

A Sketch of Alexander Berkman

Emma Goldman

1922

To write a biographic sketch of even an ordinary man within the limited space at my disposal would be difficult. But to write about one whose personality is so complex and whose life so replete with events as that of Alexander Berkman, is almost an insurmountable task. To do justice to such a rich and colorful subject one must not be so limited by space as I am. Above all, one should be removed, in point of time and distance, from the life to be portrayed. Which is not the case in the present instance.

I shall therefore not attempt a biography at the present time. I shall merely joint down a few outstanding features in the life and activities of our Comrade, which may serve as an introduction to something bigger yet to be written. Perhaps it may lead the reader to acquaint himself with Alexander Berkman's own story, the "Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist"¹, which portrays the various phases of his life and his ideal much more forcefully and intimately than any biographer could do.

That this truly great work has not yet been translated and published into other languages is a reflection on the European anarchists²): they adhere too religiously to the old standard works, the works treating of Anarchist theories. They should realise that the reactions of a human life to those theories, the struggle travail of the human spirit, are more vital and significant than the theories themselves. "Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist" speaks more powerfully than the theory and the ideal for which Alexander Berkman has lived, fought and suffered all his life.

Pre-revolutionary Russia is so rich in remarkable revolutionary characters that one would be at a loss to single out the most heroic figure in the revolutionary movement of that country. Russia has been a most fertile soil for the growth of revolutionary thought and feeling. The best flower which grew out of that soil -- Russian revolutionary youth -- stands unique in the annals of revolutionary history.

Alexander Berkman sprang from that soil. He was born in Vilno, in November, 1870, at a period rich in revolutionary ideas and activity. For it was in the epoch between the late sixties and

¹ *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* was published in 1912 by Mother Earth Publishing Association (New York). The Yiddish edition, *Gefengnis-erinerungen fun an anarkhist*, was published in two volumes in 1920 and 1921 by M. E. Fitzgerald (New York). – JK/AAP

² The exception, I am glad to state, is our Austrian comrade Rudolf Grossmann, who had begun to publish Alexander Berkman's "Prison Memoirs" in German, before the war. The latter interfered with the work, but the German translation is now being published in the Vienna Anarchist weekly, "Erkenntnis und Befreiung". – A Yiddish

the early eighties that Russia was shaken to her foundations by the heroism and sacrifice of her revolutionary martyrs. Alexander Berkman, sensitive and idealistic, could not escape the influence of that time, the period when everything in Russian was being torn from its old moorings, and the seeds for a new conception of human society -- political, religious, moral, economic and social -- were being planted. Thus, for instance, we find Alexander Berkman at the age of twelve writing a tract denying the existence of god; at fifteen he is a member a group engaged in the treasonable occupation of studying revolutionary literature. An additional factor in molding young Alexander's mind and character may have been the tragic life of his beloved uncle Maxim, exiled to Siberia for revolutionary activity. But even without the inspiration of that heroic figure in his otherwise bourgeois family, the intense youth would have, no doubt, consecrated himself to the cause of humanity. The creative revolutionary, like the true artist, is conditioned more by the impelling forces within him than by outer influences. Alexander Berkman's whole life is proof of it.

Because of his rebellious spirit he was expelled from the Gymnasium, and given a "wolf's passport", which closed every profession to him. He migrated to America which was, at that time, most barren ground for revolutionary ideas. It was early in 1888, only a few months after the judicial murder of the Chicago Anarchists, that Alexander Berkman arrived in the United States. While yet in Russia he had learned that the crime of Eleventh of November, 1887. He relates in his book how he came across the name of John Most and the Chicago martyrs in the little Kovno library. Still, young Alexander came to America with faith in her democratic liberties. It was not long, however, before he discovered the sham of American political freedom and economic opportunity. Had not the will to the Ideal been strong in Berkman, the American melting pot would have absorbed him as it has absorbed the great majority of the European influx. The intense struggle for existence and the thousand pitfalls for the man bent on material success would have monopolised his whole energy and time. Many Russian revolutionaries who came to America to seek refugee have been swallowed completely by the wild scramble for wealth and its "blessings".

Not so Alexander Berkman. He is a creative spirit whose dominant trait is to infuse new life, to give new forms, no matter how hard the struggle, how great the price to be paid. It is that trait, chiefly, which has made Alexander Berkman the outstanding figure in the revolutionary and Anarchist movement of the United States. It was not very long before he began to break the barren ground in that country. First in the Yiddish-speaking circles, in the group called Pioneers of Liberty: Berkman became one of its most active and devoted spirits. Later in the German anarchist movement, led at the time by John Most. But all that, it would seem, was merely preparatory to the supreme task toward which he was being borne by the irresistible force of his revolutionary reactions to the crying evils in our social make-up.

It was in the year 1892, at the time of the Homestead Steel strike -- the first and greatest life-and-death struggle of the steelworkers in the state of Pennsylvania against their feudal lord, Andrew Carnegie. It aroused the whole country to the slavery and exploitation in the steel industry. That great struggle, powerfully described by Alexander Berkman in his "Prison Memoirs", was accompanied by the importation to Homestead of Pinkerton thugs (the favorite detective and police defenders of the American plutocracy of thirty years ago) who killed eleven strikers, among them a child of ten. The person responsible for that crime was H. C. Frick, the representative and

edition has also been published in America.

business partner of Carnegie. The brutal attitude of Frick toward the strikers, his public declaration that he would rather see every striker killed than concede a single demand, and the final murder on July 6, 1892, of eleven unarmed workingmen, roused America to indignation. Even the conservative press denounced Frick in the sharpest terms. Throughout America the workers gave vent to their feelings in protest meetings. But there was only one man who translated the wrath of the toilers into a heroic act. The man was Alexander Berkman. On the 22nd of July, 1892, he entered the office of H. C. Frick and attempted his life. Three bullets lodged in Frick's body, but he survived. Berkman received a prison sentence of 22 years, although his act -- according to the laws of Pennsylvania -- called only for 7 years. To give our Comrade such a cruel sentence, six charges were framed up against him: because he dared to strike at the very heart of the American industrial plutocracy.

It was the *first* Anarchist act of economic terror in the United States, and Alexander Berkman had to pay dearly for his revolutionary protest. He sent fourteen years of his life in the worst of prison hells, the Allegheny Penitentiary in Pennsylvania. What those years meant he has portrayed with a master hand in his "Prison Memoirs". Here it will suffice to say that while Berkman went through every imaginable torture of body and mind our Christian civilisation has devised to maim and break the social protestant, yet he emerged from his living tomb more than ever before convinced of the truth and beauty of his Ideal -- Anarchism. But one can not be shut away from life for fourteen long years and then take root easily again. Alexander Berkman, upon his liberation, threw himself into the revolutionary activities of America with the same ardor and passion as of yore. But his long prison life and the thought of the unfortunate victims he had left behind made the process of adjustment to the new surroundings a daily Golgotha.

Six years Alexander Berkman continued the supreme struggle to get back to life again. During that time he was not idle. He edited the "Mother Earth" magazine, the publication which I began in March, 1906. He lectured, he participated in strikes; he was one of the organisers of the Ferrer School, in New York, and one of its first teachers. He became the inspiration of every important Anarchist activity in America. But it not until Alexander Berkman had written his "Prison Memoirs", and his work before him in living form, that the black shadow of the dreadful prison year finally lifted. The book had finally freed him: he could once more feel the warmth of new life.

From then on until the present day Alexander Berkman has been intensely at work, organising, inspiring, creating. In 1914 he is the dominant figure in the unemployment movement, in New York. He helps to organise the wave of indignation which swept the country at the time of the Ludlow (Colorado) miners strike: when men, women and children had been shot and burned alive by the hired thugs of Rockefeller. Together with the New York comrades he carried the fight into the very citadel of the feudal lord, the Tarrytown home of the American king of plutocrats. Later on, owing to Alexander Berkman's great ability as organiser and his popularity with the rank and file of the workers, he could defy the police prohibition and arrange the memorable public funeral of the three comrades killed in the explosion of July 4th, 1914, in New York. The police came on the scene -- Union Square, that historic meeting place -- ready to do slaughter. But the presence of twenty thousand inspired and determined workers overawed them. They dared not carry out their murderous plan.

All through the summer of 1914 Alexander Berkman is the moving spirit of the anti-militarist movement. By means of "Mother Earth" magazine, numerous meetings, and hundred thousands of leaflets, the crime of militarism is brought to the attention of the American masses and our efforts find an echo in the hearts and minds of many workers.

In 1915 Alexander Berkman devotes himself to the campaign in behalf of Caplan and Schmidt, on trial for participation in the famous activities of the MacNamara brothers. He covers the greater part of America agitating in their cause, organises defense committees, raises funds, and is everywhere the center and the spirit of the work. Upon reaching San Francisco Alexander Berkman decides to publish there a revolutionary labor paper, the "Blast", which he continues for eighteen months and by means of it carries the ideas of Anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism to the workers in the labor organisations. Then, in July, 1916, there comes the Preparedness Parade explosion in San Francisco, followed by the arrest of five militant labor men -- Thomas Mooney, Billings, Mrs. Mooney, Weinberg, and Nolan. The usual panic, after such an event, takes hold of the whole labor movement on the Pacific coast. The labor leaders, cowardly at best, dare not come to the rescue of their arrested brothers. The Socialists, too, refuse aid. Mooney, Billings, et al. are left without defense, forsaken by their co-workers and so-called friends. As usual, the anarchists step into the breach. Alexander Berkman concentrates all his energies on a country-wide campaign in behalf of the victims of the capitalist conspiracy against labor. He tours the country, and visits every important labor organisation between San Francisco and New York. He knocks at every door, and spends days and nights with the more militant labor leaders to convince them of the innocence of Mooney and his comrades. In short, Alexander Berkman becomes the Zola of the American Dreyfus case. His *j'accuse!* is heard and taken up in every land. It saves the lives of Mooney and Billings. The intensive agitation made the whole country realise the dastardly crime of the State of California, engineered by the Chamber of Commerce. Had Alexander Berkman been able to continue that campaign, Mooney and Billings might have been at liberty ere this. But America's entry into the great war made it imperative for him and all other Anarchists of America to concentrate their efforts on the anti-war campaign. The Mooney case remained in the hands of labor politicians, with the result that Mooney and Billings are still in prison.

Then came the anti-conscription activities. Begun by our little group in New York, it spread quickly throughout the country. The American people did not want war and did not vote for it. Many rebelled against military conscription. Our work therefore met with great enthusiasm. The military and patriotic cliques realised the danger of that campaign. They used drastic measures. Alexander Berkman, myself, and others were arrested, tried and condemned to two years in the penitentiary, ten thousand dollars fine, each, and deportation at the end. In the case of Alexander Berkman plutocracy demanded more. It wanted to hang him. The California Chamber of Commerce had not forgiven him for his activities in the Mooney case. His efforts and energy had robbed them of their intended prey. But for Alexander Berkman they could have gotten rid of the five hated labor men. He had spoiled that blood feast. They meant to make him pay for it.

Alexander Berkman was then in New York. To get him to San Francisco was a problem. Once there, his life would be forfeited. The arrest and conviction of our Comrade for anti-war work happened just then. It was exactly what the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce needed. It was the right psychologic moment. An indictment of Berkman for alleged complicity in the San Francisco bomb explosion was easily obtained, and officers were dispatched to the State of New York to secure the extradition of Alexander Berkman. But the California henchmen had reckoned without the militant labor movement of New York. A million organised workers rose to his defense. They knew and loved our Comrade as an unflinching and courageous spirit who had been continuously fighting in their behalf. The labor bodies sent strong delegations to the Governor of the State of New York to protest the extradition of Alexander Berkman. At the same time the dan-

ger which Berkman faced became known in Russia. The revolutionary workers of Petrograd and the Kronstadt sailors organised demonstrations threatening the life of the American ambassador to Russia, Mr. Francis. The Federal Government at Washington was apprised of the situation. It feared that Alexander Berkman's extradition to California, would result in reprisals against its ambassador. The California demand for the extradition of Alexander Berkman was refused. Instead our comrade was taken to the Federal penitentiary at Atlanta, state of Georgia, to serve two years for his activities against the war.

After reading Alexander Berkman's story of the fearful conditions at the Allegheny penitentiary, one comes to the conclusion that man's inhumanity to man can go no further. But there seems to be no limit to the brutalities of the human beast. The Atlanta prison proved even more terrible than the one in Pennsylvania. After two years in that prison Alexander Berkman came out physically broken. He was compelled to undergo an operation, and when he was ordered to be deported few of his friends believed he could survive the hardships of the enforced journey. But the will to life which helped our Comrade to outlive the black past seems indestructible. And more than the will to life is his strong humanity, which has ever made him forget his personal suffering and caused him to devote himself to others. In the Western penitentiary of Pennsylvania it was the care of his fellows in misery: Alexander Berkman was their friend, adviser, correspondent, collector of funds to secure their release and to help them start anew in life. It was the same in the Atlanta prison. And it was again the care of his comrades -- two hundred and forty-five deportees on the floating prison, the "Buford" -- which made Berkman forget his own ills and even helped him to regain his former strength. Then, too, it was the passionate faith in the inspiring possibilities of Revolutionary Russia which infused new life in Alexander Berkman -- indeed, in all of us.

Of his Russian experiences Comrade Berkman will no doubt write himself. The pages which follow present a general view of the Russian Revolution, in its most vital phases, pointing out the main causes of its defeat. May the reader learn the great lesson it holds for the revolutionary movement of the world.

This sketch of the life of Alexander Berkman does not pretend to be anything more than an outline. If it will help to bring him nearer to his comrades in foreign lands and to the workers in Europe, I shall feel this attempt worth while. Above all, I hope that it may inspire our comrades to publish the "Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist" in the language of their country. For no biography -- much less a sketch -- can convey the personality of the man so clearly and vividly as the book of Alexander Berkman himself.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Emma Goldman
A Sketch of Alexander Berkman
1922

Retrieved on 28 August 2018 from
http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/goldman/berkman.html
from *The Russian Tragedy (A Review and An Outlook)* (Berlin: Der Syndikalist, 1922)

usa.anarchistlibraries.net