

Tribute to Alexander Berkman

on the Thirtieth Anniversary of His Tragic Death

Mollie Steimer

1966

Alexander Berkman, "Sasha" to his friends, was a rebel from early childhood. He protested against injustice wherever he saw it. He paid for his militant revolutionary activities with fourteen years in prison for his attempt to kill Henry Clay Frick, chairman and general manager of the Carnegie Steel Company, during the Homestead Steel Strike.

After Berkman was released from prison he continued to devote his life to the revolutionary cause, a convinced anarchist. He worked with all his energies and dedication for the movement, for freedom, and wound up a political refugee in the various countries where he was permitted to live. He was one of the finest, most generous people I ever knew. Although he had very few material possessions, he was always ready to give everything away to others and had to be reminded not to deny himself his urgent personal needs. Berkman made every possible effort to understand and help people...He radiated warmth and comfort, like the rays of the sun.

I first met Berkman in New York City in the late Fall, 1919, at the home of Stella Ballantine, Emma Goldman's niece. We discussed the Russian Revolution and the need to expose the atrocities of the Bolsheviks against the anarchists, socialists and all who dared to criticize their new dictatorial regime in Moscow. Emma said that we should not come out against the Bolsheviks at this time when they are fighting so many enemies of the revolution. She supported her position with cogent, forceful arguments.

Sasha also argued that the Bolsheviks should be given a chance, that it was too early to start an organized opposition because the revolution was surrounded by enemies.

When he was deported to Russia, we felt that he did not really oppose our position, that his warm personal greeting indicated that he supported our right to criticize the actions of the Bolsheviks from our viewpoint.

Our second meeting with Sasha and Emma took place in Berlin four years later, November, 1923, where they had been living for two years, since January, 1922. They had left Soviet Russia greatly disillusioned with the Bolshevik regime. Sasha and Emma were each writing about their experiences in Russia. In addition, Sasha was active organizing help for the anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists and other political Opponents held in prison by the Bolsheviks. He appealed for funds, issued a bulletin in English, translated the letters from men and women prisoners in Russia. He assembled and translated all the material that was published in the book, Letters From Russian Prisons. The book was published in New York in 1925 by the International Committee

to Aid Political Prisoners. Roger Baldwin was chairman of the Committee and its members were people of world renown, including, among others, Clarence Darrow, Eugene V. Debs, Norman Thomas, B. Charney Vladeck, and Felix Frankfurter (later a Justice of the United States Supreme Court). Isaac Don Levine did some of the work in preparing the book, including translations and obtaining letters of support from prominent individuals around the world such as Albert Einstein, Knut Hamsun, Gerhard Hauptmann, Sinclair Lewis, Maurice Maeterlinck, Thomas Mann, Romain Rolland, Upton Sinclair, H. G. Wells and Israel Zangwill.

The letters in *Letters From Russian Prisons* were obtained by a committee that included Mark Mratchny, forced out of Russia by the Bolsheviks and subsequently editor of the *Freie Arbeiter Stimme*, a Jewish Anarchist weekly published in New York City for 87 years, and I. N. Steinberg, a member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party and the only non-Bolshevik Minister of Justice in Lenin's cabinet. When Steinberg was forced to leave the government and Russia he became one of the founders of the Jewish Territorialist Movement, Freeland, which sought to establish agricultural settlements in various countries.

During this period, Berkman had written three pamphlets, *The Russian Tragedy*, *The Russian Revolution and The Communist Party*, and *The Kronstadt Rebellion*. He had also assembled all the data for his excellent book, *The Bolshevik Myth*.

Life was difficult for everyone in Germany after World War I and particularly so for the political refugees. Many of us felt that we had to leave Germany. A number of us went to France, including Sasha and Emma. Sasha wrote his book, *ABC of Communist—Anarchism* in France and it was published by Vanguard Press in New York City in 1929.

While he was in St. Cloud, a town near Paris, Sasha was in close contact with a number of groups in the anarchist movement. He worked particularly with the Jewish anarchists in the area. He gave lectures frequently, whenever the opportunity offered. "No audience is too small for me to talk to," Sasha used to say.

When Emma found a tiny house in St. Tropez in the south of France, she offered one room to Sasha for his residence. Sasha preferred a small shanty in the garden. He worked there and for relaxation took care of the small garden. Emma wrote her memoirs, *Living My Life*, at that time. She would work late into the night and Sasha would serenade her early in the morning with the sound of the handmill grinding coffee for breakfast. This was the signal for Emma to wake up. Music to her ears. The morning would start with the greeting, "Bon Esprit" ("lively spirit", "good cheer") and Emma named her little hut "Bon Esprit".

The day's work started immediately after breakfast. Emma and Sasha carried on an intensive correspondence with comrades all over the world. There were requests for articles and above all, work on *Living My Life*. Emma and Sasha worked together harmoniously. When guests and reporters came to the house, or even friends of friends, Sasha would welcome them in a warm, friendly manner. He filled the house with a joyful spirit and his discussions were marked with authoritative facts and information.

My beloved life-long companion, Senya, became associated with the Stone Photographic studio in Berlin in 1929. We left France and went to Berlin where we remained for four years until the Nazis came to power. We returned to France. Sasha was living in Nice, at this time. He had become a changed person, altogether different from the man we had known. He was being harassed by the French police regarding his status as a political refugee. His economic situation was very bad. Although he did a lot of translation work he earned very little, not enough for a decent living. His health was very poor. He needed a serious operation but he kept on delaying

it because he did not have enough money to go to Paris where he would have been able to get good care by surgical specialists. He finally had to go to a small local hospital and underwent an unsuccessful operation. The acute physical pain of his prostate gland, his economic difficulties, his precarious status as a political refugee, all combined to cause our warm, genial comrade, who had always been so full of life, to end his sufferings and commit suicide.

He did not die immediately. He wrestled with death for sixteen hours. Emma was at his bedside, hiding her sorrow with superhuman control of her heartbreak.

This happened June 28, 1936, three weeks before the start of the Spanish Revolution.

Everyone who knew or talked about Emma and Sasha could not speak of one without mentioning the other. Although they lived their own separate lives, they were inseparable emotionally and spiritually. Neither of them ever wrote a major article or a book without consulting the other. They knew and shared every event in their lives; there were no secrets between them. Their friendship and companionship were the finest. Those of us who were privileged to know them will never forget them.

Emma died four years later in Toronto, Canada, May, 1940. A great part of Emma's life was lost to her with Sasha's death. His name will live as long as there are and will continue to be rebels who struggle for genuine, true liberty.

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