lucy Parsons’ paper *Freedom* (“A Revolutionary Anarchist-Communist Monthly”) announced in April 1892 the marriage of the “amiable and accomplished” Gretchen Spies, “sister of our martyred comrade,” to Comrade Robert Steiner, “well known throughout the country as an active worker in the cause of Labor .. now connected with the editorial staff of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* of this city ... *Freedom* wishes the newly married couple all the happiness possible in the marriage relation under present social arrangements.”

Capt. Schaack, in his *Anarchy and Anarchists*, reported that detectives later noted Louis Lingg’s friend Elise Friedel at “several dances,” but whether these were anarchist events is not clear.

Nina van Zandt’s life changed dramatically with her interest in the Chicago trial and her marriage to the imprisoned August Spies in January, 1887. A Vassar graduate and the only child of wealthy Chicago parents, she followed the trial closely and soon realized that the defendants were honest, principled individuals dedicated to the betterment of humanity, rather than the depraved monsters guilty of heinous crimes depicted in the press. She wrote an article on the case for the *Chicago Knights of Labor*, later reprinted in her edition of August Spies’ *Autobiography*, to which she also contributed a preface.

In later years Nina Spies was a colorful and familiar figure at the Hobo College and IWW meetings in Chicago, as well as at May Day and Eleventh of November commemorations. She eked out

a marginal existence running a rooming-house on Halsted Street, and she took in stray dogs and cats as well as homeless persons. After Haymarket, her life ran a different course than expected of a graduate of a prestigious women's college. Her funeral in 1936 was a well-attended gathering of activists representing virtually every current of American radicalism.

The best known of the women immediately connected with the Haymarket events was the far-from-wealthy Lucy Parsons, who had made her own reputation as a persuasive and dramatic radical speaker prior to the Haymarket police riot. The Chicago police considered her "more dangerous than a thousand rioters" and broke up her meetings for thirty years after Haymarket. The execution of her husband and comrades made her more determined than ever to go on with the struggle, yet it left her with a legacy of personal tragedy and set the stage for further tragedy.

Lucy Parsons gave herself wholly to the movement and avoided discussion of her personal life. Albert Parsons' death left her a widow with two small children; poverty had already forced her to move from the apartment the family had occupied on Indiana Street to a third floor walk-up flat on Milwaukee Avenue. As the executions approached, she worked her fingers to the bone sewing to support herself and her children, and she also worked herself to exhaustion selling pamphlets about the case and trying to avoid police harassment. Yet she adamantly refused to encourage her husband to petition to the governor for clemency. Albert Parsons had said, "If the State of Illinois can afford to hang an innocent man, I can afford to hang." Lucy and Albert held to this position; they were devoted to truth and justice at all cost.

Lulu Eda's death two years after her father's was another devastating blow. Albert Parsons Jr. can be seen as the final casualty of Haymarket, the victim of incarceration in the Illinois Northern Hospital for the Insane from 1899 until his death from tuberculosis in 1919. His fate was in the unfolding of the Haymarket tragedy and the characters of its strong-willed participants: his martyred

father, and his mother, determined to bring up a son to take his father's place in the social struggle.

Lucy Parsons' impoverishment in the years following Albert's execution and her experience with persecution and abuse for her beliefs may have in part led her into a relationship with the young anarchist Martin Lacher, a printer who helped her publish *The Life of Albert R. Parsons* in 1889. The two lived in the country with two large watchdogs to protect them. Lucy's personal life, no less than her political life, was under constant surveillance, and the protection afforded by her young comrade and the dogs may have kept the police at bay. Ironically, her relationship with Lacher ended in police court in 1891 where she sought protection against his abuse of her as a woman and former lover.

In the years after Haymarket the Chicago police systematically denied Lucy Parsons her first-amendment rights. As soon as she began to speak at a meeting she was arrested, booked for disorderly conduct and released, an interruption long enough to disrupt the meeting program. Graham Taylor of the Chicago Commons settlement-house first met Lucy at the northside Turner Hall on November 11, 1896, nine years after the executions. The police arrested her just as she began to address the crowd of 1200 people.

When Lucy appeared at a free-floor meeting at the Commons several years later, it was unanimously voted that she should speak the following Tuesday. "Taken by surprise and not a little embarrassed," Graham Taylor related, "I offered no objection to the proposal, which I knew would be regarded as a supreme test of the freedom of the floor." As the meeting was private, Lucy was able to speak without being arrested. This meeting, near the turn of the century, was a rare occasion for Lucy Parsons to be heard in Chicago—a speech by her was indeed the supreme test of free speech!

Lucy Parsons remained an ardent revolutionist to the end of her life, and she was an important influence on innumerable later activists in the radical labor movement. In 1894 she addressed