

Queen of the Bolsheviks

The Hidden History of Dr. Marie Equi

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Now forgotten, Dr. Marie Equi (1872–1952) was a physician for working-class women and children, a lesbian, and a dynamic and flamboyant political activist. She was a “firebrand in the causes of suffrage, labor and peace, in Portland in the ’teens, ’20s, and ’30s.”¹ A reformer turned revolutionary, Equi earned the nickname “Queen of the Bolsheviks,” one which spoke to her often imperious character as well as to her politics. Equi’s political development was framed by intense and significant changes within the US economy and society and its role in world politics, upheavals which laid the basis for the many movements in which she was involved: Progressive, women’s, socialist, radical labor, and anti-imperialist. Spanning the period from the consolidation of northern industrial capitalism to the emergence of the US as the dominant imperialist power, Equi’s life serves as a chronicle of her times and illuminates how one person was affected by and sought to change world events.

How is it that Equi was once notorious and is now forgotten? And why is it important to remember her? According to Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Equi gained her reputation “as the stormy petrel of the Northwest” by being “among the most feared and hated women in the Northwest because of her outspoken criticisms of politicians, industrialists and so-called civic leaders, and all who oppressed the poor.”² Equi has been forgotten, however, in part because few written records of her life or thoughts exist, in part because her later years were years of decline, but mainly because she was the sort of person traditional historians would rather ignore: a powerful woman, a lesbian, and a revolutionary and militant fighter for the working class. Yet it is precisely for these reasons that Equi should be remembered. Equi’s political development, her successes and shortcomings, and her rich and vivid life are sources of both inspiration and critical lessons for all who, like Equi, would act to rid the world of exploitation and oppression.

Equi’s Life: The Early Years

Equi’s political consciousness received its initial molding from both her immigrant parents and her childhood experiences as a worker in the oppressive textile mills of New Bedford, Massachusetts. Equi’s mother came from Ireland, fleeing economic stagnation and repression; she staunchly opposed England’s military and economic domination of Ireland.³ Equi’s father, a stonemason and activist in the Knights of Labor, had come from Italy where he had fought with Garibaldi to oppose papal rule.⁴ Together, they raised her to “abhor absolutism, monarchy and oppression.”⁵

Equi, born on April 7, 1872, entered the mills when she was 8 years old in 1880. At age 13, she developed tuberculosis. Equi recovered, unlike most who were stricken with TB, because she was given the opportunity to go to Florida for a year. Equi then left the US to live with her grandfather in Italy in 1886 — the year of the first national strike for the eight-hour day, the first May Day, and the Haymarket massacre — and she remained there for three years.⁶

¹ *Oregonian*, 15 July 1952, p. II. (Note: This newspaper will be abbreviated as “*Oreg.*”)

² Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *The Rebel Girl* (NY: International Publishers, 1975), pp. 197–98.

³ Letter from Equi to Sara Bard Field, 29 May 1921, in Department of Justice files. (Note: These files will be referred to as “DOJ files.”)

⁴ Joe Lukes, letter, 6/19/81.

⁵ *Oregon Daily Journal*, 19 November 1918, p. 4. (Note: This newspaper will be abbreviated as “ODJ”).

⁶ Sandy Polishuk, interview, 3/31/81.

Finding Her Own Path

Equi returned to the US at the age of 17 in 1889, to a nation still rife with anti-radical and anti-immigrant sentiment. Rather than return to the mills, Equi joined the mass exodus of Americans seeking to create a new life in the West. Different even then, Equi did not homestead with a family but went with another woman, her friend Bess Holcolm, who had been promised a teaching job in The Dalles, a young city in the burgeoning state of Oregon.⁷ When they arrived, the school superintendent went back on his word and denied Bess her position. His refusal led to the first documented case of Equi's flamboyant and feisty personality, her passionate commitment to justice, and her determination to let no one stand in her way. As reported in one Oregon newspaper, Equi surprised the superintendent in the streets of The Dalles, and – with a horsewhip – “administered a vigorous lashing in the presence of a large crowd of people.”⁸ Needless to say, Bess got her job.

While Bess taught, Equi studied to enter medical school – a fairly unusual ambition for a working class woman (even though outright opposition to women entering medical school was beginning to wane by the close of the nineteenth century).⁹ Equi's determination to be a doctor was inspired by her desire to help people. It may also have been fueled by her own bout with TB, her admiration for other women doctors, and her goal of having a profession in which she could have complete control of her work.

Equi entered medical school in 1900, attending the Physicians and Surgeons Medical College in San Francisco because the University of Oregon medical school did not admit women. When the University of Oregon changed its policy one year later, Equi transferred and graduated in 1903.¹⁰ Still loyal to her working class background, Equi established herself as a physician for working-class women and children and became known as an expert diagnostician.¹¹ She developed a close network of friends with other professional and college women, relishing independent minds. Equi soon became an outspoken proponent of woman's suffrage and the need for women to be involved in social reform. She spoke on both topics at the 1905 National American Women's Suffrage Association's convention held in Portland.¹² Equi also organized Portland's doctors and nurses to go down to San Francisco to assist victims of the devastating 1906 earthquake. There, she “was given the rank of ‘doctor’ in the United States Army, the only woman ever so honored” up to that point, and President Theodore Roosevelt even gave Equi an award for her services.¹³

In 1906 Equi also became lovers with Harriet Speckart.¹⁴ Their relationship lasted over 15 years. Apart from their being lesbians, their living together – although unusual – was not unheard of. An increasing number of professional and upper-middle-class women were beginning to establish households together at that time, and in Boston such arrangements were becoming

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *ODJ*, 19 July 1913, p. 5.

⁹ May Roth Walsh, “*Doctors Wanted: No Women Need Apply*” – *Sexual Barriers in the Medical Profession, 1938–1975* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). p. 179.

¹⁰ Sandy Polishuk, “The Radicalization of Marie Equi,” unpublished paper, 1971. Note: This paper will be referred to as “RME”).

¹¹ Julia Ruutilla, interview, 6/6/81.

¹² Ida Husted Harper, *The History of Woman Suffrage, Vol VI, 1900–1920* (NY: J.J. Little & Ives Co. 1922), p. 149.

¹³ *ODJ*, 19 July 1913, p. 5; *New York Times*, 15 July 1952, p. 21.

¹⁴ Report of Agent Bryon, 19 September 1918, and letter from Equi to Harriet Speckart, 22 May 1921, DOJ files.

so common that they were called “Boston marriages.”¹⁵ This rise in women-only households was in part a product of people being concentrated in large urban centers, and it was also a significant reflection of a fundamental change in women’s position in industrialized societies: women as a group were beginning to be able to survive as independent wage earners, and were no longer tied by necessity to a family economy or a husband’s wage. These conditions, in addition to the increased awareness of the need for birth control and the distinction for women between sex for procreation and sex for pleasure, also led to an increase in the viability and visibility of lesbian households.

Despite the gradually increasing public awareness of homosexuality, the vast majority of people thought homosexuality was unnatural and that homosexuals were sick and depraved people. Even for a person as self-confident as Equi, it would have been hard to ignore this dominant view. Moreover, the Progressive opinion on homosexuality in this era also did little to build homosexuals’ self-esteem. The fundamental assumption of these advocates of homosexual rights was that homosexuality was an incurable congenital condition (although it could be induced “artificially”), and that therefore homosexuals should not be persecuted by anti-homosexual legislation, but should be allowed to live in peace.¹⁶ These advocates did, however, provide an invaluable service to homosexuals: they validated the existence of homosexuality and encouraged research on the reasons for its existence.

Although Equi apparently did not denigrate herself for being a lesbian and was open about it with her friends and political acquaintances, it does seem she harbored some doubts as to whether being homosexual was “normal.” Years later, when she was in prison in 1921, Equi expressed in a letter her fears about being “queer,” but was advised by her friend not to worry about her relationship with her “full-bosomed mate”:

What you say about yourself being queer, well — I must convince you that you are not. It is a fact you have dared to do the unestablished thing, and therefore the unapproved, that you are looked upon as queer. So Marie D’Equi, be good, and take the advice of a friend: you are perfectly sane, though perhaps unusually out of the ordinary... Continue to act, think, look as you have for years past, and somebody will be glad to see you unchanged when you get out.¹⁷

Wearing tailored suits and fedora-like hats, having intense affairs and crushes as well as her long-lasting and serious relationship with Harriet, Equi heeded this advice, and acted, thought, and looked as she wanted to throughout her life.

Equi’s commitment to women and her personal experiences of discrimination led her to devote energy to women’s suffrage, a campaign in which she played an instrumental role. At the same time, her working-class background and her experiences as a doctor compelled Equi to become a vocal advocate for her patients. In both cases, her goal was reform through the legislative process, and she upheld the politics of the newly emerging Progressive Party, which sought not to challenge the fundamental property relations of capitalism but instead curb its excesses through legislation. In her suffrage work, Equi opposed not only men who were simply against women’s

¹⁵ Oral presentation by Boston Gay and Lesbian History Project, June 1980.

¹⁶ Sheila Rowbotham and Jeffrey Weeks, *Socialism and the New Life: The Personal and Sexual Politics of Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), p. 161.

¹⁷ Letter from Mark Avramo to Equi, 31 March 1921, DOJ files.

suffrage, but also the liquor interests, which feared that women would vote for prohibition. In 1912, the year Equi led the Oregon “Votes for Women” march and women at long last won the vote in Oregon, Equi was on the executive committee of the State Equal Suffrage League as well as on the executive board of the Progressive Party, plus serving as president of the Women’s Eight Hour League.¹⁸ Through these organizations, Equi met many dynamic and progressive women, some of whom became friends for life, such as Charlotte Anita Whitney, then a vice-president of the American Equal Suffrage Association and later one of the leading women in the Communist Party. This intense combination of friendship and political work was to occur many times in Equi’s life, with friendships evolving or ending as Equi’s own politics changed. At this point, however, Equi and all these women shared the Progressive notion of evolutionary improvement under capitalism. It was not until a violent cannery strike in Portland in 1913, led by the Industrial Workers of the World, that events changed Equi’s mind.

Radicalization

The women who struck the Oregon Packing Company fruit cannery in July 1913 were primarily immigrants, the kind of people for whom Equi was both physician and advocate; it was one of Equi’s patients who involved Equi in the strike.¹⁹ The main strike issue was low wages. The women received \$2.50 to \$4.50 a week, far below the minimum of \$10 per week that the Consumers League of Oregon had found to be the pay Portland working women needed simply to survive.²⁰ The strikers’ lot was fairly typical: the Consumers League had also discovered that virtually two-thirds of Portland’s working women received *less* than this subsistence wage. Besides wages, other strike issues included long hours (which sometimes could span from 6:30 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., with the doors to the building locked so as to ensure the women remained the full shift) and unsanitary conditions.²¹

In the course of the strike, the newly created Industrial Welfare Commission, a product of the Progressive Era, ignored its own recently established law forbidding “the working of women or minors in any occupations for unreasonable hours, under conditions detrimental to health and morals, or for wages inadequate to maintain them.”²² They did this by settling with the cannery owners for a wage of \$6 per week, without ever consulting the strikers.²³ Equi witnessed this betrayal and she also discovered that the right to free speech was only a relative right, one to be revoked by a mayor or governor when confronted by militant workers demanding better conditions. Finally, Equi also saw the police attack unarmed women strikers, and it was this brutality which caused Equi’s decisive break with the Progressive movement.

Equi described the event that triggered her radicalization in an interview she gave a year later. Recounting one of the numerous free speech fights during the strike — a tactic that was a hallmark

¹⁸ Inez Rhodes, letter, 4/17/81: *Oreg.*, 9 March 1912, p. 4; Polishuk, RME, p. 2.

¹⁹ Polishuk, RME, pp. 4–5.

²⁰ *Report of the Social Survey Committee of the Consumers League of Oregon on the Hours, Wages and Conditions of Work and Cost and Standard of Living of Women Wage Earners in Oregon with Special Reference to Portland* (Portland, OR: Consumers League of Oregon, 1913), p. 20.

²¹ *Portland News*, 28 June 1913, p. I.

²² *ODJ*, 19 May 1913, p. 1.

²³ *ODJ*, 3 July 1913, p. 2

of the IWW, who needed to have the right to speak at Street meetings to reach the unemployed, unorganized, and those on strike — Equi recalled that:

An Indian girl [Mrs. O'Connor] got on to a box to speak. She was about to become a mother in a few months. The mounted police would leap from their horses' backs, hitting the heads of working men in the crowd. When they pulled that girl from the box — that was where I went wild. All the fighting blood rose in my heart. I got on the box and said things. They took the Indian girl to the courthouse. I followed and got in.²⁴

Once there, Equi made clear that her determination to see justice done and to free Mrs. O'Connor knew no bounds:

Deputy Sheriff Downey tried to restrain the infuriated woman [Equi], She gave him a right arm swing in the jaw. Night Watchman Fifer, a meek little man, tried to remonstrate with Dr. Equi, but her ready fist caught him below the left eye. He grappled with her and threw her out bodily on the sidewalk, where she landed on all fours. But Dr. Equi was nothing daunted by these experiences, which she merely took as temporary reverses. Gaining entrance, she persuaded the elevator man to take her up to the jail on the top floor, where she opened up her batteries of vituperation on Sheriff Word and his deputies. She raked them fore and aft. While the IWW's peered over each other's shoulders, quite forgetting their arrests in their admiration for the gattling-gun qualities of vituperation, so that they had to be spoken to several times before they were booked. "You're a cowardly, atavistic creature! You're a primitive puppy! You beat your wife, and you would beat your baby if it cried at night so you couldn't sleep. You're a caveman, that's what you are." These remarks were directed at Deputy Sheriff O.N. Ford... Mrs. O'Connor was not booked, but was allowed to depart from jail, escorted by Dr. Equi.²⁵

This attack on Mrs. O'Connor hit Equi at several levels: as a worker's advocate, a woman, and a physician appalled to see a pregnant woman attacked. Galvanized by this gross injustice, and her own experience in the jail, Equi threw herself into supporting the strike, creating more front-page stories. Two days later, at a street meeting called in defiance of a prohibition by the mayor, Equi was arrested; she stabbed the patrolman with a hatpin that the newspapers rumored was poisoned.²⁶ The police held Equi in jail and told her friends — including Harriet — that "they could have the choice of restraining [Equi] in a sanatorium, having her committed to the insane asylum, sent to the penitentiary, or removed from the State permanently."²⁷ Equi refused to leave the State, and the police released her a few days later and never tried her; Equi claimed that this was because she would have testified about the brutal treatment she received in jail.²⁸

The events of the cannery strike fundamentally altered Equi's life. The strike radicalized Equi through exposing her to both police brutality and to the weaknesses of the politics of the Progressive Party. As Equi herself said:

²⁴ *New York World*, 5 April 1914, Sec. M, p. 4.

²⁵ *Oreg.*, 16 July 1913, p. 1, p. 3.

²⁶ *Oreg.*, 18 July 1913, p. 5.

²⁷ *Evening Telegram*, 18 July 1913, p. I. (Note: This paper will be abbreviated as "ET").

²⁸ *New York World*, 5 April 1914, Sec. M, p. 4.

It was my experiences during that strike that made me a socialist... Previous to that time I was a Progressive... Any betterment of conditions must come about by direct action, in other words, militancy.²⁹

Equi, confronted by the stark conditions of the class struggle, learned that legislated reform, though necessary and critical, could never by itself end the exploitation and oppression intrinsic to the capitalist system. The scope of her political vision broadened considerably, and she began to perceive how the different struggles she had been involved in were framed by class relations. Equi also saw the State act forcibly to protect the interests of the ruling class. Thrilled by the militancy of the IWW, its commitment to organizing the unorganized, and its recognition — as stated in its preamble — of the “historic mission of the working class to do away with capitalism,” Equi underwent a profound change. She began to perceive the present as history, to see history and politics as the expression of class conflict, and to realize that with this understanding one can change history. Accordingly, Equi entered a period where her life became inextricably bound with the history and politics of her times.

The Radical

Having “declared war against the organized forces of capitalism,”³⁰ Equi the radical and socialist rapidly made a place for herself in virtually every Progressive movement in Portland. Equi did not confine her work to purely economic or industrial issues, as the IWW often did. Bringing her class analysis to what she viewed as short-sighted and single-issue reform movements, Equi argued that they would amount to little if they were not linked in the effort to end capitalism and create socialism, as she expressed in a 1914 interview:

Certainly I am a suffragist. But I am far from believing that woman suffrage is a panacea for every political ill. I am not a Prohibitionist, though I recognize the liquor evil is a great national curse. To my mind, the liquor evil, the social evil, unemployment and all the great social and economic problems that confront us are merely symptoms of the greater evil of capitalism.³¹

Having said this, Equi — a woman for whom words were a call to action — took up a multitude of specific issues, all tied to her strategic vision of how capitalism could be overthrown.

From 1913 to 1915, Equi worked mainly with the IWW, campaigning for better conditions for lumber-workers. Risking arrest, she participated in the IWW’s national campaign to organize the unemployed during the severe economic depression of 1913, and succeeded in obtaining much needed relief, food and shelter for many of Portland’s unemployed. In the spring of 1914, Equi traveled back East to meet with other activists, visit her family and get some rest.³² The content and complexity of her political work changed, however, with the outbreak of the imperialist World War I in August 1914.

²⁹ *New Bedford Evening Standard*, 17 March 1914, p. 3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

Soon after the war started, Equi joined the newly formed American Union Against Militarism (AUAM), based on the belief that the US would eventually play a military role in the conflict to ensure its stake in the outcome. AUAM published anti-militarist analyses of the war, lobbied in Washington against preparedness and conscription, and also campaigned against US imperialism in Latin America and the Caribbean, seeking to impress upon the US public that the true reason for the war was economic profiteering.³³

Not one to lead a tranquil life, in the spring of 1915, when Equi became involved with AUAM, she and Harriet adopted a baby girl. The child, Mary, was born March 15, 1915; Equi at this point was 43 years old and Harriet was 32. For reasons that are not entirely clear, but which may have had to do with the adoption, Harriet temporarily married an IWW organizer, James F. Morgan, on March 18, 1915, and divorced him on May 29, 1915.³⁴ Morgan was not pleased with this turn of events, and complained bitterly to some fellow IWW members about how “Doc stole his wife.” The daughter of one of these IWW members, later to become a friend of Equi’s, overheard this and asked her father what the word “lesbian” meant. Defending Equi staunchly, the father replied that anyone’s sexuality was the preference of the individual, and that “Dr. Equi was a wonderful woman and that this was quite well known in the labor world and anyone with any brains didn’t criticize it.”³⁵ His support for Equi, at a time when lesbianism was perceived as deviant behavior in the Progressive as well as conservative sectors of society, is yet another indication of how well respected Equi was.

Within a year of Mary’s adoption, Equi had established herself as an outspoken critic of the war and the preparedness movement in the US. This put her at loggerheads with the bulk of Oregon’s predominantly conservative, white, and US-born population, its big businesses (particularly lumber), and its superpatriotic and jingoistic newspapers.³⁶ In April 1916, Equi spoke so forcefully at an anti-preparedness meeting that the organizers forbade anyone to follow her, for fear a riot would erupt.³⁷ On June 4, 1916 — national Preparedness Day, a day on which 150,000 in Chicago, 120,000 in New York City and thousands in other cities marched for the war³⁸ — Equi outdid herself by carrying her anti-imperialist politics into the heart of Portland’s Preparedness Day Parade.

Portland’s parade included 15,000 to 20,000 participants. At the request of the AUAM, Equi carried into this crowd a banner which read:

Prepare to Die, Workingmen, J.P. Morgan & Co. Want Preparedness for Profit. “Thou Shalt Not Kill.”

Not surprisingly, two nearby contingents attacked and tore the banner down, and the police took Equi into custody.³⁹ Released later that day, Equi followed this protest with another one. Borrowing a pair of linesmen’s spurs from a friend, she climbed to the top of a telephone pole

³³ Blanche Weisen-Cooke, ed., *Crystal Eastman on Women and Revolution* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 12–13.

³⁴ Polishuk, 3/31/81.

³⁵ Julia Ruutilla interview.

³⁶ E. Kimbark MacColl, *The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon, 1915 to 1950* (Portland, OR: The Georgian Press, 1979), p. 139.

³⁷ Polishuk. RME, p. 125.

³⁸ *ODJ*, 4 June 1916, Sec. 1, p. 6.

³⁹ *ODJ*, 4 June 1916, Sec. 1, p. 6.

(having practiced weeks beforehand to pull off this stunt) and, while giving an antiwar speech, unfurled yet another banner “Down With the Imperialist War.” She succeeded in attracting a huge crowd and arousing the wrath of the police, who could not get her down to arrest her. Totally frustrated, the police called the fire station to get the fire truck and ladder to get Equi down, but what they did not know was that the firemen were Equi’s friends, because the care she gave their wives and girlfriends. The firemen accordingly “took their own sweet time” to respond to the call, by which point Equi had finished her speech and the police had despaired of arresting her.⁴⁰

A few weeks after this incident, Margaret Sanger arrived in Portland as part of her national speaking tour on the need for legal birth control. At this point, Equi already had been providing abortions for years to any who needed them, based on her belief that women should have children only when they wanted them and were able to care for them.⁴¹ Once Sanger came into town, Equi immediately became involved in her visit. In the first few days of Sanger’s visit, Equi revised Sanger’s pamphlet on birth control, *Family Limitation*, to make it more accurate medically. On June 19, when Sanger gave her talk, police arrested three men for selling the pamphlet on the grounds that it was “obscene literature” — though it was only *after* the arrests that the City Council hastily passed an ordinance to ban it as “obscene.”⁴² Since Sanger had to leave town for a few days to give her talk in Seattle, Equi took over the defense effort, a task she gladly accepted because of her rapidly developing bond with Sanger. Passionate about her ideas, her work, her politics, and her friendships, Equi was quick to make friends with a woman who was equally passionate, equally involved in politics, and equally willing to put herself on the line. It was as if the isolation caused by being a political pariah in society at large could almost be compensated for by such intimate and sustaining friendships.

Once Sanger returned, a rally was held for the arrested men. It turned into a wild demonstration, and police arrested Equi, Sanger, and several other women. Their trial received much publicity, and supporters met them with signs saying, “Poverty and Large Families go Hand in Hand” and “Poor Women are Denied what the Rich Possess.”⁴³ The judge found all the defendants guilty, but fined only the men who sold the pamphlets, and then waived the fee. Although Sanger’s visit to Portland and the tumult that ensued may not have helped the birth control movement much in Sanger’s estimation,⁴⁴ it did cement the friendship between Sanger and Equi. During the years that followed, Equi wrote many letters to Sanger expressing her deep love, admiration, and even passion for her, and Sanger responded with her deep feelings for Equi; there is no evidence, however, that the two were ever lovers.

Equi’s commitment to ending the oppression of women, as demonstrated by her suffrage and birth control work, nonetheless was now framed by the overall class struggle, as epitomized by the war.

In the fall of 1916, rich Republican women campaigned for the Republican president candidate, Charles Evans Hughes, because he was pro-suffrage. They ignored the fact that he also supported US entry into the war. Those women toured the nation on a train dubbed “The Golden Special.” When the train arrived in Portland, Equi greeted it with a banner asking, “Which Goose Laid

⁴⁰ Julia Ruutilla interview.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² *Oreg.*, 8 September 1966, p. 36.

⁴³ *ODJ*, 25 November 1971, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Margare! Sanger, *Margara Sanger: An Anthology* (NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1938), p. 206.

the Golden Egg?”⁴⁵ Her point was to make clear that these women could afford to campaign for Hughes only because their husbands were wealthy and wanted Hughes elected. Equi followed this confrontation with another, by leading a Street corner pro-Wilson demonstration which drowned out the Hughes rally in a building across the Street. She vividly described this incident with great relish in a letter to Sanger:

Hey Beloved Girl! It sure has been a good Friday for me... We sure did have a strenuous time — Put the Hughesites entirely out of business. I was arrested in the afternoon. Detained 1 hour. Bail \$100 — an attempt was made to lodge an insanity complaint — am sending you the Portland paper with the picture of the banner. We had 5000 people at 6th and Alder... Say it was the richest thing ever pulled off — and a complete surprise — even to the Democrats. I do not believe in either man but choose the lesser of the two evils... No football game here in the West ever had the rooting we pulled off. I stood on my little old table — and started the Wilson Yell... the reception that bunch of Wall Streeters got — they will remember it to their last days... Deliver a body of women over lock-stock-and-barrel to the Republican Party! Solidarity of women! Having me arrested was an example of it!⁴⁶

This incident also bore testimony to how much Equi had changed in the past four years. Before 1913, women’s suffrage was virtually the be-all and end-all of her politics, but by 1916 she was at a new stage where she viewed that particular struggle in terms of how it was framed by the larger picture of class relations and class conflict.

A few days after this demonstration, Equi was plunged back into IWW activity by the November 4, 1916, Everett Massacre. Equi immediately traveled up to Everett and took charge of the wounded IWW members. She also investigated the deaths of those slain, and testified that “with surgical attention there would have been more than an even chance of recovery” for one of the dead men.⁴⁷ Then, on November 19, Equi was given the honor of being the Oregon IWW delegate to release Joe Hill’s ashes to the winds on the first anniversary of his execution,⁴⁸ as delegates were doing in every other State of the union (except Utah, where Hill had been framed and shot) and in “every country of South America, in parts of Europe and Asia, in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.”⁴⁹ The main theme of Equi’s political work, however, remained her antiwar activism, one spurred on by the US’s entry into the war on April 2, 1917.

The War Years

As soon as the US government declared war, it took immediate steps to squelch domestic dissent. Congress rapidly passed the Espionage Act, which stated that “if anyone shall make or convey false statements with intent to interfere with the operation or success of the military or naval forces... he shall be punished by a fine of not more than \$10,000 or imprisonment for not

⁴⁵ Polishuk, RME, p. 25.

⁴⁶ Equi letter to Sanger, 2 October 1916, Library of Congress.

⁴⁷ Walker C. Smith, *The Everett Massacre* (Chicago: IWW Publishing House, n.d.), p. 94.

⁴⁸ Inez Rhodes letter.

⁴⁹ Philip S. Foner, *The Case of Joe Hill* (NY: International Publishers, 1965), p. 92.

more than twenty years or both.”⁵⁰ This harsh sentence ensured that the government’s version of reality would be the gauge by which to measure “truth.” To build public prowar sentiment, the government helped create and promote the formation of “patriotic” societies to encourage citizens to inform on “subversives opposed to the war. The chief example of this was the Justice Department’s American Protective League. By the end of 1917, it had units in 600 towns and cities with a membership of 100,000 (which would increase to 250,000 in 1918), and it claimed by the end of the war to have brought more than 3 million cases of “disloyalty” to light.⁵¹ The government also cracked down on antiwar activists in numerous ways: for example, the Post Office confiscated mail and newspapers by the ton, and a new “radical clause” permitted the deportation of aliens suspected of being IWW members.⁵² Under the banner of “national security,” the government moved in to eradicate the IWW for once and for all, and it was through this attack that the government was finally able to convict Equi for her political work.

The timing of the government’s campaign against the IWW was set by the IWW’s launching of a successful strike for the eight-hour day in the Pacific Northwest lumber industry in June 1917. Because timber had strategic significance for the military, the government moved quickly. On a plan agreed to by the Council of National Defense, the Attorney General, the Secretary of Labor, President Wilson, the Department of Justice, the US Post Office and the American Protective League, the government launched numerous raids nationally on the IWW during September, charging most of its leaders and hundreds of its members with violation of the Espionage Act.⁵³ In the forests of the Pacific Northwest, where Equi had close ties with the IWW, the government sent in 45,000 soldiers to act as timber-workers. It also created the Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen (also known as the 4Ls), a superpatriotic organization dedicated to the concept of “open shop” and the elimination of the IWW, with members willing to serve as strikebreakers and as spies on IWW members.⁵⁴ The intensity of the government’s attacks on the IWW was also heightened by the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917. Despite the fact that the IWW was essentially an anarcho-syndicalist organization, and not Marxist-Leninist, the US government responded to the IWW as if it were the Bolshevik threat itself. In May 1918, the government passed the Sedition Law, an amendment to the Espionage Act, to finish off what little remained of the IWW and opponents of the war. This new law forbade criticism of the US government, the constitution, the military, flag, navy, or uniforms, and it increased the length of prison terms and fines that could be imposed.⁵⁵ It was this new law which finally snared Equi.

Equi was arrested for an antiwar speech she gave at the IWW hall in Portland on June 27, 1918. Her antiwar agitation had reached the point where its effectiveness mandated that the US government attempt to silence her. Indicted secretly on June 29, Equi was charged with insulting the flag, soldiers, and the ally Great Britain — all for saying that workers should not participate in a war where they would be killing fellow workers at the bidding of their masters, and for prais-

⁵⁰ James P. Foreit, *The Industrial Worker in the Northwest 1909–1931: A Study of Community-Newspaper Interaction*, Thesis, University of Washington, 1969, p. 138.

⁵¹ H.C. Peterson and Gilbert C. Fite, *Opponents of War, 1917–1918* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), p. 19.

⁵² Roben Tyler, *Rebels of the Woods: The IWW in the Pacific Northwest* (Eugene, OR: University of Oregon Books, 1967), p. 141.

⁵³ Peterson and Fite, p. 62.

⁵⁴ Charlotte Todes, *Labor and Lumber* (NY: International Publishers, 1931), pp. 141–143.

⁵⁵ Polishuk, 3/31/81.

ing the Easter Rebellion in Ireland.⁵⁶ The men who supplied evidence to the State against Equi were employees of the Military Intelligence Bureau, the branch of the US Army's Intelligence Department that had close ties with the 4Ls. It was these men who credited Equi with saying that military men were "scum," a charge Equi consistently denied, stating that she knew most soldiers were working-class youths without any real options and that she would not insult them; her target was those who profited off the war. Throughout her trial, Equi and others contended that the lumber interests were out to "get" Equi on account of her work with the IWW, a charge that was essentially substantiated.⁵⁷ From the time of her arrest to the end of her trial, the Department of Justice also paid Margaret Lowell Paul to be a full-time informant on Equi. Paul met Equi through Kathleen O'Brennan, one of the main activists in Equi's defense campaign. Paul became friends with O'Brennan by pretending to know members of the New York City chapter of the Sinn Fein, an Irish revolutionary organization to which O'Brennan belonged. O'Brennan, in turn, had met Equi during her 1918 trip to Oregon to lecture on the Irish cause; shortly after meeting Equi, O'Brennan became infatuated with her and the two ended up having an affair.⁵⁸

After various delays, Equi's trial finally began on November 12, one day after the *end* of World War I. Lasting nine days, the trial consisted of a succession of operatives from the 4Ls, policemen, and "upstanding citizens" – some from the American Protective League – who testified to Equi's bad reputation for loyalty. Many gave evidence about acts Equi had carried out or remarks she had made regarding her opposition to the war *prior* to the US's entry into the war and the enactment of the Espionage Act; the judge allowed this testimony to be used as evidence, despite Equi's lawyer's protests. These charges were countered by witnesses who spoke on behalf of Equi, ranging from assorted IWW members to physicians and other "respectable citizens." The highlight of the trial was the confrontation between Equi and the prosecutor; one newspaper commented that "from the first question until adjournment of court such a battle of wits was on as is seldom seen in a courtroom between a woman and a man."⁵⁹ After arguing with her lawyer as to the best way to proceed, Equi used the trial as a political platform:

Not even the warnings and protests of her lawyer... could tighten the break on her tongue. The woman would answer a question of the Government prosecutor with another question; she aired her views on industrialism, poverty, crime, the wage scale, child welfare, child labor, Liberty Bonds, militarism, vice, IWW songs, IWW principles, who started the war, and sundry and various topics.⁶⁰

At the end of the trial, the prosecutor launched into a vitriolic one-and-a-half-hour diatribe against Equi and the IWW. Attacking Equi for being an "unsexed woman,"⁶¹ he stormed that,

"The red flag is floating over Russia, Germany, and a great part of Europe. *Unless you put this woman in jail*, I tell you it will float over the world!"⁶²

⁵⁶ Judgment Roll #8099, *United States vs. Marie Equi*. Registrar No. 7968, Indictment, 29 June 1918.

⁵⁷ *Workers Unite: A Presentation of the Case of Dr. Marie Equi*, November 1919, p. I.

⁵⁸ Report of Agent Bryon, 4 September 1918, DOJ files.

⁵⁹ *ODJ*, 19 November 1918, p. 14.

⁶⁰ *Oreg.*, 19 November 1918, p. I.

⁶¹ *ODJ*, 21 November 1918, p. 2.

⁶² Flynn, p. 252.

Finally, he appealed to the Jury's patriotic sentiments "with a stirring comparison of the red, white, and blue flag and the red flag favored by Dr. Equi and ended with quoting 'The Star Spangled Banner,'"⁶³ making crystal clear that the political purpose of the trial was to build consensus for the US's war and foreign policy, as well as to silence critics such as Equi. Within three hours, the jury concluded Equi was guilty.⁶⁴ Equi insisted the trial was a frame-up, and the long process of appeals began.

The judge sentenced Equi to three years in jail and a fine of \$500 on December 31, 1918. He stated that her crime was *expressing* her views, not simply having them.⁶⁵ The verdict and sentence demonstrated that US citizens do not have the right to effectively criticize government policy, despite the existence of the first amendment, when the overriding interests of the ruling class are at stake. When Equi left the courtroom after being sentenced, she got into a violent scuffle with William Bryon, the chief Department of Justice agent assigned to her case who, in his numerous reports on Equi, revealed his utter loathing for her on account of her being "an anarchist, a degenerate [i.e., lesbian] and an abortionist."⁶⁶ Equi asked Bryon if he was "satisfied" with the outcome and ready to go after another innocent woman. In response, Bryon hit Equi and shoved Harriet to the floor when she tried to come to Equi's aid.⁶⁷ Indicative of the support Equi still had in an overwhelmingly repressive climate, the Oregon State Federation of Labor unanimously passed a resolution condemning Bryon's actions and demanded that he be removed from Equi's case.⁶⁸

Equi spent the next year and a half appealing her case. It was a period in which the nation was gripped by a Red Scare of massive proportions, well captured by a phrase from John Dos Passos' novel *1919*: "To be a red in the summer of 1919 was worse than being a hun or pacifist in the summer of 1917."⁶⁹ Equi's case went to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco, which upheld her conviction on October 27, 1919.⁷⁰ In response, Equi gave a speech addressing the fate of political prisoners and stated:

We may think we live in a free country, but we are in reality nothing but slaves. When President Wilson recently said we are at war he spoke the truth for once. But it is not a war against another nation, but a never-ending class war within our own country.⁷¹

After yet more appeals and delays, Equi was finally ordered to San Quentin on October 19, 1920, her sentence commuted to a year and a half.⁷² Before leaving, she sent Mary to live with Harriet at Harriet's house in Seaside, on the coast of Oregon; Harriet remained in Seaside until her death in 1927, never to live in Portland or with Equi again.⁷³

In some ways prison was a relief for Equi. She wrote to Sanger that:

⁶³ *Oreg.*, 21 November 1918, p. 2.

⁶⁴ *ET*, 31 December 1918, p. 1.

⁶⁵ Judgment Roll #8099, Judge Bean, Instructions to the Jury, p. 84.

⁶⁶ Report of Agent Bryon, 9 September 1918, DOJ files.

⁶⁷ *ET*, 31 December 1918, p. 1.

⁶⁸ *Workers Unite*, p. 6.

⁶⁹ John Dos Passos, *Nineteen Nineteen*, in *USA* (NY: Random House, 1939), p. 457.

⁷⁰ *ODJ*, 27 October 1919, p. 1.

⁷¹ *Oreg.*, 1 November 1919, p. 9.

⁷² Letter from Equi to Sanger, 29 October 1920, Library of Congress.

⁷³ Polishuk, 3/31/81.

“When I left Portland for here it was as if I had dropped from my shoulders an out-worn garment — all the bitterness — the hatred — that had been displayed towards me.⁷⁴

While in prison, Equi corresponded with many personal and political friends, and Harriet wrote to her almost every day. For a period of several months, the Department of Justice copied all letters to and from Equi, and used this information to try to track down Kathleen O’Brennan as well as compile a memorandum on Equi for J. Edgar Hoover (one filled with inaccuracies). These letters reveal the deep ties that existed between Equi and her dear friends, and the support she received from IWW members and other radicals who had never even met her. They also reveal Equi’s unwavering commitment to the abolishment of capitalism, her conviction that she had been right to speak out against the war, and her opinions on the need for prison reform.⁷⁵

Equi was released on September 10, 1921, only to face the lonely and arduous task of rebuilding her life and reestablishing her practice without Harriet or a Progressive movement to welcome her. No longer the turbulent ’teens, the world Equi faced was relatively hostile to her and her ideas, and revolutionary change in the US seemed further away than ever: The IWW had been effectively destroyed; the Communists, small in number, were only just beginning to gain influence; the traditional women’s movement had virtually disbanded after women obtained suffrage in 1920; the birth control movement was more and more in the hands of the eugenicists; the anti-imperialist movement was muted; and the US economy seemed prosperous, still riding high on the profits made during the war.

The Decline

Equi’s decline as a political activist began after her release from prison. Attributable mainly to her age and the impairment of her health by jail, Equi’s lessened activity was also a reflection of the general lack of revolutionary or even Progressive political work in Portland, as also expressed by the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. With the exception of the Communist Party, which Equi apparently was not interested in joining, there existed no outlet for her revolutionary politics. Despite her own relative lack of political involvement, Equi did maintain her connections with other political activists. In 1926, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn moved in with Equi, having suffered a breakdown in the course of her strenuous campaign for Sacco and Vanzetti; Flynn, previously the key woman leader of the IWW, knew Equi through past political work. Equi supported and took care of Flynn while she rested and recuperated. Although there is not definitive evidence the two were lovers, it is certain they had an intense, emotionally-involved and occasionally stormy relationship.⁷⁶ Despite their ups and downs, each deeply cared for and respected the other, as Flynn expressed in a letter to her sister:

[Equi] was not the easiest person to get along with, she had a high temper from her Irish-Italian origin, but she had a brilliant mind, a Progressive spirit, and had been in prison for her opposition to World War I, and I admired her a great deal.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Letter from Equi to Sanger, 24 November 1920, Library of Congress.

⁷⁵ DOJ files.

⁷⁶ Polishuk, 3/31/81.

⁷⁷ Rosalyn Baxandall, “Dreams and Dilemmas: Introduction to Elizabeth Gurley Flynn’s Writings on Women,”

Flynn ended up living with Equi for ten years, from the midst of the “Roaring Twenties” to the middle of the Depression.

In 1930, when Equi was 58, she suffered a heart attack, one that left Equi virtually bed-ridden for the rest of her life. Flynn now took care of Equi. In an attempt to keep in touch with the world, Equi invited the new generation of activists to her home. One activist recalled:

Whenever we went to visit her, she was always exhilarated... and talked and talked. She was fascinating to listen to... When she was in bed... she used to renew her life forces by talking – and she was a marvelous talker.”

In the summer of 1934, Equi left her bed to make her last documented public political act, one which took place during the monumental dock strike, which tied up shipping on the entire West Coast. According to *The Hook*, the official union bulletin, after Portland police severely wounded four strikers,

An elderly, gray-haired lady, 62 years of age, walked into the office of the Longshoremens at the Labor Temple this afternoon. She said that she wanted to do something for the boys down on the line and more specifically, the four boys that are lying on cots in the hospitals of the city. She has donated \$250 to be used exclusively for medical and hospital attention... We have Dr. Marie Equi to thank for the above donation and also for the wonderful moral support she extended us.⁷⁸

Though Equi’s days of political activism were over, she continued to call herself a Red and insisted that others call her a Red also. When the Portland police issued a Red List in 1934, prompted by Communist involvement in the ILA strike, and omitted Equi’s name,

“Equi was absolutely livid with annoyance. She called up the chief of police and she threatened to sue the police department. She wanted it reissued with her name, ‘Dr. Marie Equi, Queen of the Bolsheviks,’ at the head of the list.”⁷⁹

It was Flynn, however, and not Equi, who was to become the leading woman in the Communist Party USA. In 1936, despite Equi’s protests, Flynn left for New York City to join the party, and she soon became the first woman to sit on its national board.

Equi lived until 1952, her last sixteen years nowhere evident in the public record. During her last years, the McCarthy era raged on. This Red Scare was similar to that which had engulfed the nation after World War I. During the Korean War, the same Espionage Act under which Equi had been convicted was resurrected as the US entered a “state of emergency,” and the Espionage Act remains on the books to this day.⁸⁰

Equi died on July 12, 1952, at the age of 80, virtually a forgotten woman. She lived on only in the memory of her friends, who knew her as a “woman of passionate conviction, and a real friend of the have-nots of this world.”⁸¹

unpublished paper, 1982, p. 30.

⁷⁸ International Longshoremens Association, “The Hook,” Vol. 2, No. 11, II July 1934.

⁷⁹ Julia Ruutilla interview.

⁸⁰ Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (NY: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 357.

⁸¹ Julia Ruutilla interview.

Equi's life deserves to be remembered. It is clear that who Equi was and how she developed both personally and politically were intimately linked with world events. Equi traversed a route familiar to many who were galvanized to take up Progressive political work on account of one issue, only to eventually arrive at the conclusion that all such issues are connected to the overall class struggle that shapes the development of society. It is to Equi's credit that she overcame the narrowness of single-issue reform groups and renounced her belief in gradual change. Making links between the different struggles going on about her, in her own life as well as in the world at large, Equi instead became an advocate of socialism and revolutionary change.

Equi's revolutionary politics sprang out of and were shaped by her passion for life. Equi's concern for others and her decision to be a physician and political activist were firmly grounded in her generous spirit, bolstered by the memory of her working-class origins, and were more than just an intellectual response to suffering and world events. Full of intense emotions and unquenchable curiosity, independent and head-strong, Equi was never one to be dominated in any manner, and words were always to be translated into action. Equi lived openly as a lesbian, and established herself in a profession where she was dependent on no one else for her livelihood. Through her medical and political work, Equi came into contact with other dynamic and Progressive women, such as Sanger and Flynn, and established an integrated fulfilling world of personal, professional, and political bonds. Motivated by her deep-seated desire to see justice done, sustained by her inner vitality, and capable of getting her way on account of her often domineering manner, Equi truly earned her nickname "Queen of the Bolsheviks." Her life stands as an inspirational and instructive account of how one person, conscious of her place in history, chose to link with others to create, in the words of the IWW, "a new world from the ashes of the old," free from exploitation, oppression, and human degradation.

Equi's life, and the broadness of her vision, stand as an impressive challenge to those in the many relatively isolated Progressive movements within the US today. Her record, embedded in the sensational accounts of the cannery strike, her work with the IWW, the Preparedness Day March, the birth control demonstrations and earlier suffrage work, and her anti-imperialist activities and Espionage Act trial, speaks to all in the Progressive, feminist, labor, and solidarity or anti-intervention movements. Her experiences with the Progressive Party are a challenge to those who maintain that socialism can be achieved solely through the electoral process or through economic measures only, and to those who minimize the deep-seated and violent nature of class struggle in our society.

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