

Working with G. P. Maximoff

Sam Weiner

(July-August, 1950)

Those who knew our late comrade Maximoff and his endeavors in spreading our ideas in Russia and other European countries, his contributions to our theoretical and practical problems, his work on the consolidation of the anarcho-syndicalist movement in Russia and the worldwide libertarian movement generally, can describe that phase of his life better than me. Therefore, I'm limiting myself to reminiscences about his life in America.

Maximoff didn't like it when comrades transplanted from abroad concerned themselves exclusively with the affairs of their homeland, ignoring the fact that they were living in America and paying little attention to the problems of our movement here. When I first met Maximoff, his knowledge of the English language was quite limited, but he made up his mind to master it so that he could take a more active part in the local movement. A few years later he was able to deliver public lectures in excellent English.

Maximoff soon realized that the American anarchist movement was not only small, but, still worse, extremely fragmented and incoherent. It confined itself to a narrow framework of semi-utopian illusions, separated from the everyday life of the workers and their problems. The movement took the form of exclusive clubs, similar to masonic lodges, where the members engaged in debating and boasting. The American libertarian press did more harm than good. Articles were full of distortions and inaccuracies, creating the impression that the anarchist movement and its ideas had been slapped together by well-intentioned, but ineffectual, people who wrote in a stilted, pedantic style comprehensible only to a small number of "intellectuals." New recruits to the American movement understood that there was something fundamentally wrong, that a strong, active movement couldn't develop under these conditions. Being young and disorganized, they really needed some direction. I was one of the first to meet Maximoff in Chicago, where he was working as an upholsterer's helper, and got to know him at a conference of Mid-West anarchist groups. As a member of the group "Free Society," I wrote a manifesto and demanded its approval by the conference. Comrade Yelensky and others advised me to seek the opinion of Maximoff.

With the help of a translator, Comrade Maximoff analyzed my manifesto, pointing out what I still needed to learn about anarchism and its problems. Over the course of many years, he helped to create a more effective American libertarian movement. This involved an enormous amount of work: he contributed to the anarcho-syndicalist journal *Vanguard*, writing a number of articles for it; he often spoke at informal meetings of young people, explaining the theoretical bases of

anarchism and showing us the way forward for future action. He edited *Golos Truzhenika* [The Voice of the Toiler], Russian language journal of the IWW, and urged us to get more involved in this organization so that it would remain libertarian in orientation.

During his visits to New York, where I had moved, we often met. Again we talked about our tasks. Despite his busy schedule, he always found time to talk to comrades. Once on a cold winter evening, a dozen friends were supposed to come to my place for a discussion, but no one showed up except Maximoff. When I expressed my frustration at this development, he replied that it didn't matter to him if he spoke to an audience of one or a thousand, as long as the interest was there. He delivered his report to the two of us, myself and my wife.

Writing these lines, I'm unable to describe all the incidents that I remember. It's impossible to describe with words the deep personal interest that Maximoff showed in the well-being and development of all the young comrades. It's also impossible to describe the idealism that he radiated, and his simple manners and kindness.

When Maximoff arrived in New York recently (I hadn't seen him since 1937), accompanied by the lovely Comrade Olga, I noticed that he appeared pale and worn-out, that he had aged appreciably. It was obvious he was very ill. He even mentioned that this would probably be his last visit. Nevertheless, his days were full of activities and seeing the sights. He gave several lectures, both in Russian and in English. In order to speak at a meeting at the home of one young comrade, he had to climb the stairs to the sixth floor. This was very hard for him: he had to stop for breath on the landings and take a pill to help with the severe pain. Still, he was able to speak about his hopes for a better future for these young people. It was at his suggestion that the Libertarian Book Club was started, to publish and distribute libertarian books and pamphlets in the English language. The Club published his book about Bakunin.¹ This book and *The Guillotine at Work* (1940), as well as his articles and pamphlets, were a tremendous contribution to American libertarian literature.

Maximoff had a passionate dislike for flowery tributes, which were quite inimical to his spirit.

I have lost a dear friend and teacher, Comrade Olga a faithful companion, and our movement one of its thinkers and a fighter for the freedom of humanity. We are few in number and his loss is keenly felt. Therefore we are showing his memory our deepest respect when we continue to work toward our goal, the goal for which Maximoff sacrificed so much.

Delo-Truda Probuzhdenie #33 (July-August, 1950), pp. 13-14.

¹ *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, by G. P. Maximoff, New York, 1953.

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