

# **My First Years in Philadelphia**

Joseph J. Cohen

1945



Members of the Philadelphia branch of The Workmen's Circle (*Arbeter Ring*) in 1938. Cohen was a founding member.

In the spring of 1903, I found myself in Philadelphia. I stumbled into a conservative circle, one nourished by Kasriel Sarasohn's *Tageblat*, which I found repugnant from the very first day.<sup>1</sup>

Some twelve or thirteen years earlier, I had belonged to a revolutionary circle in Minsk for a couple of years. I had become acquainted with the idea of socialism as it was understood in Russia in those years. I had then followed, from the backwater of Polesia, the rise and development of the Bund, and the growth of the revolutionary movement among the Jewish masses.<sup>2</sup>

Three works, quite different in character, strongly influenced my development in those early years. Kalman Schulman's account of the Paris Commune in his ten-volume world history (*Divre yeme 'olam*) elicited in me, still a youngster in the great Mir yeshiva, the highest sympathy for the Communards.<sup>3</sup> The more the author sought to portray them in a bad light, the more appealing they became to me. I felt a close kinship with their yearnings and personal compassion for their martyrdom.

I then stumbled upon, in the woods of Polesia, a bound volume of *Ha-Melits* from 1881, which provided all the details of the historic trial against Zhelyabov, Perovskaya, and their comrades, for assassinating Tsar Alexander II.<sup>4</sup> The newspaper, as one can imagine, portrayed the accused in the worst possible light—"tsare ubytsi," a mere trifle!<sup>5</sup> People who dared raise their hand against the God-anointed ruler of all Russians! My sympathies, however, were absolutely on their side. I followed the proceedings with greatest interest, swallowed every word, and lived through all their tribulations.

The third work was, in a way, even more interesting: a bound old supplement to the *Novoe vremya*, which serialized Edward Bellamy's great utopian work, *Looking Backward*.<sup>6</sup> This had happened before *Novoe vremya* became a dogged reactionary and antisemitic newspaper. I came

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<sup>1</sup> Kasriel Sarasohn (1835–1905) was a pioneering Yiddish newspaper publisher in New York. Having immigrated to the United States from Poland in 1866, he launched both the first Yiddish weekly in America (*Di nyu yorker yidische tsaytung*, 1872) and New York's first Yiddish daily (*Yidishes tageblat*). See Bernard Martin, "Yiddish Literature in the United States," *American Jewish Archives* 33:2 (November, 1981), 184–209; Tony Michels, "'Speaking to Moyshe': The early socialist Yiddish press and its readers," *Jewish History* 14 (2000), 51–82.

<sup>2</sup> The General Jewish Workers' Bund of Lithuania, Poland, and Russia (*Der algemeyner yidisher arbeter bund fun Lite, Poyln, un Rusland*). Founded in 1897 in Vilna (today, Vilnius, Lithuania), the party was an influential part of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party and the 1905 revolution, and it became the largest Jewish political party in Eastern Europe before the revolution of 1917. See Daniel Blatman, "Bund," in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (<http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bund>).

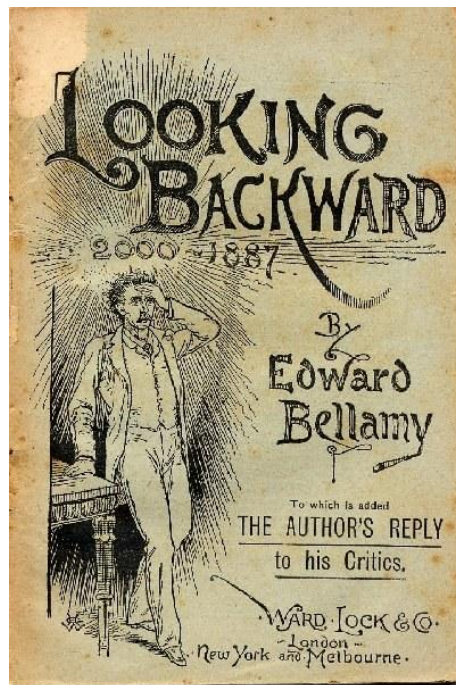
<sup>3</sup> Kalman Schulman (1819–1899) was a maskil from Belarus who eventually settled in Vilna. Among his many works—including Hebrew translations of major works of Josephus—is the general history of the world, based on *Allgemeine Weltgeschichte* by Georg Weber, published under the above title. See Avner Holtzman, "Schulman, Kalman," in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* ([http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Schulman\\_Kalman](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Schulman_Kalman)).

<sup>4</sup> *Ha-Melits* was the first Hebrew weekly in the Russian Empire, the mouthpiece of the Russian maskilim. See Avner Holtzman, "Melits, Ha-," in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* ([http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Melits\\_Ha-](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Melits_Ha-)). Alexander II was assassinated on March 1, 1881, by members of the radical left organization *Narodnaya volya* (Will of the People); Andrei Ivanovich Zhelyabov (1851–1881) and Sophia Lvovna Perovskaya (1853–1881), along with other members of *Narodnaya volya*, were put on trial and executed as organizers. See Edvard Radzinsky, *Alexander II: The Last Great Tsar* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Russian, *regicides*.

<sup>6</sup> *Novoe vremya* ("The New Time") was a Russian daily published from 1860 to 1917. Originally liberal, it became a reactionary and antisemitic publication. See Radzinsky, *Alexander II*, 2006. Edward Bellamy (1850–1898) was an American socialist whose groundbreaking utopian novel, *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*, was published in 1887. In *Looking Backward*, Bellamy imagined a postcapitalist society based on solidarity and egalitarianism. See Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*, ed. Alex MacDonald (Buffalo: Broadview Press, 2003).

across the supplement in the mid-1890s; Bellamy's critique of the current order in the foreword, and his example of people harnessed into a carriage, had a violent effect on me.



I spent the last several years before coming over to America in the army in Grodno, where I had a good opportunity to read and study the best Russian classics for days and nights on end at the local library. I even succeeded in organizing a revolutionary circle in the army, about which I will have a little more to say at a later occasion.

Here I merely wish to point out that at the time of my arrival in Philadelphia in the spring of 1903, I was well acquainted with socialism. I considered myself a socialist and a revolutionary. Of anarchism I knew nothing—I had never even encountered the word. A few years before, I had read several articles by Samuel Hirsch Setzer in *Ha-Dor*, I think, about Stirner's teachings, but his extreme individualism, even egoism, found no deep resonance in my heart.<sup>7</sup>

The reactionary spiritual circle into which I had fallen shocked me profoundly. I could not bring myself to touch the *Tageblatt*, and I did not find in the *Forverts* what I expected to be published in a socialist newspaper, either.<sup>8</sup>

Soon thereafter, news reached these shores of the savage pogrom in Kishinev.<sup>9</sup> Jewish newspapers were full of horrible accounts. It became pretty obvious that the *Forverts* and the *Tageblatt* were competing with one another in scratching the deep wounds of the people in order to win more readership. *Forverts* won the race;<sup>10</sup> it was actually at this point that it began its phenomenal rise, which no other Jewish newspaper could ever match. But in my eyes this made it even more obnoxious than Sarasohn's overtly nationalist rag.

After the assassination of President McKinley in 1901 and the attempted murder of Voltairine de Cleyre in 1902, the anarchist movement in Philadelphia was all but abandoned.<sup>11</sup> C. Weinberg was busy developing the cooperative store on South Street, as well as the communist house, in which a number of young comrades lived—B. Axler and Y. Katz among them—and in which they were saving money and dreaming of an agricultural communist colony.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Samuel Hirsch Setzer (1882–1962) was an American Jewish journalist, originally from Poland, who wrote in Yiddish and Hebrew. *Ha-Dor* was an elitist weekly in Warsaw, which folded a mere three years after its founding in 1901. See Avner Holtzman, "Dor, Ha-" in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* ([http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Dor\\_Ha-](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Dor_Ha-)). Max Stirner (1804–1856) was a German thinker whose work, *The Ego and Its Own* (1844), is considered an early foundation of anarchist thought. See "Max Stirner," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/max-stirner/>).

<sup>8</sup> *Forverts* began as a Yiddish daily newspaper published in New York since 1897 and achieved unrivaled influence among the Yiddish-speaking masses in New York in the early twentieth century. See Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> The pogrom in Kishinev was a violent anti-Jewish popular riot that took place over three days in early April 1903. About fifty Jews were murdered, with many hundreds wounded, and much Jewish property destroyed. See Wolf Moskovich, "Kishinev," in *The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (<http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Kishinev>).

<sup>10</sup> The word "race" appears in English in the original; Cohen uses many Anglicisms throughout his writing.

<sup>11</sup> President William McKinley was shot in Buffalo, New York, on September 6, 1901, by Leon Czolgosz, a self-proclaimed anarchist. McKinley succumbed to his wounds eight days later, and Czolgosz was put on trial and executed. See Scott Miller, *The President and the Assassin: McKinley, Terror, and Empire at the Dawn of the American Century* (New York: Random House, 2011). Voltairine de Cleyre (1866–1912) was an American feminist and anarchist. She was a well-known activist, writer, and orator on many topics, including female sexuality, the institution of marriage, and opposition to the state. Between 1889 and 1910, she lived and worked in Philadelphia. On December 19, 1902, one of her former students attempted to assassinate her; de Cleyre survived. See Paul Avrich, *An American Anarchist: The Life of Voltairine de Cleyre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> Chaim Weinberg (1861–1939) was one of the most important activists in the Jewish labor movement, and one of the earliest advocates, in Yiddish, of workers' cooperatives. Weinberg was one of Cohen's closest collaborators in the cooperative movement; in his memoirs, however, Weinberg never mentions Cohen, due to their falling-out in the 1930s. See Chaim Leib Weinberg, *Forty Years in the Struggle: The Memoirs of a Jewish Anarchist* (Duluth: Litwin Books,

A group called *Frayhayt* (Freedom), in which L. Landau (A. Voliner) was the secretary and leading activist, tried to do some anarchist educational work that year. They were not successful in their efforts. Their rallies and lectures drew no audience. It is clear from the ads in the *Fraye arbeter shtime* that the group had no confidence in its own work.<sup>13</sup>

That first year, I worked hard during the day as a laborer in the Building Supplies Warehouse, in which almost all skilled workers were Germans, professionals, and where one worked only eight hours. In the evenings, I learned the craft of cigar making at Baron de Hirsch School on Tenth and Carpenter.<sup>14</sup> I spent the rest of my time traveling to and from work. In the few free days I had, I was busy learning English. I simply had no time for any social activities.

This, however, could not last long. My urge to be with people, to start “doing something,” was very strong. One day, I came across a handbill announcing a meeting of the cooperative society on South Street. This got me very interested. I went to the meeting at the appointed hour, found there an intelligent group of people, and became a member myself, having paid five dollars from my meager earnings.

I gradually became familiar with the activities of the society and got to know its activists and leaders, chiefly their head, C. Weinberg. He took me under his wing; he would spend every free minute before and after the meetings with me. He introduced me to all of his activities in the anarchist movement. It is from him that I learned the history of our movement, its glorious activity among the workers, and the great ideal toward which anarchists strive. Under his influence, and with the help of the *Fraye arbeter shtime*, I gradually turned to anarchism and began dedicating more and more time to the study of anarchist literature.

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2008). On the “communist house,” better known as the cooperative house, see Weinberg, *Forty Years in the Struggle*, 65–69. For Benjamin Axler and all other lesser anarchist personalities henceforth, consult Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), and Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> *Fraye arbeter shtime* (*The Free Voice of Labor*) was the Yiddish anarchist newspaper that was published from 1890 until 1977. See Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*.

<sup>14</sup> The Baron de Hirsch Fund supported, among other causes, the establishment of Jewish agricultural societies. In the late 1890s, The Hebrew Education Society of Philadelphia allowed the Baron de Hirsch Fund and several other Jewish organizations the free use of its building on the southwest corner of Tenth and Carpenter Streets, known as “Hebrew School No. 1” or “Touro Hall.” See *Fifty Years of Work of the Hebrew Education Society* (Philadelphia, 1898).



Masthead of the *Fraye Arbeter Shtime* (the Free Voice of Labor), the longest running Yiddish language anarchist periodical.



The cooperative store, which sold hats and shoes, was already going downhill. Workers did not buy those items more than once a year, and thus had almost no connection to the enterprise. The cooperative bakery, which had started a little earlier, was already dead. With great enthusiasm, Weinberg would talk about the grand parade they had organized for the opening of the bakery, in which thousands of people took part, including all of the Jewish unions and associations. Donning clean white aprons, the bakers marched at the front, carrying on their float a challah the size of a house. Other unions marched behind them with bands playing. Money was collected in large bedsheets passed among the spectators, and it seemed like a mountain; but when the copper coins were counted, it turned out that the sum was not even enough to cover the expenses of the parade.

In one respect, the bakery did accomplish its goal: the strike and lockout that gave birth to it were settled soon thereafter. Only then did trouble in the establishment itself begin. Weinberg himself became the manager of the bakery; he was a cigar maker and did not have the slightest clue about the baking business. The workers' skills were not the best; and beyond that, being members of the cooperative, the workers considered themselves owners of the enterprise, so nobody could tell them when and how to work. Their baked goods constantly arrived late, and were not always as good as customers had come to expect. The result was inevitable: after several months of hardship, the enterprise had to be given up and debts paid off.

In the shoe and hat store, things went the same way. The first manager was comrade Edelstein, also a cigar maker, an anarchist-nationalist, one of the founders of Po'ale Tsiyon.<sup>15</sup> He was a good orator, but without any experience in business matters. When he got into his role a little bit, he was removed, and another inexperienced man was installed, comrade Sokolov. In addition to the manager, the store's location was changed as well: the business was moved to Fifth and South, a neighborhood in which private shops had done well, but which was not suitable for a cooperative store. Private shop owners in that area had made their profits by swindling the neighborhood blacks [*nigers*]<sup>16</sup>—a source of income of which a cooperative business could not avail itself. On the occasion of the move to their new place, another great parade was organized, led by Joseph Barondes on a white horse. Everything was done enthusiastically and on a grand scale, but to no avail.

Incidentally, Edelstein, the previous manager of the store, opened his own shoe shop on Second Street, in the cooperative's old location, and did well. He was a highly gifted man and an interesting personality. He advocated the forging of a worldwide Jewish youth movement that would demand a homeland for the Jews and back this demand with terrorist acts. An early death, the result of a bathtub accident, cut short his dreams and plans.

Our movement was shaken up at that time by the arrest of John Turner, the English anarchist who had come here for a short lecture tour.<sup>16</sup> In London, Turner was an organizer, and the secretary of the Shop Assistants' (Clerks') Union. Like many others, he was drawn to anarchism after the Chicago tragedy of 1887.<sup>17</sup> In the 1890s, he had visited America and given lectures in

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<sup>15</sup> Po'ale Tsiyon is a Labor Zionist party, founded in 1906 in Russia by Ber Borokhov, though it was formed by the joining of many existing Labor Zionist groups. See Samuel Kassow, "Po'ale Tsiyon," *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* ([http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Poale\\_Tsiyon](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Poale_Tsiyon))

<sup>16</sup> John Turner (1865–1934) was an English anarchist, the founder of Shop Assistants' Union, and the first person deported from the United States under the 1903 Immigration Act, also known as the Anarchist Exclusion Act. See John Chalberg, *Emma Goldman: American Individualist* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> On May 4, 1886, while the police were dispersing a massive but peaceful workers' rally in support of the eight-hour workday at Haymarket Square in Chicago, someone threw a bomb, which, along with the ensuing mayhem, killed

all major cities without any trouble. Now, under the new anti-anarchist law, he was arrested at his first appearance in New York.<sup>18</sup> This brought into existence a Free Speech League, joined by a large number of liberals who managed, with great difficulty, to have him released on bail until his case was reviewed before the highest court in the land.<sup>19</sup> He visited Philadelphia, where he addressed a huge crowd and made a wonderful impression. He also gave talks in many other cities and elicited great interest in the question of free speech and the roadblocks that legislators had put down in order to prevent foreign anarchists from coming into the country.

The Supreme Court ruling, as could have been expected, upheld the law: Congress had the right to pass this law, despite it being expressly against the spirit of the Constitution and guaranteed freedoms.

On April 10, 1904, we went to see and hear Emma Goldman for the first time.<sup>20</sup> The event was to be held at the Odd Fellows Temple on Broad and Arch, not far from City Hall. When we came there, we saw a cordon of policemen encircling the entire building. The street was full of people who were forbidden from standing there. Mounted policemen drove the crowd from the sidewalks, like Cossacks had done in holy Russia. I stood there dumbfounded; at first I could not comprehend what was going on. That here, in America, in a free country, peaceful citizens should not be allowed to gather in a venue to hear a speaker—I simply could not believe my eyes! Only my complete ineptitude with the language prevented me from attempting to address the people in the crowd, and call them to resist. I left the scene beaten down and upset, resolved to do whatever I could to combat this barbaric tyranny.

During the entire year of 1904, the cooperative store wrestled with problems we could not solve. We went deeper into debt, and the outlook was becoming ever worse. We sought to get more people interested in our enterprise by organizing lectures and gatherings. We brought Yanovsky, who was no great believer in the cooperative movement, to give one of the lectures; he was willing to come and help us out.<sup>21</sup> After the talk, Weinberg introduced us to one another, and we went together to the cooperative house. On the way, Yanovsky complained that the comrades in Philadelphia were ignoring the *Fraye arbeter shtime*. Subscribers were few, and they were not paying their dues. Individual sales at the newsstands were very low. Few people were aware that the newspaper even existed. Comrade Lavrov, the official representative of the *Fraye arbeter shtime*, was a very fine man, but he didn't know Yiddish, and had no idea about what went on in the paper. The result of the conversation was that I offered to take over the representation of the *Fraye arbeter shtime* in Philadelphia.

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seven policemen and four civilians, and wounded many others. In the aftermath of the bombing, eight anarchists were convicted on conspiracy charges, and four were executed by hanging on November 11, 1887. See Timothy Messer-Kruse, *The Haymarket Conspiracy: Transatlantic Anarchist Networks* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012); also, Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>18</sup> The already mentioned Immigration Act of 1903. See Edward Hutchinson, *Legislative History of American Immigration Policy, 1798–1965* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 133–134.

<sup>19</sup> The Free Speech League, founded in 1902, was an organization combating the government curbing of political and other forms of speech. See David Rabban, *Free Speech in Its Forgotten Years, 1870–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Emma Goldman (1869–1940) was a well-known anarchist thinker and a feminist who greatly influenced anarchist political philosophy in the West in the first half of the twentieth century. See Candace Falk et al. (eds.), *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years*, vols. 1–2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003 and 2004), and Vivian Gornick, *Emma Goldman: Revolution as a Way of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Saul Yanovsky (1864–1939) was a well-known anarchist and editor of the *Fraye Arbeter Shtime*. See Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits*, 191.

My offer made Yanovsky very happy. This was what he was actually aiming for with the entire conversation. My name was familiar to him from the frequent notes that I used to send him. Now he made me his lieutenant. In the letters from the editor in the following historic issue, he arranged for the publication of the following text:

L. Lavrov, Phila. – You will be so kind and act in accordance with the resolution of the meeting. Surrender all lists, monies, and receipts to Joseph Cohen, who, we hope, will do his best so that Philadelphia also pulls its weight for the “F. A. Sh.” [*Fraye arbeter shtime*].

This sounded a bit curious to me. There had been no meeting, and nobody other than Yanovsky had made any resolutions. Lavrov had no monies or receipts to surrender to me. The whole affair was artificial, but—what was done was done! I took the job, and now I had to do it.

I became a frequent contributor to the newspaper. Covering the elections that year, I wrote a story about how oxen were raised especially to help lead the herd to the slaughterhouses of Chicago, and compared this to the activities of socialist politicians among the workers. Yanovsky printed the story in the first two columns on the front page, thereby attracting great attention to it. William Zuckerman, who later became a friend, saw it as an unprovoked attack on the socialists and started an interesting discussion about the whole matter.

Being the official representative of the paper brought me into contact with all the comrades in town. I visited a number of them every Sunday. I became acquainted with most of them, and developed close relationships with the more active ones. The state of the movement was not great. Everyone said that Philadelphia had once been a fortress of anarchism, having had a whole range of good orators in Yiddish and English. Comrades had been active. They had organized unions of cloak makers, bakers, vest makers, and other trades. They had held anarchist rallies close to City Hall every Sunday, attended by masses of people. Yiddish gatherings had been well attended. But that had all been a long time ago—now there was not a trace of any of it. A couple of speakers died (Wilson and Gratsch); others became estranged from the anarchist movement and went their separate ways (Sh. Prener and Dr. Gordon); still others became doctors and pharmacists (Dr. Max Staler, Dr. Barber, Dr. Gartman, Dr. Segal, Seldes, Joffe, Natasha Notkin, and others). They had become busy people living respectable lives, and more or less kept a distance. The only speakers who remained in the movement were C. Weinberg and old Levin. Compared to years past, our movement was spent.

That was the situation I encountered when I became the official representative of the *Fraye arbeter shtime* at the end of 1904. After visiting the subscribers and getting to know them, I realized they could be divided into distinct categories. A part of the old guard—a handful of doctors, former speakers—had become dead to the movement. The best we could expect from them was a few pennies and a visit on a festive occasion. On the other hand, the pharmacists, especially Joffe and Natasha Notkin, put their heart and soul into the movement. Joffe’s drugstore, on Third and Bainbridge, was our main meeting place. Then there were the individuals of the old guard, scattered all over town, such as C. Weinberg, Levin, Edelson, Ab. Brandschain, J. S. Prenowitz, Ozer Smolenskin, David Apotheker, L. Wolfson—the latter four being poets and writers, pen in hand.

There were also a number of respectable Jews, shopkeepers, who kept themselves close to our movement: Riklin, Lubarski, Stoffman, Dubin, the brothers Agursky, and others. Also, a bunch of workers and quasi-intellectuals, such as Menkin, Mayer Rozen, Lifshits, the brothers Tsan—people who longed for the good old years, and wanted to see a broad renewal, should somebody take the initiative and start the work.

Among the readers, I also found a small circle of young, energetic workers who were dying for action. Among them were Y. Katz, B. Axler, Y. Vashkovits, Sembat, and especially L. Landau (A. Voliner), who lived in Philadelphia at the time, sewing shirts in Faigin's historic shop; and wanted to write feuilletons in the *Fraye arbeter shtime*. We became close friends, and used to spend all our time together, planning a wide range of activities.

The cooperative store gradually ended its agony and folded. A number of its members founded a branch of the Workmen's Circle and named it Cooperative Branch 81.<sup>22</sup> Among its first members was my humble self. The branch exists under the same name to this day, though few members today are aware of its origins.

During the store's liquidation, I worked on the committee tasked with closing the accounts. There I discovered two interesting things. The organization had hundreds of members, but the entire capital from membership dues amounted to less than 300 dollars. Most members paid not more than twenty-five or fifty cents. Only two greenhorns—myself and one lady—paid the entire amount of five dollars. On the other hand, the leading spirits of the enterprise, members of the board of directors, owed the store 226 dollars, which they never paid back. The store was built and run without its own capital. It was sentenced to collapse from the very beginning.

The liquidation of the cooperative enterprise gave me the opportunity to dedicate all my free time to work for the *Fraye arbeter shtime* and the movement, which I found meaningful and fulfilling.

Two older comrades, involved activists from good times past, encouraged me and helped me substantially. H. Wolf would give up one day every week to distribute the London *Arbeter fraynd*.<sup>23</sup> Every Friday he would come to town from his residence and business in faraway Manayunk to sell some copies at the bakers' union meeting and visit several regular buyers of the paper.<sup>24</sup> The second one was comrade Y. B. Moore, then a manufacturer of women's clothing, who was always ready to leave the shop and do whatever was necessary for the movement.

The main work, however, was done from then on by the three musketeers—myself, Axler, and Y. Katz. For a good while, we were inseparable in work and friendship.

That winter, our job was to organize several gatherings, lectures, and a traditional "farmers' ball," for which we published a "farmer newspaper." The latter was put together by L. Landau and David Apotheker.

The farmers' ball was a great success, under the circumstances. It brought in over 200 dollars net profit for the *Fraye arbeter shtime*, and created a good mood among comrades.

Among the activities that year, I should note our active participation in welcoming "Babushka," Yekaterina Breshkovskaya, when she came to America accompanied by Dr. C. Zhitlowsky.<sup>25</sup> A gathering was arranged at the Walnut Street Theater for a Sunday afternoon. When I arrived there, I found a packed theater and a huge mass of people outside who could not

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<sup>22</sup> The Workmen's Circle (*Arbeter-ring*) is a Jewish fraternal organization, founded in 1900, working for social justice, workers' rights, and Yiddish culture. In the early twentieth century, *Arbeter-ring* was the dominant organization of the Jewish labor movement. See Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 179–216.

<sup>23</sup> *Arbeter fraynd* (*The Workers' Friend*) was a London-based Yiddish weekly founded in 1885. Although originally socialist, it became primarily an anarchist mouthpiece in the late 1890s. It ceased publication after World War I. See Todd Endelman, *The Jews of Britain, 1656 to 2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 139–140.

<sup>24</sup> Manayunk is a historically working-class neighborhood in northwest Philadelphia.

<sup>25</sup> Yekaterina Konstantinovna Breshko-Breshkovskaya (1844–1934), known as "Babushka" or "the grandmother of the Russian Revolution," was a well-known Russian socialist, who visited the United States with Zhitlowsky on a fundraising trip on behalf of the Russian socialists. Chaim Zhitlowsky (1865–1943) was a Russian Jewish socialist,

get in. I consulted with comrade Moore, sent him off to find another venue in the neighborhood, and went to discuss with the speakers a possibility of them addressing a second crowd. Within several minutes, everything was organized thus. People filled the large auditorium on Eighth and Lombard, not far from there, and speakers, one after another, came in from the original theater to address the crowd. Weinberg's speech at the Walnut Street Theater that afternoon surpassed every other he gave, before or since.

After the rally, a small circle of us close comrades went to the anarchist communist house, where Babushka was staying. There we spent the evening in an atmosphere of wonderful enthusiasm. Babushka, despite her advanced age and a horribly difficult time in the Russian *katorga*, was young and cheerful in spirit.<sup>26</sup> We sang Russian revolutionary songs together, she danced and kissed young comrades, whose presence inspired in her a new belief in the future of our ideal.

On another occasion, we welcomed in Philadelphia the elder gray-haired leader of the Russian socialist revolutionaries, Nikolai Tchaikovsky.<sup>27</sup> He was one of the most seasoned activists in the Russian revolutionary movement. When Peter Kropotkin returned from Europe in 1872, where he had become a member of the First International, he joined Tchaikovsky's circle in St. Petersburg.<sup>28</sup>

We welcomed the eminent guest at Joffe's house, where we spent the whole night talking about the prospects for the impending revolution in Russia.

Officially, Tchaikovsky's mission was to raise money for the movement. His true task, however, was to buy and send arms for revolutionaries to use in our old homeland.

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political philosopher, and an advocate for forging a transnational modern Yiddish culture. See Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 125–178.

<sup>26</sup> *Katorga* was a system of punitive labor detention in tsarist Russia. See Steven Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 20–21 and passim.

<sup>27</sup> Nikolai Vasilyevich Tchaikovsky (1851–1926) was a famous Russian revolutionary. See Murray Bookchin, *The Third Revolution: Popular Movements in the Revolutionary Era*, Vol. 3 (New York: Continuum, 2004), 28.

<sup>28</sup> Prince Peter Alexeyevich Kropotkin (1842–1921) was a Russian thinker who profoundly influenced anarchist theory. See Brian Morris, *Kropotkin: The Politics of Community* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2004).

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1945

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“My First Years in Philadelphia” is one of the first chapters in the second part of Joseph Cohen’s memoir, *Di yidish-anarkhistishe bavegung in Amerike: Historisher iberblik un perzenlakhe iberlebungen* [The Jewish Anarchist Movement in America: A Historical Overview and Personal Reminiscences], published in Philadelphia by the Radical Library (Workmen’s Circle Branch 273) in 1945. Translation by Emil Kerenji.

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