Still Crazy After All These Years

Interview with Sam and Esther Dolgoff
Sam & Esther Dolgoff 60 Years of Anarchism
An Interview by Nhat Hong, Parts 1 and 2

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Editorial Note: This is the complete interview Nhat Hong conducted for the Minneapolis-based anarchist magazine, Soil of Liberty, in either 1980 or 1981. The first part was published in Volume 8, No. 2 in Spring 1982. The second part was never published due to demise of the magazine. It has been slightly edited from the original with corrections as needed and clarifications shown in brackets. Footnotes were added for readers unfamiliar with some historical details.

Esther: 1905. I am going to be 75 this December Sabbath, Hannukah, but it comes out on Christmas, sometimes, too. They didn't keep too many records then, even though my mother was very anti-superstition. She was sort of scientific. I remember her going to lectures on child care and all that. (laughs) I remember that one time the doctor was so impressed by her knowledge of something. I came up to say, "Mama" or something and he was surprised she had a big girl already. She says , "I have two more at home." She had five **[four]** sons and two daughters.

SOL: What did your parents do?

Esther: My father was a bricklayer. He was very proud of his trade. They had to build a wall. It wasn't a façade. It had to stand up. They knew their trade thoroughly. The bricklayers were the masons from way back.

You can tell how things moved then. My father used to tell the story. He was anti-militarist, you know, but in Russia you could replace a conscripted member of the family, and my uncle was married and had a child already, so my father went into the army for him. But the priest called him in about something to fix at the monastery. It was heated by a kind of brick oven in the walls. So, the priest called him in and they discussed it. But my father said, "Well, unfortunately, I am leaving to the army for my brother." The priest said, "So, when you come back." Three years or so was just nothing.

We had relatives who came here before the Civil War. We used to visit them after a while when we were in Cleveland—they lived on Cedar Avenue—never forgot that name. They made more of family than they do today. For instance, my mother's letters were kept in the Israel branch of the family, announcing the birth of children and different things that happened. We don't do it. I can barely write to my brother, it seems. I don't know why….

SOL: When did your parents immigrate. Did they immigrate together or separately?

Esther: My parents were never as well off in America as they were in Europe. They hadn't established. Also, my father came because he wanted to escape the militarism—I think the Russian-Japanese War, which was around that time. And in the American wars my father didn't go. We ate beans until I couldn't stand them anymore. Other people were making money and he refused, and my mother didn't say a word. She had to humble herself to go to some relative who had a wholesale grocery store and she lent us money. My father paid it back. My father always lived like that because of his seasonal work. Sometimes he had a big job but he couldn't work because it was too cold. The mortar would freeze. Now they have many things to prevent that. He would walk around looking out the window, "Oh, if this would only let up!" He paid back. His credit was good. I remember his going to a young couple and then going to that person, that storekeeper, and borrowing money to give to these people that they should be able to pay their rent because the husband's work was good. He said it was his debt, it would be paid back. The couple paid

back too. People were honest. They didn't try to do each other out of a debt, but everybody lived with quite a bit of mutual trust. They were neighbors; neighbors meant something.

My father was a lucky fellow. He was the aristocrat of labor. We had a piano in the house. We owned our own house, too. It was nice enough, not magnificent—he was a worker. When times weren't right we lived off borrowed stuff and paid back. It was not comfortable. They worried about it, you know, but that was the way life was. And don't forget—the building trades had a lot of chauvinism and prejudice, and it was in the hands of the Germans and the Irish, see, and they were pretty tough. They didn't want to see anyone in there. The initiation fee was almost $300. I remember they were very exorbitant. The building trades have always been that way. My father put up a fight. He wasn't the only one, but he was very militant in that fight.

The excluded Jewish laborers decided to compete with the unions, [saying], "As much as we do not like it, all is fair in love and war, because we have to make a living for our children too; and we're good workers and we don't see why we should starve." So they passed out leaflets in the community that said there are workers who are willing to work but can't because of prejudice. They decided, "If they're [the building trades] going to work for 65 cents an hour, we're going to work for 55 cents an hour; we can't help it." The war was pretty close and the union finally had to invite them without initiation fee.

My father was given the honor of addressing the union when the Jewish workers were let in. He used to tell this story over and over again. I can remember the exact words that he used. He spoke English with more of a German accent because he had lived with his sister [in Russia among German settlers] and he spoke English like an immigrant, you know. Some union officials were sitting on the stage and while they were speaking, one began to snicker because of his English. My father turned quickly around. "Fellow workers, if your heart was in the right place and where it should be, I would not have to be on this stage speaking in my poor English. I would look at you and we would understand each other without words." And everybody applauded. It seemed like the rafters were coming down. (laughter) My father had his day of glory.

SOL: It's very eloquent.

Esther: Sure. My father never forgave him, that Mr. Wagner.[1] And they started by not giving up their identity. They became the Jewish Bricklayers' Benevolent Association. And why do I

[1] Esther added some comments after the first part of the interview was published:

Wagner, the union business agent never forgave my father because the members applauded his speech which pinpointed Wagner as an anti-Semite. After that, Wagner took every occasion to make it difficult for him.

The Jewish bricklayers decided not to give up their self-help organization and organized themselves into the Jewish Bricklayers Benevolent Association. They presented my mother with an inscribed solver candelabra in appreciation for her support and solidarity.

My parents came over to America. They were never as well off as they were in Russia, where the family were bricklayers and masons for several generations and even owned their own kiln and yard. My family immigrated to America because my father was recalled into the Russian Army to fight in the Russian-Japanese War of 1905. They were pacifists and refused to cooperate in any way with militarism and war.

Although many workers were making good money during the First World War by working in war industry, my father refused to do so. My mother did not complain. She agreed and swallowed her pride and asked relations who owned a wholesale grocery store to help. We ate beans. To this day, it makes me sick to even see a navy bean. My father always scrupulously paid back every cent he ever borrowed, and his credit was excellent. We lived on credit because work was seasonal. Sometimes he would have a big job to go but couldn't work because it was too cold and the mortar would freeze. Now the building trades have all kinds of gimmicks to prevent this. He would pace up and down the house, look out the window and say, "If only this cold weather would let up."

I remember, once when we heard that a neighboring young couple, who lived in a garret apartment in the next house did not have enough money to pay the rent. My father assumed responsibility for the debt because his credit

bring this story, for what reason? That the self-help organizations are endemic. It isn't the government, it's a human characteristic. They had many benevolent institutions, the members of the union and the Wobblies. They had 60,000 members, self-help institutions, even summer camps for the kids. Self-help institutions are natural to the human being, because we are a social animal. They gave my mother a silver candelabra, printed on the bottom you know, because they met in our house. I remember sitting on the lap of one of the members of the group. But it is interesting to see how devoted the union workers were. For instance, "Fellow worker so-and-so is hard up. Who will go to visit him?" It was something that was done like a family. Or, "His wife is ill, who will help?"

SOL (to Sam): Where **did** your parents come from?

Sam: They came from what is now called **Belarus**, western Russia, not too far from Poland.

SOL: When did they emigrate?

Sam: Well, my father **came** here in 1903–04. He wanted to escape the Russian-Japanese War. He was about to be drafted and he wanted to escape. He left my mother, myself, my sister in Europe and came on ahead. A year or two later he sent for us.

SOL: How old were you then?

Sam: I came here at about age 5. I was born in 1902**. [Sam gave various dates of his arrival in US. Usually he said 1905 when he was 3.]**

SOL: You moved to New York City?

Sam: Yeah. My father settled down on the lower east side here. In those days there were no lavatories—the lavatories were in the hall or in the yard. There was no electricity. Gas illumination and coal stove. Very, very crowded.

SOL: What did your father work at?

Sam: In Russia he was a timekeeper on the Trans-Siberian Railroad under construction. He used to check on the time and run a commissary for the workers. Over here he became a house painter because the countrymen who came here before were house painters. A new person would come, one of the countrymen, and they would get him in the trade, get him started. After, when other relatives and friends came here, my father taught them the job.

SOL: So did you go to school in New York?

Sam: I got as far as elementary school. But I never went any further than that. And even the elementary school, they had to burn the place down to get me [out of] there**. So,** my education has not been very formal.

SOL: When did you finish elementary school?

Sam: 1914.

SOL: When did you start working?

Sam: I started to work before finishing elementary school. I worked part time from the age of eleven delivering breakfasts—rolls and milk. In those days they didn't have bottles of milk. They had a big can of twenty gallons or more with a dipper. Each had his own can and they dipped out a quart of milk. We used to hoist it up in what they called a dumbwaiter. I worked before school from about 6:30 to close to 8:00, and after school I worked from 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon to 6:00, and half a day on Saturdays. Got about $4.50 per week.

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was good. The young couple were our neighbors. People lived more or less in mutual trust. My father was sure that money would be paid back, and it was.

My father was a lucky fellow. Bricklayers were considered the aristocracy. Eventually, he owned his own home. We had a piano, nothing magnificent, he was after all only a worker.

After elementary school I went to work full time, around different factories as unskilled labor, as a messenger, all sorts of things. And then my father made up his mind to teach me to be a house painter. But he couldn't make any headway with me. I was very, very obstreperous, I wouldn't listen to him. So, he got a friend of his who was a very good decorator painter, a Swiss, and he told him, "He don't listen to me, so I am giving him to you. Make a painter out of him. If he gives you any trouble, kick him in the ass." I worked for that fellow for three years, then he threw me out. He said, "If you can't get along now, you will never get along."

SOL: **So,** then what?

Sam: Then I was about sixteen or so. I became a social democrat.

SOL: Instead of a house painter you became a social democrat?

Sam: No, I was still a house painter. There was a socialist speaker on the corner. I became so inspired by him. I didn't know shit from granola. (chuckle). Then I joined the Young People's Socialist [League]. They were elected to the State Assembly, elected because they were against the war, because they promised better milk for babies, they were going to save the five-cent fare—they had all kinds of things. Anyhow, they were elected. They had a special train to take them to Albany—a car on the train, the "Red Special." The **band** played "The Internationale", and the three or four that were elected were on the platform. A judge who was elected said the Revolution is here and now, that is the beginning of the end of capitalism, at last, we have this, that and the other thing, you know. They played and they **played. Well,** six months later they threw them all out on a technicality.

In the meantime, the Russian Revolution was starting and we became very inspired by the Revolution, but we didn't know anything; and the Social Democrats were very enthusiastic about it. They kept on with their reformist things. The youth were more inspired for action than the [non] militant **wing,** so if you are interested, I will tell you what happened. [Gap in tape.] So, they decided that I was **very** unruly and they were going to expel me from the young people's group. So, they had a trial and of course they expelled me. After the trial, one of the judges came up and said, "You know, you're not too bad, in fact, you did a pretty good defense as far as these things go, although your case is hopeless. I am going to give you a tip. You're not really a socialist, you are an anarchist." So, I sez to him, "What's their address?"

I joined the *Road to Freedom* group and for a while everything was going very nicely, but then friction developed, not only [for] myself but a few of the other young people. First of all, [the Road to Freedom group] had nothing positive—they were against everything. Secondly, every yokel who rode in on a freight beam, who happened to be passing by, would come into the meeting and holler just as much as if he was a member. They had no qualifications. There was a guy from Canada who used to talk about being an unfinished organism. To him, everyone was an unfinished organism. And he got up there and says, "Emma Goldman? Who is Emma Goldman? She gets [something] once a month when she has her period."

And anything more than three or four people was a bureaucracy. Not even a committee of relations, because we were in a hall taken over by different groups of anarchists. There was the Italian group, a Spanish group, Russians, all kinds—except for the Yiddish group that had their own place. And the most utopistic ideals, but they couldn't answer one [practical] question: What are we going to do? How are we going to do it? How will we run industry? How shall we interest people? They were vegetarians. To them vegetarianism was an article of faith. Pacifists and all kinds of sex. Not that I cared about it. There was nothing there.

So, we [the younger anarchists] started to raise objections: "You put out a paper, [where] one page laughs at the other page. You have no ideas that are worth a damn. You give the impression of being a bunch of screwballs."

Well, [the Road to Freedom group] didn't believe in expelling anybody, you know, so they say, "You know, you're not really an anarchist, you're a Wobbly." So, I sez, "What's their address?" So, from that day I became an anarchistic, **syndicalistic Wobbly.**

SOL: When did you and Esther meet?

Sam: In 1930–31. Yours truly was making a propaganda tour. We used to speak for both the Wobblies and the anarchists. In those days we didn't have such things as expenses or transit fare paid. You got there the best way they could, you took freights. I hit Cleveland, Ohio, and I got off the freight and I was told to meet her or somebody in front of the public library. Which I did, and that's how we met. She was in charge of the forum which I was supposed to address. And I debated a communist lawyer. I pulled a trick on him, and he was fit to be tied. I memorized a big piece of what Trotsky said, but I didn't tell him that Trotsky said it. I made that my emphasis and he started to rebut it. And I sez, "Now look here, don't blame me—Trotsky said it."

"You're a liar." You're this and that.

And I sez, "The fact is, I have the book here."

He sez, "Show me the book," and after I show it to him, he sez, "What a dirty Irish trick."

I sez, "I'm not an Irishman."

Anyhow, it was the height of the Depression and they got up a committee to get my fare to Buffalo. In the meantime, she chased me up and down the city of Cleveland in a taxi and she was really after me. She was after me to commit marriage, but…

Esther: (laughing) Oh no, no, what a story!

Sam: …we got together anyhow and she came a year or two later to New York. I gave her a line of bullshit about Ibsen, recited Shakespeare, things like that, and she thought the sun rose and set on me. But now she found out different because no man is a hero to his wife.

Esther: (still laughing) No man is supposed to be a hero.

SOL: What was your political involvement after you got the Wobbly address?

Sam: Well, then I became an anarcho-syndicalistic-pluralistic, anarcho-communistic individualist. I was sort of a combination of everything but more inclined to anarcho-communism, anarcho-syndicalism. But I knew that something constructive had to be done and I knew that at least the Wobblies had an alternative and that we should have self-management,

Then I met Maximoff in the '20s when I was on the bum in Chicago. I was a member of a group called "The Free Society" and Maximoff had just arrived in Chicago. He and his wife Olga had been deported from Russia and had lived in Berlin for a while and in Paris for a while, and then they came to Canada with the idea of coming to the 'States. And they landed in Windsor, across the river from Detroit. **So**, the anarchists from Chicago and Detroit staged a picnic in the park in the middle of the river and the Maximoffs came to the picnic. And when the time came to go back, they put them in a van with boxes and they got them into the 'States. This was in 1926. It was not legal. He went under the name of Urkevich and we had a comrade who taught him how to be a paper hanger. In the **meantime,** he learned English. His wife worked as a cashier in a department store.

We got talking to Maximoff and he listened to me for a while, my half-baked ideas, full of violence, full of thunder, romantic and all that. "You know", he sez, "you are a very dangerous

fellow to work with. I would never work with you. You know, I think you are crazy but being that you are young there is still some hope for you."

And he started to guide my reading, talking to me, and he straightened out my ideas. Not that I agreed with him, but every time I talked with him, he'd say Kropotkin said this, said that, this one said this. So, well, I sez—I'd better take the matter serious—if I'm going to be an anarchist. I'm going to get involved. I ain't satisfied with a few little pamphlets they had around. I made up my mind I was going to get a reading knowledge of the necessary languages. So, I taught myself French, Spanish, a little bit of German, Italian. I know a little bit of Yiddish, too.

Maximoff, I used to almost worship him. He was not my guru, but I thought of him almost like a guru, and he is the one who straightened out my ideas about the necessity of social anarchism. Not as an article of faith, but more than that: anarchism as a believable alternative, and rooted in the history of struggle. This is what set me off right.

SOL: How long did you stay in Chicago?

Sam: I stayed in Chicago for about three years. That brought me to the late '20's, and then I went on the tours. I was on the loose for eight years or so without a steady place to live. I lived places a year or so and worked, but I had no steady place.

In Chicago I was associated with "The Free Society" group and the Wobblies, who had their headquarters at 1001 West Madison. I was a good friend of Dr. Ben Reitman. He was called "the clap doctor from Chicago" because he specialized in venereal diseases. His books were on prostitutes, pimps, things like that. He was a very good man.

Esther: These were the first of sociological studies of these things. He was one of the first people to talk about venereal disease, take blood tests, and view it as a disease like any other.

SOL: How did you meet him?

Sam: We had an anarchist group called "The Free Society" group. He used to come up there once in a while. He lived on the North Side around a place called Bughouse Square, Newberry Square, where all the non-conformists came. One day Reitman came in with a nice woman and said, "I want the group to meet my newest wife. This is the latest edition." He invited us to come up to his place to drink whiskey. This was during Prohibition, you know. He used to be a physician, so he would write out prescriptions (for liquor).

I also met a fellow named Hippolyte Havel, and I hit it off with Reitman. We saw each other often. He used to be very active in and around Skid Row on Madison Street. When he died, he left $1500 to all the bums on Madison Street to drink to his health, and anyone found weeping in his beer wouldn't get any more drinks. He was very eccentric.

Esther: For those years! He wore those pajamas—the loose pants, big white pants like pajamas. They were paunchy. He wore his shirt out with an open collar.

Sam: He had a cane with a snake on top, and every one of his fingers was full of rings. He had a necklace and a big ribbon for a tie and a big hat. But a good fellow. In this sense, I don't think Emma Goldman when she wrote about him was fair. We all know he had a lot of faults, there's no getting around it, but she wasn't very generous. He was phony in many ways, but I'll tell you this much: he had many qualities. He did more for her than she ever did for him. If he wasn't an anarchist, that's nobody's fault. That's the way he was. He gave the best that was in him, and she should have been a little more considerate.

Berkman said, "He isn't even a doctor, he's a phony, he's an adventurer who is milking you.", and this that and the other thing. Finally, they found out that he really was a doctor and furthermore a goddamn good doctor. I know he had a lot of faults, but I think Goldman was the kind of

person who went overboard when she didn't like someone. She wouldn't find even one saving grace in the person. She was very dogmatic and hard to live with. So, I'm not saying the guy was an angel, but I do not think he did more than she gave him credit for.

Esther: He was a pioneer in the sociological studies having to do with women of the road, the whole question of prostitution. It was a scientific study that was accepted as such. Sociology was in its infancy. He made blood studies. In Cleveland he was put in jail and during the day he did work in the Health Department. He was a man of distinction in many ways. People came distances to ask his advice and you must remember you didn't take an airplane and be in India in two hours. He had really travelled too and was consulted about different countries**. He went** to the Orient, everywhere. He travelled all around the world at a time when it wasn't easy to do that. He dressed the way they did in tropical countries—loose clothes, colorful. To make little of him isn't fair.

SOL: After Chicago where did you go?

Sam: I went back to Kansas City, Missouri. There a very amusing thing happened around the Mooney-Billings case. I was on the bum in Kansas City or somewhere in the Midwest, and one day I was on the street I saw a fellow with a big coffin with the words, "Justice wasn't done in California—Save Tom Mooney." I listened for a while and said, "That's not a bad idea, that coffin and all."

He asked, "Are you footloose? I tell you, I'm getting tired of driving this hearse and selling the literature. How about coming with me? I need some help. I'm heading toward Chicago. East of Chicago another fellow with another hearse, a fellow with a wooden leg called Kelso is doing the same thing. You can sleep in the hearse with a pillow or two. I'll get up and spout off. You introduce me and sell the literature."

I asked him how he ws going to get along in the small towns, coming in with that sort of thing. He said, "If the Chief of Police is Irish and we're out for Mooney and Billings, they won't bother me."

So, I slept in the hearse and we went back to Chicago. When we got back to Chicago the Mooney Committee was coming under control of the Communists. They didn't want Harry Meyers (who later marries Thorstein Veblen's niece) to continue. They said, "You must surrender the hearse, the literature, and everything else. You're fired. Kelso is fired,", and so forth.

So, Harry Meyers said, "Jeez, what are we gonna do?"

I said, "Don't give them anything. You hang on to that goddamn wagon and you go see the IWW."

The IWW had a headquarters at what was called Three Nickels—555 West Lake Street. A fellow named Mahler was the Secretary-Treasurer. So, we went to him and told him the story. He said, "This hearse and all its contents are in the custody of the IWW; and it's parked in a garage in a garage across the way and will stay there until we can return it to the legitimate Committee."

Then I started to travel east and met Esther in Cleveland.

SOL: I recall a story you.ve told about a meeting in Detroit during the '30's.

Sam: The mayor was named Murphy and he was a civil libertarian. He was always very favorable to free speech. All the radical groups used to pop off in the Grand Circus Park, including the Wobblies. They used to fight over space. Every time the Wobblies would get us to talk, the Communists would heckle and guys would throw us off the platform. We had them all spotted and decided we'd teach them something. So our speaker got up and said, "You know, there is one

thing I don't like, and that's a cowardly rat like you are. You haven't even got the guts to admit you're Communists. How many of you here are Communists?"

The minute they raised their hands, they went down because we were each beside them with a club wrapped with *The Daily Worker*. They cried, "Bums, murderers, Hearst-ers! Break up the meeting!"

We said, "This is only the beginning. We're organized and if you want to grow old, keep away. Otherwise you're going to die young." No trouble after that.

Esther: They would fill up a hall and when the speaker began, they would stamp their feet in part of the hall. When you'd go over to them to make order, they would stamp in another part of the hall. You had to do something.

Sam: We had quite a few run-ins like that.

SOL: This was in the 1930s. they were very dominating?

Sam: They [the Communists] had their own people in every single slot allotted to the different speakers. They wouldn't let anyone talk except themselves. They had a good squad and would forcibly throw anyone else of the [speaker's] box. Murphy, the mayor, said, "Look, how the hell are you radicals gonna make a new society when you can't even arrange so each gets a fair share of time? I looks like I have to step in now. From now on there won't be any more beatings. I am going to allot the time and I'll have the cops there. You have a half hour and after that, off you go and another one gets up."

He [the Mayor] brought order out of chaos, not exactly a compliment to us. We weren't responsible for the disorder. It was the Communists. We were willing to share and share alike, but they wouldn't have `it`[JS1] .

SOL: In the mid-30's you were back in New York, correct?

Sam: I came back to New York in the mid-thirties.

SOL: Esther, did you travel with Sam during this time?

Esther: I traveled some. We went to see the Bonus Marchers to Washington. We went to Stelton. We always hitchhiked to Stelton and environs. The big thing was the Bonus Marchers camping in the streets of Washington. General MacArthur was the fellow who expelled them.

Sam: I want to tell you something about the '30s. The '30s was when we finally got together in New York. We decided that we could not get along with varieties of anarchists with whom we had had serious disagreements. We could get along when we had something in common, but we could not identify with them because we couldn't get our ideas across. So we got away from *The Road to Freedom*, which was being published then, and we organized an anarchist-communist group. We put out several papers. One was called *Friends of Freedom* and we also had *The Vanguard*. We continued that way until other groups came in, such as the *Resistance* group—a fellow named David Wieck and a few other people. From time on, we had an identifiable current with a definite formulation of basic principles.

We had a disagreement over the war. The group of people who came with us on *The Vanguard* dissolved. The paper now depended on a couple of people and that's not good for the movement. So we gave up publication. But later on, shortly after World War II began, we started again and put out a paper called *Why?* Our position was, we had to get rid of Hitler because he was a threat to civilization; gotta fight fascism. But we don't trust the government to do the job. **Therefore,** we fight only on the condition that nobody profits off the war, that the struggle would not be directed by the government, and that we make sure the fascists are defeated and that social justice be instituted along with the battle; a centristic, **intermediate position.**

Other people joined our group. David Wieck and Dave Dellinger hung around. Paul Goodman was on the periphery. We had different ideas. They had a sort of bohemian approach to things. Most of them did not believe in organization. Any group over four was a conspiracy. They were a hundred per cent against the war, come what may. I'm not arguing who was right or wrong, just that we had this disagreement. They didn't believe in a Declaration of Principles. They were more interested in the artistic, personalistic things. They were out to capture the Village, but Greenwich Village captured them.

They were virulently anti-syndicalist and we couldn't get along—it was impossible to get along! The smallest things would bring objections and there were big fights and arguments over and over again. They said the Spanish Civil War was doomed to failure and that they didn't believe in it; the CNT was a reformist outfit. It was a lot of things and we couldn't get along. We left because we weren't the ones running the thing. There were only three or four of us and they had ten or more. They were actually doing the work and we couldn't do anything, so we said, "All right, if we can't get along, we can't get along."

They put out a paper called *Resistance*. It resisted every attempt at common sense, in my opinion. It lasted a few years. The guiding light of the group, David Wieck—I don't know if you ever heard of him—became a professor of philosophy at the Polytechnic University near Albany. His mother named him David Thoreau Wieck. Anyway, in the mid to late '40s t**hey** started what they called The Resistance Group. In the '50s we started the paper *Views and Comments*, organized along the same lines as the [Vanguard group] in the '30s.

SOL: We skipped the magazine that you worked on in the '30s during the Spanish Civil War.

Sam: We had a paper called, *The Spanish Revolution*. That was not our own. When the Revolution took place and the commies and everyone else had all this publicity, our people got **together.** We had a delegate come from Spain to talk to us. So, all the libertarian tendencies formed United Libertarian Organizations to present the anarchist side of the conflict in *The Spanish Revolution*, of which I was one of the "idioters." We kept it alive for a year and a half or two years. In 1938, after the events of 1937, we became very unhappy with the way things had gone. So we had to give up the paper; we didn't get enough support. **Instead,** we branched out to help the prisoners.

SOL: Was there an attempt to ship arms by the anarchists in New York?

Sam: Yes, we got together, the United Libertarian Organizations, which included the Spaniards, and we equipped a ship, the *Mar Cantabrica*. The Cantabrica is a small sea on the northern coast of Spain, off the Atlantic coast. A Spaniard gave the ship its name. We loaded that ship with guns, ammunition, medical supplies, everything. You don't realize what it took for the groups to undertake a thing like that. We raised I don't know how much money for it. But there was a stool pigeon who notified Franco about the ship, and when it was due in Spanish waters and it never reached port.

SOL: It did sail from New York?

Sam: Sailed into Spain but never reached port. It was intercepted by the Franco navy. I forgot whether they sank the ship or they took everything. They killed or imprisoned the crew. The crew was our people, too, everybody from the guy who peeled potatoes to the captain. Somebody there, either on the boat or who had been active and knew about the preparations. He went ahead, the son of a bitch, and betrayed us. We had done a lot of work. I had left Esther with the young boy and had one in the oven and was about to pop. I went all over to raise money.

SOL: That must have been a big disappointment.

Sam: Yeah. We were very bitter, too, because they (the CNT) had joined the government and it made it very hard to explain things, you know. It was embarrassing! Irrespective of whether they had to or not, it was very embarrassing for us (chuckle).

I got support while we were raising money. There are soft coal fields in southern Illinois—Springfield to St. Louis, around there. We had an organization called Progressive Mine Workers of America, an anti-Lewis union strongly influenced by our people, a lot of Italian anarchists and syndicalists, different people. They had sent for me to come down there—not because I was so competent, but I was footloose—to fight the Communists in the small towns who had an outfit of their own called the National Miners Union, and to help out the boys. They weren't so good at speaking. I went down and got together with a local whose secretary was a fellow named Batuello. There were two brothers, John and Dominic. They were on our side of the barricades, strong Wobblies, not Marxists but anarchists, Bakunin Wobblies. There are different kinds of Wobbly. I'm a Bakunin Wobbly.

Anyway when the [Spanish] Revolution broke out, all of a sudden we get a check for $5000. The locals of the Progressive Mine Workers Union had taxed themselves at a dollar each and sent $5000 to the United Libertarian Organizations. They kept it up for months and months and months until it went under. It was a big help and they gave me credit for it but I had nothing to do with it. I had left there long before all this took place, but the sons of guns remembered everything. Don't give me credit. I didn't do it.

SOL: Did many U.S. anarchists go to Spain? The anarchists didn't have anything like the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

Sam: No, no, not even resembling it. We never had a concerted anarchist battalion or anything like that. Most of those who went over, Wobblies and a few others, joined either the Abraham Lincoln Brigade or the Debs Brigade, but mostly the Abraham Lincoln Brigade—that was the Communists. The Debs Brigade, if that was the right name for it, were socialists. I dare say we may have had a couple dozen going at most. We discouraged them because during the whole ferment the CNT sent a delegation to the 'States, a delegation of four or five, to see whether we could get some support from the trade union movement for the Spanish cause, particularly our side of it and to see if we could get arms. But no men.

They [the CNT] told us, "Please don't go! Please don't send anybody! We have more men than we have arms. If you stay here and you try to raise money and try to get arms, that will be more than enough, and we'll be happy." They discouraged it. I was one of the people discouraging them from going to Spain: "You're not going to do a goddamn bit of good. They have enough rifle hands there." So, we didn't have very many go..

SOL: Was there much police harassment during this period?

Sam: No, not very much. What we did have was competition among a number of outfits who were looking for money to help their particular grouping in Spain. We were one of the competition. The State Department interceded and said, "It's perfectly all right for you to raise whatever money and help you can. But you must file a declaration with us stating the name of your organization, how much money you have raised, and what part of that money went to Spain and what part was used for administrative and other purposes. If you don't tell the truth you'll go to jail, get sued."

The Communists had the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, and out of every dollar, ninety cents went for administration. Only a dime of every dollar reached Spain.

We of the United Libertarian Organizations sent every single penny we raised to Spain, and paid expenses out of our own pockets.

SOL: You had no administrative costs?

Sam: Not a goddamn cent.

Esther: If we didn't make any money at the meeting, so be it; we dug into our own pockets and made up the expenses and made up the money. But no administration.

Sam: That was the way it was. I have to tell you about poor Harry Owens. He was a member of the Wobbly sailor's union, I.U. 510, and he went to Spain with the International Brigades. He started to raise hell with the Communists. They were very dictatorial and they were inciting the troops against the CNT. So Harry raised holy hell with them. You know what they did? They put him in the front line to be sure he'd be killed. And he wasn't the only one. I know at least half a dozen people in the International Brigades who were either killed outright or imprisoned.

There was a fellow who later became associated with us in *Views and Comments* named Russell Blackwell. He started off as a Communist. He knew Spanish perfectly and he was sent out to influence the youth movements in Central America. Then he became a Trotskyite. Then he joined a split-off from the Trotskyites. Then he went to Spain. He was a stowaway on a ship to Paris and then hitchhiked to Spain. During the May Days in Barcelona in 1937 he was a member of the Amigos de Durruti. He got shot in the leg.

There he got in touch with the CNT and became anarcho-syndicalist. They named him Negretti, "the black one", because his name was Blackwell. He was about to leave for the 'States when the Communists snatched him from aboard the ship, claiming he was an agent of Franco, and put him in jail. There was a big campaign by the CNT and they got him out. He came here and became active in the Libertarian League. He was walking down Fourteenth Street and the Communists' gangsters and goons got hold of him and beat him up while he was wheeling his kid in a pram. They [the Communists] were very vindictive.

[At this point the article says "To be continued..."]

(Excerpted from *Soil of Liberty* magazine, Volume 8, No. 2, Spring 1982. Minneapolis, MN.)

This is the second part of a two-part interview with Sam and Esther Dolgoff. The first part was published in the anarchist magazine, Soil of Liberty, Volume 8, No. 2. The second part was never published.

Nhat Hong: I've read several different things about Carlo Tresca's assassination. One was that it was done by Mussolini's contact with the Italian underworld. Another was that the Communists were guilty. What was your view of it at the time, and now?

Sam: I could never make up my mind about it and still can't. He could have been killed by either of those or others. I know that Generoso Pope, editor of the daily *Italiano-Americano,* and the fascists were very strongly against him because he and the Italian comrades used to break up fascist meetings in New York City. They would walk around with canes with razor blades in the bottom amd give the fascists a slash in the ass. It was pretty bad and they sure didn't love him (chuckle). And the Communists were dead set against him because he was always fighting with

them. We don't know to this day [1980].[2] There is no reliable, foolproof evidence who killed him. So I don't know, and as far as I know, no one else knows.

Nhat: Tresca was the editor of a daily paper, wasn't he?

Sam: *Il Martello,* The Hammer. It came out weekly, and later twice a month. We had an English page in there. We had something to do with putting it out.

Nhat: Tresca's paper crusaded against fascism, gangsterism, and the Communist Party?

Sam: He made many, many enemies. I was very close to him personally and was deeply distressed about how he went under. I've got a picture here and it says in says in Italian on the bottom, "His flowing blood fertilized the idea."

Esther: It hangs on our wall all the time. He was a very colorful figure. Although his English wasn't good, he gave a good presentation against the fascists. A lot of people poke at this one meeting, but no one gave a clearer analysis of the fascist movement. The fascists had every reason to be after him. And on the other hand, he was always asking about Julia Stewart Poyntz.

Sam: Poyntz was a writer and fellow traveler with the Communists, who eventually became a Party member. One day she suddenly disappeared. She had been disagreeing with the Communists and attacking them. Carlo wrote a pamphlet, "Where is Julia Stewart Poyntz?", which said that the CP had kidnapped and killed her. Whether they did or not, I don't know, but they were fit to be tied. There were so many people who could have killed Carlo—how the hell do I know who killed him? After he was killed, every year the Italians would go down to the corner where it happened, drop roses on the spot, and have speakers.

Carlo was very romantic. He has a "roving eye" and liked the ladies. He lived for years with his sweetheart, the wobbly agitator, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. One day we were at our hall on Broadway, a young man came up and said, "I just got in from California and here is my girl friend and I happen to be Carlo Tresca's son." I took a look at him and said, "You're a carbon copy. I don't doubt your word. You look just like your father. Is your mother Elizabeth Gurley Flynn?" To my surprise he said, "She is not my mother, she's my aunt." It seems that while Gurley Flynn was away making revolution, Carlo managed to seduce her sister. She became pregnant and that was it. Carlo's son calls himself Martin and till recently owned a bookstore on the southwest corner of 89th St. and Broadway.

Nhat: Did you ever have meetings in saloons or bars?

Sam: Never. We might go out after a meeting and have a few drinks, but never, never did we meet in a saloon. In Manchester, England, we did have a meeting of forty people in a meeting room in a pub in 1980, when syndicalists and the Wobblies got together to talk with me. It was a big compliment for me and the drinks were coming free.

Nhat: So your meetings were mainly rented halls?

Sam: In rented halls: or occasionally we hired a place for a banquet, a special celebration. But we never met in a saloon.

Esther: In our day there was a sign in the Wobbly hall: "You can't fight the boss if you like the bottle."

Nhat: Did anarchists use the Wobbly hall?

[2] Dorothy Gallagher, in her biography of Carlo Tresca, *All the Right Enemies,* identified the likely assassin as Frank Garofalo, a Mafia gangster with ties to the pro-Fascist newspaper mogul Generoso Pope. The Tresca murder was likely covered up by the NYPD and the FBI in an effort to protect Pope and place suspicion on the Communists. Sam reviewed Gallagher's book in *Libertarian Labor Review,* No. 6, Winter 1989.

Sam: In New York, our anarchist-communist group, the Vanguard, shared a hall with the IWW. That was on 17th Street. We were on good terms as far as it went, and it didn't go far either. I've got my reservations even though I'm still a member.

Nhat: Getting back to the 1950's, is that when the Libertarian League started?

Sam: It was most active in the mid-50's to the early to mid-60's. Then we went under. It was a peculiar situation. We went under precisely when there was so much interest aroused in anarchism all over the country. Our literature was being snapped up left and right. We got more orders than we could take care of. We had to reprint some things. But our problem became acute because we didn't have somebody there to do the necessary day to day work that keeps an organization alive. For example, somebody would undertake to open the hall and then wouldn't show up with the key. The correspondence wasn't taken care of. The books were so badly kept that we didn't know where the money went. Nothing—literally nothing was being done. The work fell on two or three people. The others left everything to us—but the minute we did anything we were called "dictators" (chuckle). Blackwell, who was one of our closest people, suddenly became interested only in the civil rights movement. He left us holding the bag. He didn't even go to pick up mail. So in the midst of the time we should have been enjoying the fruit of our labor—Esther did most of the work.

Esther: I did all the work.

Sam: Almost. I did it when I could, but I had a job. I hadn't retired yet. Maybe one or two others occasionally helped, but we were always there, and we simply couldn't keep it up any more. It's such a sad thing to go under the very moment, we could have been so useful. It was a very sad situation. I'm still resentful.

Esther: We had a friend at the post office—a black fellow—who warned us that we were being watched by the FBI. He would always tell us when the inspectors were going through our mail. We had all kinds of characters around who hastened our downfall. One SOB posed as a Catholic priest. He wore his collar backwards. Another guy stole our literature and sold it to second-hand bookstores. Another would borrow money and never pay back a nickel. The fellow eho was supposed to did not pay the rent and disappeared. But we never lost payments for books or other literature ordered by outside groups.

Sam: We met every obligation any way we could. But we went under because of a lack of internal organization and because of insufficient dedication to the movement. You can't operate without that.

Nhat: I remember you telling about having to burn all kinds of things in your furnace. Was that in the 50's?

Esther: There was a lot of surveillance.

Sam: That must have been in the McCarthy times. We had a lot of trouble. We kept the mailing list in different places, and we burned correspondence instead of keeping it. I'm glad we did that, because we didn't know how far the reaction would go, and we felt responsible to protect our readers.

That reminds me of a story about the Wobblies. Herbert Mahler was the Secretary of the organization. He was also Secretary of the General Defense Committee here in New York, and during the 30's he was raising money for the Kentucky miners. There was a woman who was a steady contributor to the GDC. She sent maybe one or two hundred dollars to the Kentucky miners with a note: "I'm sending this contribution, but I know full well you're just like the rest

of them. You probably can't account for the money and God knows what it's going to be used for. But I'm a sucker, so I'm sending it anyhow."

Mahler returned the check with his own note: "The IWW is an organization of the highest integrity. We do not accept contributions from people who distrust us or who in any way think we misappropriate anything. We therefore return this contribution to you. Perhaps you can find someone you can trust. We don't deal with people who don't trust us."

Know what she did? Took a god damn train to New York and gave us twice as much money! She said, "You're the only one in all those god damn years that renewed all my faith in humanity!" If anyone made the slightest hint or implication that we didn't deserve he contribution he or she was sending, we always sent it back. We never lost anything that way. We always got it back with an apology, or got more. Our organization is based on trust and mutual respect. We will not capitulate to base insinuations. "Go to the Communists." That made a big impression.

Nhat: Tell us when you taught school in Boston.

Sam: I never knew Sacco and Vanzetti intimately, but I did run across them in a place called Newton Upper Falls, one of the Boston suburbs, where the Italians conducted social-cultural activities in a house of their own, a building called, "Casa del Pueblo", (House of the People). They had a theater, a dining room, a kitchen, a game room, and even classrooms. They didn't trust the public school system and wanted their children to get a "revolutionary education." They "hired" me—at no stated salary—to teach children. After each session they would take up a collection and give me the proceeds. Not only the students attended but also the parents, particularly the fathers.

They didn't care about anything besides anarchism and revolution—that was the main subject for them. The parents would sit there with the students and listen carefully that I recited the dogma exactly, according to their formula. If I said something they disagreed with, they would think nothing of disrupting the class and arguing the point as if the students were not there. It was very embarrassing and disruptive, and the kids were getting pretty fed up. Things soon got to be impossible. I resented it that the parents were interfering, and that anarchists were putting all sorts of unofficial but nevertheless rigorous censorship on anything I said. You couldn't talk to anybody. It was like dancing on eggs. I never met such a strong informal dictatorship! It can be more devastating than an official one.

So I eventually quit. No amount of money and all the king's horses and all the king's men could ever induce me to go through such an ordeal. But all their quarrels notwithstanding, they were really friendly people. They didn't think anything of giving me an argument and forgetting it two minutes later. So they asked me to recommend a replacement. I said, "How do I know you are not going to get another pain in the ass like me?"

"Well," they said, "we'll take a chance. You're not as bad as we think you are, but a good deal worse than you think you are." I got a wobbly named Stockman to teach there a while. Stockman was ready to leave with his wife, and he got Carl Keller, a very good wobbly, to replace him.

Sacco and Vanzetti would come to classes. I'll say one thing for them: they didn't talk and interfere. But my knowledge of the case does not come from them, but from their comrade, Aldino Fellicani. He was a professional printer, with a shop on Milk Street in Boston. He used to do all the printing for the Italian societies and for magazines. He even offered to print our *Vanguard* free of charge, but it was too far from Boston to New York. He published the magazine *Contro Corriente.*

Anyway, he told us things about the Sacco-Vanzetti case which he didn't want known. He said nothing until years after the event, when he felt free to talk to comrades he regarded as close, who would use a certain amount of discretion. But since poor old Aldino is long gone, I feel free to tell about an incident which took place when the case still more or less a local matter. Every politician was corrupt, and nobody made any bones about it. Their motto was "How much?" One of them—times were hard and he probably needed the money—said to Aldino, "Aldino, the boys are in a hot spot. If it goes no further and it remains between us, I can fix the case. It'll cost about $5,000, but I don't get it all. I have to distribute it to the right people in the right places in the right manner at the right time. I can get it either quashed, or they might do a few months, but that's about all. That's my proposition. Take it or leave it."

Aldino, of course, couldn't take it upon himself to do a thing like this without talking to Sacco and Vanzetti. He went and talked to them and one of them, I forget which one, was adamant. Even if he dropped dead he wouldn't have anything to do with the state, and certainly not with a corrupt politician. The other one showed slight signs of being receptive, not weakening—slight signs. But being that he did not want to be less heroic than his partner, he turned the deal down. Besides Aldino had reservations, too. "Who the hell is this guy? How do I know he isn't a racketeer who will take the $5,000 and the boys could go to the chair just the same? And how do I know he won't spill the beans and blackmail us, saying, 'I'll squeal on you if you don't give me more?"

So he said, "The hell with it. Besides they are innocent." That's what he was thinking at the time. But later, when the case became aa cause celebre and everybody in the world knew about it, they became symbols, martyrs. They had to pay with their lives for their martyrdom. They perhaps could have been saved but they were made martyrs. The fellow who proposed the payoff was not entirely mercenary about it. He seemed to have a strong feeling for them, in his own way. If I'm not mistaken, he even intimated that he himself wouldn't get a nickel out of it. He was doing them a favor.

Aldino did go back to him later. "It's too late," he said. "The fat's in the fire. The prestige of the State of Massachusetts and the government of the United States is involved. All the king's horses and all the king's men and a million dollars won't help you. The only thing you can do is appeal to the governor."

I want to make a little remark concerning the virtues of political corruption. When we have a strictly "honest" state (which is a strictly dishonest state), and they are very, very legal and very, very exact about enforcing the law to the letter, nothing can be done about anything because there is always some legal objection. You can't get anything done for love or money unless you are willing to wait for the outcome of years and years of litigation. So, if you want some thing done, loosen up the strings. You need the politician. And when the politician is paid and does his job and screws up the legal process to make things work for you for a little while, he's doing you a big service. Everything was going nicely when these politicians were in power. You went up to the corner ward heeler and told him, "I'm a regular registered Democrat or Republican. I got a little money. Could you see to it that they fix this ticket?"

And he'd fix it. The only way by which the system works, at least partially, is through these people. They are unconsciously performing a valuable service. In all the totalitarian countries there are just such people around who can make the thing work and make the state look altogether ridiculous. That's only a little remark *en passant* (in passing), and I will no doubt be accused of being in favor of corruption and the law. I'm in favor of the type of corruption that will bypass the law. If we can pay for that, I'd be tickled to pay for it. As far as I'm concerned, if we

could have paid money to save Sacco and Vanzetti, it would have done more damn good for them and their lives than all that howling and propaganda and speeches from political opportunists. That's my feeling on the matter.

Nhat: There was a lot of rivalry over who controlled the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee, wasn't there?

Sam: There was a great deal of very, very unhappy things. First of all, the Communists didn't want Sacco and Vanzetti free. Katharine Ann Porter write a little book about the case. They were using the case to enhance their prestige and make propaganda. The money they got went to their party. Then we had a bunch of lawyers out to make a reputation for themselves. A few of them had a great deal to do with the case, too. I'm not saying they wanted to be, but they were very, very inept. Then there were also all kinds of political opportunists on the bandwagon who couldn't give a goddamn about Sacco and Vanzetti altogether. In all the talk and all the noise that was made, the fact remains that these two comrades lost their lives.

I knew an anarchist named Harry Kelly.[3] He was one of the most prominent anarchists in the United States, a Welshman I believe, but he lived here all his life. He was one of the founders of Stelton (an anarchist community in New Jersey) and the Mohegan [New York state] Ferrer School. He delivered a talk shortly after the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti and said, "What you people miss is one thing. You howl and raise hell about how the law has this, that, and the other thing, has been transgressed, etc. Each and every atrocity, from the first time of the arrest to the time they were executed, no matter how horrendous and cruel, was legal. From the legal point of view the State had an open and shut case. Remember that everything done to them was legal."

He said, "Legal—get it through your thick heads. It's the State!" That was my boy. He was good. He had them mesmerized.

Nhat: How and when did the Libertarian Book Club come about?

Sam: How the idea came about is a little vague. When Maximoff came to New York while touring for the Russian anarchists, we got together with him and he said, "The education of the young has been sorely neglected, and we should organize a club to get anarchist propaganda published."

This idea had been floating around. He wasn't the originator, but he brought it to people's attention. So we started a book club—this was in the late 40's, I believe. It incorporated under the laws of the State of New York and started publishing books. At first the club just published books and held an annual banquet to raise funds. That would build up the treasury to several thousand dollars. The first book was Voline's *The Unknown Revolution.* This was a translation of about half the original by a fellow named Holly Kantine published with some collaboration from Freedom Press in London. Then came Eltzbacher's book on anarchism,[4] and then *Men Against the State.* They published *The Ego and His Own* by Stirner because we has a few Stirnerites in the club and they said, "We've been very tolerant of you when you've published the other things. You should be to us."

We didn't want to insult Stirner. We also gave assistance to authors—when we saw someone who was trying to write a book, we have them a few dollars. We also got into selling books [by other publishers].

[3] Harry Kelly was born in the United States. He travelled to England and worked briefly with Peter Kropotkin, before returning to the United State.

[4] Paul Eltzbacher, *Anarchism.* Eltzbacher was a German Jewish anarchist who later converted to Bolshevism after the Leninist takeover in Russia.

We lost money on every one of these books, because we had no system of distribution. We seldom printed more than a thousand copies of a book. We went to bookstores. The fellow in charge was very enterprising, and he'd give the books to the stores for next to nothing, at a heavy loss. But we had the satisfaction of knowing that the books were in circulation.

Then the club started running short of money. They had some money, but not personnel. People were getting old and a lot of them dropped out. The club gave an advance to Nicholas Walter to do Kropotkin's *Words of a Rebel,* a collection of writings, some of which hadn't been published before. He couldn't carry it through because he had health problems and returned the money. By that time the club lacked the imagination and the people to do translations. The half dozen or so who were left had other things to do. So, we went to putting on monthly lectures, and sold a lot of new literature, much of it not published by us. We were getting old and diminished in numbers—one man was way over 80, another sick, one died.

Then this new group, Steve Paar, Mitch Miller and others saved the situation by stepping in. The club still has a little money, a little over a thousand dollars, peanuts nowadays, but we're still able to help some publications. They can always lay their hands on some money. They have enough of a [mailing] list that they won't have financial problems.

That's about all, except that we always met in the headquarters of a branch of the Workmen's Circle, a fraternal organization in cooperative houses more or less like these. {Sam and Esther live in cooperative high-rises in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The houses were partly built with union funds. Nhat Hong] Abe Bluestein was the manager of the project at that time. He got the Workmen's Circle to rent the hall to us, and we've been meeting there for I don't know how many years now. All told we can say that it has been a success. The lectures varied from very bad to fairly good, but every month we had a forum, there would be a reunion of people and social atmosphere.

Esther: Don't forget, we were their best customers for books.

Sam: Yeah. By the way, we were the ones that bought the books [laughter].

Esther: The Libertarian League also conducted open forums every Friday, rain or shine. We had speakers on different subjects from all kinds of groups: War Resisters League, Catholic Workers' Group, IWW, dissident communist groups, Samuel H. Friedman who ran for Vice-President with Norman Thomas on the Socialist Party ticket, etc. etc.

Nhat: What kind of circulation did your magazine have?

Sam: *The Vanguard* in the late 20's and 30's had around 3,000 which was very good for those days. People not of our persuasion considered it one of the very best publications of the radical movement. Very, very good articles. We were in constant correspondence with Emma Goldman, and she would pass judgement on them from Europe. She gave us money, too, whenever she had some, and she write for us. We had Augustin Souchy and [Diego Abad de] Santillan for international correspondents. Maximoff wrote articles on economy.

My job every month was to find fault with the labor movement [chuckle]. It wasn't a very arduous thing. I'd write a report now and then. We conducted forums every week, social events and debates with other tendencies. We debated the Trotskyites. We debated anybody at the drop of a hat. We got to where we trained our people. *The Vanguard* organized a federation of groups across the country whose sole purpose was to help us and establish centers in other places. The Free Society Group in Chicago [was one]. The foreign language groups fought each other like cats and dogs, but they buried the hatchet to help support an English language paper. We also

had people in the colleges and universities. We were doing pretty well, very well indeed. Until it broke up. That brings up another thing, the breaking up. It should be recorded.

We were neophytes, comparatively, none of us too sophisticated. I was still a young fellow. What the hell, it was in the late 20's. One day we made contact with a Russian anarchist who spoke perfect English.[5] He had been to Russia during the Revolution and he had encyclopedic knowledge. He was a top rate linguist, fluent in five or six languages. He knew things about the history of the revolutionary movement that we never heard of, and he knew Maximoff. Very, very sophisticated and very, very knowledgeable. We started to look up to him. We were afraid to say anything to him, because we might make ourselves look ridiculous. I was the same way. He wrote for the paper under the name of "Senex", Latin for "old one." He wrote in a very involved manner, with very vague terms. He'd never use a plain term where he could use a complicated one. The simplest idea became profound with him. Everything was profound! A bad style; a very overbearing sort of fellow. We had absolute confidence in him. Now I could kick myself.

But our idol had feet of clay. First of all, he was a consummate conniver. He thought of himself as the Lenin of the group. So he got his people on his side to help him out over his idea of how the paper should be put together, what articles to print and everything else. Then there was *l'affaire de coeur,* love you know, *Cherchez le femme.* This man was older than the rest of us, ten or twelve years older than I was. There was a nice young fellow in our group who had a romance going with a young woman. The Russian managed to lure her away from him. He had a personality—oh man, he knew how to handle things and she went overboard and away with him. You think it's nothing, right? But you'd be surprised how these little things have their consequences with a close knit group of people. The young fellow got resentful and complained. The "genius" justified what he'd done by defaming the young fellow, calling him a scab and this and that. People in the group started taking sides, and that had a great deal to do with the dissension.

Then there came another thing. I'm being very honest and frank. I can afford it at my age. He began to show an increasing affection for the Communist Party. He denied he was a Communist, but he talked like one, acted like one. He wanted us to make a united front with the Communists, and when they changed their party line in favor of united fronts he was very enthusiastic. Every time something happened he was pro-Communist and would keep knocking us, the anarchists. That got under yours truly's skin, you know. A fellow may take a shit on my doorstep, but he doesn't have to ring my bell and ask for toilet paper. I and a few other people walked in on him and said, "Well, if we felt the way you did, we would have enough integrity to join the Party. You are a renegade because you don't have the courage to stand up for your views. We have no respect for you."

He [Schmidt] and his gang left. They started to quarrel one with the other about personal matters, including what I told you. Everything became very chaotic. We [Sam and Esther] didn't take sides in things like personal matters and affairs with women, etc. But when he became pro-Communist, it had to stop. If we went under, we went under. Especially when this fellow [Schmidt] said one day that the Hitler-Stalin Pact was perfectly alright on the grounds that it was a delaying action on the part of Stalin, and that we should support him [Stalin] on this.

Then he aroused the ire of my friend, Maximoff. Maximoff used to come each year to give some lectures, and had yet to see the lay of the land. Two things happened. The Russian [Schmidt] had

[5] Sam is making a reference to Mark Schmidt, a member of *The Vanguard* collective who later became a Stalinist Communist.

translated Maximoff's book about Bakunin, and his *The Guillotine at Work.* Maximoff distrusted him after he became a Commie, and checked the translations. They were very poor, by the way. They were literal, and that's very bad. The breaking point came before that, when Maximoff visited here. This "Senex" took him to dinner to the restaurant in the headquarters of the Russian C.P. [chuckle]. Maximoff saw where he was and walked out and wouldn't break bread with him.

This is the sort of thing that led to the collapse of the Vanguard group.

Nhat: What was the circulation of the other magazine?

Sam: We had a few little ones in the period after the Spanish Revolution and shortly before World War II, We issued *The Spanish Revolution* a little while before *The Vanguard* [folded]. There was already dissension. It came to a head around 1938 or so. It's hard to gauge the circulation. I would say four to five thousand. It was very popular at the time. Greenwood Publications has reprinted it.

We don't have to worry about a paper any more. When we had *Views and Comments* wit was "*e pluribus unum.*" But now there are many, a little paper here and a little paper there, thanks to the graphics arts (photo-offset printing). But what is badly needed is clarification. I don't give a hang whether they accept what I think are anarchist principles, declarations, or tactics, but they must ne something definite. But this floating around…

I have a very deep disagreement with Bookchin on these matters. I even go so far as to attack the holy of holies, you know, the French student riots of 1968. I predicted if it lasted six months, it would be doing very well. But lately we have a very encouraging development: the international symposiums on vital questions. There was one in Venice on workers' self-management and another one on modern bureaucracy/statism, and another on Bakunin's ideas. We've had programs suggested by federations all over the world. We're doing a lot of discussion on an international scale. To me this is a big thing. It's very hopeful. I'm not pessimistic at all.

Sam: Yes. Never, never, never in the past did we have a convocation lasting a week or three days with papers dealing with what we could do in a practical way. There's a whole book on the proceedings of the conference on workers' self-management. We had a paper called *Interrogations*[6] which went under—I won't go into why—that cast a great deal of light on what we should do. We've got proposals for provisions of our dearly held ideas. If they go too far, I don't mind because we are trying to find a way. We weren't wedded to a dogma that we have no right to change. We're not a church.

Nhat: Was either of you involved with the *Freie Arbeiter Stimme*?[7]

Sam: I was for quite a while. I delivered a few talks and wrote articles for them, which they translated (into Yiddish), of course. I was closely but informally associated with them for many years. They are one of my pet aversions. They started out in the 1880s or 1890s. They were convinced anarchists and they put out an anarchist paper. Most of them were East European Jews who had been oppressed in Russia and Poland and left their country and became very rebellious people. They left in Russia a very orthodox religious atmosphere. The fathers were very strict and the children revolted against domestic despotism. They were looking for a different world

[6] *Interrogations: International Review of Anarchist Research,* was published in Paris from 1974–1979. It included articles in one of four languages, French, Spanish, Italian, and English with summaries in the other three. Sam Dolgoff contributed articles in three of the eighteen issues. The contributing authors were primarily veteran anarchists, like the Dolgoffs.

[7] *Freie Arbeiter Stimme,* "Free Voice of Labor" was the Yiddish language newspaper of Jewish anarchists in New York City, published between 1890 and 1977.

and became active as anarchists. They started the paper around 1890, a very militant paper. The Jewish anarchists were among the pioneers of the labor movement, especially in the clothing industry and printing, and they were very influential. The socialist Jews argued with the anarchist Jews. The feud went on for years.

The opportunistic socialists had more influence and more money. Their biggest paper was *The Forward.* It's across the street from here, but now the building's been sold to the Chinese.

I want to get down to what itches me. In the mid-1920s, the Communist Party made an all-out offensive to gain control of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America and ILGWU. The socialists and the anarchists naturally didn't want this, so they buried the hatchet to make a common front against the Communists. By the time they succeeded in getting rid of the Communists, they had developed a distinct liking for each other in the course of their struggle. The anarchists lost their identity and became almost like the socialists. In exchange for their cooperation in fighting the common enemy, the anarchists received influential positions when the union was reorganized. Many of them became business agents, vice-presidents, etc. They became so influential that they lost their revolutionary vigor. A contributing factor, of course, was that the second and third generation anarchists who had already achieved a certain status in society, became teachers, businessmen, in the professions and other higher-paying brackets. There developed what we used to call "the bourgeoisification of the proletariat." They adopted bourgeois, reformist attitudes and became almost indistinguishable from right-wing social democrats. They didn't do this deliberately, but they gradually became integrated into it.

The *Freie Arbeiter Stimme,* instead of remaining an uncompromising champion of anarchism in action, became the literary edition of *The Forward.* They got to be so sycophantic that, for example, when Dubinsky—head of the ILGWU—had a birthday, they ran a big headline, "Congratulations!" When his wife got sick, they'd print their condolences. When she recovered, they were happy. When they had a banquet, all the labor fakirs came. They helped support the paper. On Labor Day and May Day, the paper was full of ads from different branches of these unions in which the anarchists were officials. They lost their dynamism entirely. They became class collaborationists. The only thing they had left was a good style of writing, very literary, and also referring to the old classics. But the paper ceased to exist as a force in Jewish life altogether.

As a literary journal. the FAS gave some of the best Jewish writers a start. As a journal that printed articles by the classical anarchists, it was very good. But as a meaningful organ, presenting the anarchist position in modern times, it constituted a practical betrayal. Therefore we, and quite a few Jewish readers of the paper too, felt that it ceased to exist as an anarchist paper for all intents and purposes in the 1920s and 30s.

Nhat: There was a comrade named Armando Borghi. You ever hear of him?

Esther: He was an Italian anarcho-syndicalist.

Sam: He was a friend of Malatesta and the secretary of the Syndicalist Union of Italy [USI], very prominent in the revolutionary movement. He was a refugee here from Mussolini. One day, we went up to see Olga Maximoff, who was staying with Rose Pesotta, the one I told you about. Borghi was there. When Rose started to sing hossanas to Roosevelt, the New Deal, and the Socialist Party—you know what they [the Jewish anarchists] were doing? They were canvassing to bring out the vote for the Democrats! When he heard her talk, he says to her, "If I talka like you, in Italy they'd make me a minister. I wouldn't be a refugee. I'd have a big job in the government. You call yourself an anarchist?"

The poor man had a fit and turned purple like an eggplant. I felt sorry for him. They [the Jewish anarchists in the clothing trades] were turncoats, but if they were a thousand per cent anarchist, they [the paper] couldn't survive. Yiddish is a dying language. None of the foreign language [anarchist] papers have an audience now. We had Italian, Russian, Hungarian, German, and Spanish papers. They all are gone. At least they went under with their collors flying. They went under with glory.

Nhat: There was a documentary on the F.A.S.?

Esther: The F.A.S. documentary was a travesty and the documentary on the IWW was also a travesty. Some people came here to speak about the Wobblies and get information for a play about them. I have a poster on my wall for it. There was also a documentary that was more ambitious. The production was subsidized by thousands of dollars from the National Endowment for the Humanities and a union and took five years to make. They did some research and some brief interviews with Wobblies in Chicago. But the theme song was that "it was all over kids, the IWW died in 1919, etc. etc."

Sam: What do you expect from a commercial enterprise? They're out to make money. They had some good things in the film, I can't deny that. Coming from them it was a good picture.

Nhat: Was there much international contact in the anarchist movement in the 1920's and 1930's?

Sam: Oh, yes. Our main contacts were with Germany, France and Spain. We didn't have much from Italy. The IWMA, the reorganized International, had its headquarters in Berlin. Berlin was the center of all kinds of things.

Nhat: I'm interested in how difficult it was to raise a family in all this activity.

Esther: I know you young people feel that way: "How can I raise a family?"

Sure, it was difficult, but not all that difficult. First of all, I didn't think that the world couldn't get along without my services, that they were so necessary that I had to neglect my children. Secondly, the two things intermingled. We had committee meetings at home and did our writing there. And I didn't think the children could develop as human beings if they didn't participate. So if I could go on a picket line, I went. If I couldn't, my children came first.

Anyway, to make a long story short, people shouldn't have fears about bringing up children. You can't be anti-life. No matter how much your life is occupied, there is something within us, like it or not, we're it for the next generation. That's nature. And the man and the woman are very much alike. They want offspring. You want life to continue. My grandson, his troubles are my troubles. I don't say you have to have a dozen kids or have them when you're sixteen.

Sam: Let me tell you about Stelton. They wouldn't teach the kids how to read until the kids felt they were ready for it—which could very well be never. The parents became alarmed, but they didn't want to show that they were bad anarchist or Ferrerists. So they took the kids aside at home and said, "You little devil, I'm going to teach you how to read and write. But if you mention one word, if you give out the secret, I'll box your ears."

A lot of parents did this. They were ashamed and embarrassed to face up to the authorities. Isn't it true?

Esther: Yes. One day the teachers did discover that parents were teaching their kids to read surreptitiously [chuckle].

Sam: It was a good kindergarten. I'll grant that any day, except for the principal. She used to punish kids. You should read Avrich's book,[8] you see. He had their number. He didn't pull any punches, either.

Nhat: If I'm not mistaken, weren't they taught to write in the Ferrer school?

Sam: I think they had to read and write at the Ferrer school. Avrich claims that at Stelton, they didn't go according to Ferrer. (To Esther) Do you know?

Esther: Oh, yes. He just didn't say there was a set age. Certain he was very literary. And he put a lot of emphasis on science. He had the best scientists writing text books for the children.

Sam: Then they weren't going by Ferrer's methods, not that Ferrer was the only great educator in the world. Avrich's book *The Modern School* tells how the parents interfered. They had to decide everything, and they'd countermand the teachers. That points up a conflict. Being a parent doesn't qualify you to be a teacher or administrator. But have the parents no rights whatsoever?

Educators and other people would come to Stelton to observe, and we'd talk to them. Many of them were very, very impressed. Others didn't like it, because the school avoided indoctrinating the kids. Their argument was that, like it or not, the child was being indoctrinated by others anyway, by the [capitalist or religious] establishment or by Communists or Socialists. The Steltonites insisted, "Leave the kids alone. They will learn alone by themselves. They are free individuals."

But they are not. They were being left defenseless against all those outside influences. This analysis [that it leaves them defenseless] makes a good deal of sense to me. There is no such thing as a person so absolutely free as to be immune to all influences except his own. If the kid is being indoctrinated with bourgeois false ideas, we have to do something about it. As common sense and logical as that sounds, you couldn't convince the people at Stelton of that. They wound up being the absolute dictators of the school. They wouldn't allow anybody to express an opinion. This was the cause of a great deal of friction.

Nhat: What was the painters' union like when you travelled with it?

Sam: I'm a life member.

Nhat: Was it a decent union?

Sam: No, it was a very, very bad union, though certain things were not. We used to work 40 and 44 hours a week. My union introduced the seven-hour day, five-day week. And, of course, they had all the usual, standard benefits—or at least they used to have, until they stole the money. Health insurance, annuity pension, vacations, all these things. It was not more corrupt than the average building trades union. A lot of favoritism and a lot of waste—a lot of bad things. Anyway, at the age of sixty-five I retired. I couldn't retire sooner. I got a pension of $125 a month. Later they increased it, but I don't get the increase. I got a plaque of which I'm very proud, and an honorary life membership, so I don't have to pay any more dues. The plaque says I fought hard for the painters. I'm very proud of that. The commies captured the union. Then an ex-Trotskyite took it away from the commies. And he became a grafter.

New York isn't really a union town like the West. How is it in your neck of the woods?

Nhat: Fairly strong. Was work steady for you?

Esther and Sam: No! As a rule, very few people worked more than six months a year. Six months a years was doing marvelously well. Many worked less. To qualify for a pension a man must have been employed a certain number of days each year. And that's very hard to reach.

Nhat: Did that allow you time for anarchist activity, or did you have to look for other jobs?

[8] *The Modern School Movement: Anarchism and Education in the United States* by Paul Avrich, 1980.

Sam: You know what they say: "Where there's a will, there's a way!"

I did two things. First of all, I drew unemployment insurance. Then I would take small jobs off the books on my own. I'd paint a living room or kitchen for somebody. Small things—an apartment once in a while. I even did a synagogue once. And we were very, very economical in our way of living. We lived in a dump not far from here. We paid $25 a month tops. Esther was very economy-minded. We had no luxuries, so we were able to keep going.

If I had wanted to play ball with the union administration, I could have worked every day of the year. There was a lot of favoritism, you see. The secretary of the union was a Trotskyite or ex-Trotskyite, one of Trotsky's innumerable secretaries. He knew me very well personally. He used to come to my talks and he liked our position on Spain. He was very close to us. When he became secretary of the union, he offered to give jobs to me and wanted us to vote with him in the union. But I refused.

Esther: When they asked Sam for a donation for Israel…

Sam: I wouldn't give them a nickel.

Esther: Sam said, "If you were asking for money to organize people, I would gladly give you my contribution. But if you ask for political kinds of things, I'll keep it."

Sam: I refused to contribute to the union political action committee, the Liberal Party, and these sorts of connections. He had come into power, you see, and everyone who comes into power builds a machine to keep himself in power. He would give members preference for work and get them to join his machine, the best jobs and all the work they could take. He thought, "Sam is a patsy. We know each other and there will be no trouble."

But then I refused, and I refused to ask him for a job in those days. Se we didn't exactly become enemies, but there was no love lost. He sort of dropped me and I dropped him.

Well, I don't have anything to be ashamed of. Some of our comrades, painters in our movement, were very weak on these things. Then there were other painters who were of a very conservative mind. They weren't ideological. But they were every bit as militant as I was. It had nothing to do with ideas. Some people you can't buy, irrespective of what they might be. They couldn't buy me and some other people who are still in the union. There is always a rebel or village atheist around. You can count on it.

Esther: We had a musician who was a Wobbly. His name was Samuels.

Sam: He was a very good musician. He played with Arturo Toscanini. Toscanini used to contribute to the anarchist paper against Mussolini. His son was a very fiery anarchist revolutionist.

Nhat: Did the government or the police ever harass you during your life?

Esther: Oh, yes.

Sam: Remember when the FBI came? But I wasn't bothered very much. Once and a while they would get me for vagrancy, or holding an illegal meeting, or for defying the cops or obstructing traffic. I never did any serious time and I'm glad of it. But then again, I never tried to break the door down to get in, either. If I could avoid it, I did. I wanted to last. But other people were not so fortunate.

There was an amusing incident, though. Out of Chicago, I was riding on a passenger train, right where the coal bin was. In those days they had coal. In Indiana, a railroad bull caught me and took me to jail. I was sentenced to three or four days. When they searched me, they found my Painters' Union card. So the sheriff says, "Oh, you're a painter?"

"Yes," I said.

"Well," he said, "maybe we can put you to work painting my office. I'll give you an extra ration." (It was a piece of moldy bread with Karo syrup and a glass of milk."

"Okay," I says, "if I get an extra ration, I'll paint your office." I knew I had another two, three days to stay there. When I got to the toilet, I says to him, "You want me to paint the seat, or varnish it since it's natural wood?"

"Sure, sure," he replied.

"To make a good job of it, don't sit on it for a day or two." So I got the varnish and mixed it with raw linseed oil so it would never, never, never dry in a million years. And when he'd sit down on that toilet seat all the hairs of his ass would stick to it and he wouldn't be able to get up. The seat would move up with him (chuckle). I was taking a little chance. Luckily, I got out the next day and I wasn't far from the state line. I was lucky to get across because I bet you his ass is still stuck!

Esther: I had an experience when I passed out some May Day leaflets. I was on the street and a cop came up and started saying, "I'm going to pull you in for littering the sidewalk. People saw this young girl and a cop, so they all began to take the leaflets out of my arms. He said, "Didn't I tell you to stop passing those leaflets out?"

I didn't say a word and he finally went away. I went upstairs to our hall and people started to tell me, "Emma Goldman would have done this. Emma Goldman would have done that." I said, "I'm not Emma Goldman. I'm poor Esther Miller and I'm scared stiff of cops and I'm scared stiff of police stations. Do you want to help me put the leaflets between some books?"

So, a comrade named Bento came out with me. He walked on one side of the street and I on the other. We passed out all the leaflets. We were trying to make a good May Day, not trying to become martyrs.

Nhat: Esther, I am curious about how you got interested in anarchism?

Esther: My family came from Russian Poland. I was born into the anarchist movement. I had a cousin who was only about five years younger than my father. While in Russia my cousin joined The People's Will "Go to the People" movement and he went to the people to teach them to read and write. He considered himself an anarchist. My mother and father would proudly tell us about him. My mother used to tell when she and my father were still in Russia and how they persuaded him to visit with them, so they could mend his clothes and "get the wrinkles out of his belly." After my father and mother came to America they learned that my cousin had found a young radical girl for a sweetheart and wife and had two little girls not much older than my sister and myself. During a strike in which my cousin was arrested and went to jail, his young wife also participated in the strike and with all the nervous tension that prevailed, caught influenza and died.

According to the Jewish religion, a person has got to be buried before sundown the same day. Because this was not done, the neighbors threw rocks on the house. But the broken-hearted mother-in-law persuaded the authorities to let her son-in-law out of prison for the funeral and in the meantime, contacted the radical underground to get her son-in-law out of Russia. My cousin came to America to live with our family.

I must have been five or six years old, a few years older than his own children. He was a sad and beautiful person. He mourned his wife and missed his orphaned children. We all loved him very dearly. He was a trained pedagogue and knew how to get along with children. We parted when we moved to Cleveland where there was more work for bricklayers as the city was growing

rapidly. My cousin finally succeeded in bringing his children and mother-in-law to America and was active in the labor movement.

Nhat [to Sam]: What was the story of your uncle?

Esther: Sam went to the commie bookstore to get the minutes of the First International.

Sam: It was published in Moscow on the hundredth anniversary of the First International. It was the minutes of the General Council. The fellow waiting on us was a Jewish Communist. At the time, Krushchev was in power, so I kidded him along. "What the hell are you doing in here? You're a Jewish fellow working in the CP bookstore and they're all a bunch of anti-Semites."

He says, "That's not true. The Jews have all the freedom and power anybody else does. As a matter of fact, we even have a Jewish magazine called *The Jewish Homeland.* Here's a copy. Take it with you." While I'm reading the *Minutes,* Esther read the magazine. She says, "That's your uncle."

Esther: I said, "That man is the smitten image of your father." I read the article and it sketched the biography of Sam's uncle.

Sam: A section of the magazine was devoted to famous Soviet Jewish writers, and one of these was my uncle. His name was Dolgopolsky, which is my real name. He worked in the brush factory as a young man. Then he became educated and became a school teacher, a big thing for a Jew in those days. He was also a writer. He was against the Czar and led a strike, so they arrested him and sent him to Siberia.

Esther: You're getting it all mixed up. A lot of young people in the movement studied methods of teaching reading and writing because there was illiteracy among the people. Then they went out and taught the people. Also, he was a Yiddish writer. People with social ideas are usually literary people. He wrote the family history. He was writing long before the Bolsheviks were there. He translated Shakespeare into Yiddish. That was a big evil for the Bolsheviks.

Sam: He was sent to Siberia.

Esther: They disgraced and persecuted him. Then he was rehabilitated, and that's why his picture was in the magazine.

Sam: The article said that during his life he had been a very good writer about village life, a translator, and everything else; that he was one of the best writers of the Revolution.

Esther: They gave him a nice write-up.

Sam: Definitely a very militant man. He had been killed by Stalin and rehabilitated by Krushchev.

Esther: They used to kill their writers, execute them.

Nhat: But this article said he lived to a ripe old age?

Sam: It didn't say how he died. It said that this was the eightieth `anniversary`[JS2] of his birth.

Esther: They could kill him and celebrate the eightieth anniversary of his birth after rehabilitating him!

Sam: The Russian Jewish community knew all about these things and they knew him. They told us he had been killed. I've got his picture here. He looked just like my father.

Esther: His cousin, Gussie, got the news first in *The Forward.*

Sam: That's another thing. Long before we knew what had happened to him, his stories were being printed in the Jewish paper. They wanted him to come to the States and be a staff writer, but he didn't want to come. He was a good revolutionist, was in a lot of strikes, spent a lot of years in jail. Once, under the Czar, they [the Czarist police] came looking for him in his mother's house.

They came in and he said, “I know you’re looking for me. You know a human being wipes his feet before he comes into somebody else’s house, but not a pig like you. You haven’t got manners. Get out of this house! You don’t even ask permission to come in.”

Esther: We have a neighbor who was the editor of the Jewish paper. He knew every writer. Sam went over to ask about his uncle’s books, and he looked them up immediately. Yes, he says, a memoir of life in Russia, especially the family. I translated the piece for his niece.

Sam: I’m very proud of my uncle. But he had no influence on me. I was only three or four when we left Russia. I didn’t even know how he looked.

Esther: This is funny. Jewish people didn’t like to be classed as manual workers. They were considered poor and lacking in good manners.

Sam: My cousin, Gussie was that way. She boasted that nobody in our family ever did any manual labor, that my uncle never worked in a brush factory. It’s a lie. He did. And my father’s attitude was the same. A relative came to see him from Riga, a redheaded woman, a good-looking woman with a lot of freckles on her. He warned me, “Look, this woman is coming from Riga and I don’t want you to tell her I’m a painter, because that’s a manual laborer. Tell her that I’m a salesman.”

I said, “I will tell her no such thing. What are you ashamed of?”

Esther: He expected anything from Sam.

Sam: He was terrible. But on the other hand, he was a peculiar character. In the days when he married my mother, the bride was expected to give a dowry. He said, “I refuse to accept the dowry. I didn’t marry this woman for her money and I refuse to take money from you.”

He scandalized everybody because they were very, very orthodox and conformist. I’ll tell you another thing. You may as well know the worst. He also smoked cigarettes on Saturday [the sabbath]. Oh, mamma mia! My grandmother said that my mother had to divorce him. The idea, that somebody would go ahead and smoke cigarettes on Saturday (chuckle).

Nhat: Were your parents pretty scandalized by you?

Sam: Oh, yes! She used to cry because her son became a socialist. She didn’t know a socialist from the man on the moon.

Esther: She cried because he would wander off.

Sam: I used to run away.

Esther: When he was fourteen years old, he went to China on a boat.

Sam: After Esther got hooked up, but before we committed marriage, you know, she says to Esther, “I love you like a daughter. Keep away from him. He’s a bum. I don’t want to see you ruined for life with this character hanging around.”

Esther: No, she said, “Sam is like a blackbird, here today and gone tomorrow.”

Sam: That you couldn’t depend on me and I’m no good. That I was taking the youth of an innocent girl and was going to ruin her. She’ll starve to death. “You can’t depend on him. He won’t do anything. He’ll wander.”

Why didn’t you lister to her?

Esther: She’d tell me things about him and I’d say to her, “You don’t love him? He’s your son. I’m only your daughter-in-law.”

She answered very cleverly, “I hold you dearer than my daughter.” So what could I say to this? And she meant it too! So it happened that she finally said that I was worse than him, when it comes to being a radical.

Sam: She was right. But worse than this was another thing, while we were in Cleveland. Did you ever hear of an anarchist named Fanny Baron, who was shot to death? Her sister Luba lived in Cleveland and was married to an old Wobbly named Fagin. Luba liked Marcus Graham. She told Esther she shouldn't go with me because I'm a bum, I'm irresponsible, I hang around with sailors, I drink. "Why don't you get a respectable man like Marcus Graham?"

I told you how we toured different places. If Marcus Graham got to a city ahead of me, he'd tell the people there, "After I'm gone there's a fellow named Weiner who's coming to town. He's no anarchist at all. When he comes around, don't listen to him. He's no damn good. I'm warning you, don't treat him too good. If you do, you'll have a steady boarder."

But if I was ahead of him, I'd tell the people, "The fellow following me, if he had another wit, he'd be a half-wit. His name is Marcus Graham and he's a jackass. He's long-eared and has all the other qualifications."

Nhat: This is the Marcus Graham who edited *Man*?

Sam: Yeah, that's right.

Nhat: Was this a serious rivalry?

Sam: No, we were barely on speaking terms and the subject was never mentioned.

Nhat: You two didn't get married for a long time, did you?

Sam: Hell, no. We got married during World War II. So, we had the kids as witnesses at the wedding.

A very humorous thing happened with Marcus. He was a very fanatical vegetarian. He was peddling his book, *An Anthology of Revolutionary Poems*, all over the States, a very good collection. He got to some small town in Arizona and they put him in jail. He wrote an urgent letter to *The Road to Freedom*. This was in the '30s when hardly anyone had enough to eat. He said, "I want you to organize a worldwide protest against how I'm being treated by the State. They put me in jail and I told them, I'm a vegetarian. Even if you mention the word meat, I get sick, let alone be near it. What do you think they did? They serve me steaks. They serve chops. I begged them on my knees, even if it's a rotten piece of vegetable, I'd rather have that. But they wouldn't do it. I demand my rights and I want an international protest of the anarchist movement."

So, we wrote him back, "You can come here and we'll go to jail. We don't mind the diet." You know he held a grudge against us for years. He said we were traitors.

Esther: Yes, your mother…

Sam: I loved my mother. Most of what they said against me wasn't true, anyhow. It's true that I wasn't around and all that, but I never sponged off them. I never took a nickel. And I helped them out. I'm not bragging about it, but I was unjustly treated.

Esther: I've found it to be true in most cases that the child who is regarded as the black sheep is the one who treats the mother and father best.

Sam: Let me tell about the old man studying to be a rabbi. He was qualified to be one, but then he lost his faith. So he didn't go too far. He smoked on Saturday and only went to the Synagogue on the day of Atonement. When he slept, he used to pray in his sleep. When my sister got married in a religious ceremony, the rabbi forgot the words, so the old man told him the words (laughter). I loved the old man. I loved my whole family, but they were very, very limited, you know. They're not the ones who made a radical out of me.

I had two brothers. This one here (pointing at a photo) was the middle brother. My youngest brother was the Assistant Director of the Menninger Clinic. He's an expert administrator, not a psychiatrist, but without going to school he knows a lot about it.

My father and all the other Jewish people there, everyone of them had to have some professional in the family, a doctor or a lawyer—they preferred doctors—or a teacher. Funny thing though, my sister had a piano teacher. It was considered proper for girls to play piano and boys to play the violin. But the teacher looked at my hands with the long fingers and said, "You could easily make an octave."

But my father said, "With long fingers he could make a good pickpocket—no son of mine is going to play the piano. A sissy plays the piano."

Esther: Don't you remember (laughing) when you told me that my family was several hundred years in advance of your family in their ideas.

Sam: That wasn't saying much for either of them. I don't think there is anything extraordinary in our careers that couldn't match with a lot of other people's. Each has what they had.

Nhat: Every person has an important story. You can't minimize your own, either.

Esther: They say every individual could write a novel. I never appreciated that until I got much older.

[END]

Nhat Hong
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