
Memories of C.E. Ruthenberg

by Rachele Ragozin:

Excerpt from an Interview

Conducted by Oakley C. Johnson

and Ann Rivington, 1940

Handwritten notes in C.E. Ruthenberg Papers, Ohio Historical Society,
Box 9, Folder 5, Microfilm reel 5. Very heavily edited by Tim Davenport.

I met C.E. on May 26, 1920 at the underground convention in Bridgman — the convention at which the CP [Ruthenberg faction] and CLP were united. It was a time when some elements of the CP were dissatisfied and broke away — Ashkenuzi, etc. There was a great deal of bickering. We were all more bolshevik than the Bolsheviks. Isolationism, sectarianism, like rats in a hole. There were arguments at the convention about dots and dashes. C.E. and Ed Ferguson were branded by some as rightists and a threat to unity.

At that convention one thing stirred me very deeply. What I will never forget is the attitude of C.E., as though he was sitting at the sickbed of his best beloved. It meant so much to him. To him the question of unity was so important that he couldn't even be comforted. I think it was a question of domination of the Central Executive Committee — the CLP was practically a group of leaders without a following, while the CP had a following. Yet the CLP was threatening to take most of the positions on the CEC.

It was unhealthy. Very few remain in the Communist Party today — including Katterfeld, Lindgren, etc. It shows C.E.'s attitude to have been correct.

The largest delegation was the CP group. But opposition had developed in the CP. There seemed to be a threat that the whole CEC would be CLP. There was the threat of a split, and the reaction on him struck him forcibly. C.E. walked up and down the beautiful grounds, smoking one cigarette after another, more perturbed than I ever saw him. He passed people without seeing.

C.E. said to me afterward that it reminded him of 1919, with two conventions, when he was running back and forth between the conventions trying to unite them. He saw — as the Communist International saw — that there was no difference in principle between the groups. They were too sectarian.

Later I asked, “Who was the most perturbed over the threat of a split? I think it’s you.”

“Yes, I think I was,” he replied. “I could have wept.”

The split that later took place was the thing he visualized and sought to avoid. He could see that revolutionary groups *must* unite at that critical time. He was following the directives of the Communist International.

Cannon was there — not Lovestone. Foster was not there.

At this first Bridgman Convention there were no arrests — those came at a later, second Bridgman Convention. Foster was at the second, also Browder, I think.

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I was born in old Russia and came to America with my family when I was about 4 years old. My father was a small businessman who was a former Talmud student, with the diploma of a rabbi. He barely made a living. I was brought up in the New York public school system with all its prejudices and was extremely conservative before the war. I graduated from college in 1912.

I joined the Socialist Party in September 1914. The war brought me in. I was led to the SP by my emotional reaction to the war. Once in the Party, I learned more about it. I came from an extremely conservative family but the war shocked me out of my feeling of security. I was a pacifist.

I joined the Left Wing when approached. I was a member of Local Kings County, Brooklyn — one of the first to be expelled. My younger brother and sister were CP sympathizers. My older brothers and sisters are conservative. I have one very wealthy brother.

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When I met him I was more or less a shy person. We only had about 3 women then altogether — Rose Carson, a stenographer, and one other. I was one of three women at the convention — Rose Kars-

ner came as a stenographer and another woman. I think I was the only woman delegate. I went to the [New York district] organizer and wanted to know where the lake was. He said, "Ask C.E., he'll tell you." I went up to C.E. and asked him. He started to give directions, then said, "Wait, I'll go with you."

We were on a sort of a hill, the lake below. C.E. ran down the sandy hill, about 20 feet, then back, bringing back a handful of sand. We sat down. He took sand in his hands and recited a little poem: "As a handful of sand runs through my hand, so the thought of you runs through my mind."

C.E. later got me two volumes of Browning and wrote that into the first volume. I was the one who was fond of Browning, his favorite poet was Shelley. He liked particularly "Alastor, or The Sprit of Solitude" — it stirred him very deeply.

I was not alone with him, but I was falling in love with him. His deep voice, his sweet smile, a nice soft look in his face as he looked down at me. It was a big change from the businessman talking Party affairs a moment before.

As a person he was kindly and sympathetic. I don't think he could deliberately hurt anyone. Anyone else saying anything to hurt would cause a revulsion in him. At one controversial meeting C.E. made a statement beginning, "No one in this group is capable of leadership..." He said it so severely. It was the strongest remark I ever heard him make, he was always so tactful and kind.

He told me once that when his son Danny was four years old he spanked him for something and then sat down and cried with him.

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He looked upon all people in the Party as working with him. He was never bitter and regretted factionalism. He never organized factional caucuses. At the 1920 convention I was quite disillusioned by the bickering of the two groups at what was supposed to be a unity convention. He said to me, "We ought not to struggle against each other. Our real enemy is the capitalist class. It is an unhealthy sign that our activity is not directed at our real enemy."

I watched C.E.'s diplomatic moves — compromising as it seemed to me. I asked him about it and objected to his not going "directly" at the questions. He said he was not a diplomat, but rather too naive, tending to yield on what seemed like minor points, but which might

easily be used against him. Rather than a diplomat, he was more of a statesman. He was uncompromising on principle.

At the convention Alfred Wagenknecht was elected Executive Secretary with C.E. as editor of the paper. C.E. should have been Secretary, but possibly no one else could edit the paper, *The Toiler*. It was a weekly paper and C.E. always brought it out on time. Jim Cannon, who edited it when he was in prison, was lazy and thought up excuses to not bring it out on time. C.E. during all this time had his trial every day, acted as his own lawyer, and yet the paper came out regularly. Party work went on regularly.

The day before he was to be decided guilty or innocent, the dummy was all made up for the printer. e spent the whole night getting the paper ready. He was exhausted. He dropped down on the bed exhausted, in the wee hours of the morning. Whatever was his work, was done. No difficulties could interfere.

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C.E. had few close men friends, though many co-workers and many admirers. Ed Ferguson was one. Ruthenberg and Ferguson were mentioned together in those days almost as if they were one person. C.E. also had a very good opinion of Charles Dirba. He said that to me many times. He thought him a very fine worker. Jay Lovestone and C.E. were rather good friends in the early '20s. They and Will Weinstone would go out together, to eat together and discuss various questions.

During the period C.E. was in jail,¹ Lovestone sometimes went with me to visit C.E. in jail. There was no antagonism between them at that time. Lovestone was much younger than C.E — about 15 years. Weinstone was also a young man. I actually knew Weinstone when he joined the Socialist Party, we were in the same branch in Brownsville. Lovestone was in Manhattan and I first heard about him from Weinstone. I did not meet him till sometime before 1920, casually. Lovestone helped me ship and carry bundles [of illegal Party newspapers and leaflets].

Julius Heiman was a very good friend of Ruthenberg, too.

C.E. was a very warm, affectionate person. He called me by the Jewish diminutive of my name — “Rä - ch - e - le.”

¹ Ruthenberg was behind bars for “Criminal Anarchy” in New York from about the first of November 1920 until April 24, 1922.

One day we were walking across a street in New York City. The traffic was quite heavy. I shied. He said, “You know, when I come to a corner like that, I just close my eyes and walk. Let’s just close our eyes and walk.....”

That was C.E.’s idea of how to get through heavy traffic!

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I was present at his trial in 1920 when C.E. was sentenced to Sing Sing. The mere words can give you very little idea. It was the most inspiring thing that ever took place in American Communism. He actually electrified the judge and every attendant in the Court. The Court *shook* with the power of his words and the power of the thought behind it. I was pulled out of my seat and didn’t know I was standing....

The trial in 1920 was in New York City. There was about a month of it. The end came on Nov. 2 when he went to The Tombs. From there he was taken to Sing Sing. The judge’s name was Weeks. I had to work. I was teaching — I taught kids in Public School 64, Manhattan. I taught 6B. I spent my lunchtime there and immediately after school.

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C.E. was so self-reliant and strong. He was actually emotional and showed it on anything that affected the Party. When in jail and he couldn’t attend a convention, he used to lose weight worrying.

He drew up a program for the Party at the time the Party came out in the open.² He gave it to me in jail, I got it to Lovestone. A Trusty in jail used to put papers in the ladies’ room and I would take them out — pamphlets, leaflets, programs, articles he wrote.³ C.E himself was searched before and after each meeting. This could be done in Sing Sing but not in Dannemora, where he was held for three months.

² WPA Founding Convention: New York City, Dec. 23-26, 1921.

³ After wading through the immense mass of vapid and apolitical Ruthenberg-Ragozin prison correspondence, I find this assertion extremely difficult to take seriously. One program and the odd letter are possible, but there was most assuredly no massive literary output by Ruthenberg from prison.

One policeman who picked him off a train said, "Well, Ruthenberg, haven't you learned your lesson yet? Don't you know you can't get away with it?"

He said to himself, "No, I have *not* learned my lesson."

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Whenever he ran any meetings, he'd be sure to have flowers there. Once when we were out in the woods together he said to me, "When you write my biography, you can just say that I love flowers." He went out in the woods by himself and picked flowers and brought them to put on the speakers' stand. He always went out into the woods or someplace on Sunday afternoon.

The weekend before he was sent to Sing Sing, we were out in the woods, some place in Scarsdale we always went. While we were walking along a country road and the sun was setting, he said in reflection, "They can't shut me away from this, from all this beauty..." It was the loss of the beauty of nature that he felt the most. It was late October, towards the end of the trial.

Niagara Falls was too commercialized for him. The only day I was in Cleveland with him, he took me to the Rocky River. He must have loved the Rocky River.

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When Warden Lawes said good by to C.E. he thanked C.E. for the help he was in Sing Sing. His whole attitude was one of speaking to a superior person. He expressed this and showed he was glad of reversal of the decision. He thought C.E. was a very fine person. C.E. worked in the office most of the time he was at Sing Sing.

There was a Department of Justice agent in the car C.E. was released. He brought him down to New York City, where he was taken to the Tombs and released the next day. Ed Ferguson was also there.

Ferguson said, "There'll be a lot of trouble in this struggle and a lot of dead, and I propose to live my life for myself." This indicated to C.E. that Ferguson just dropped out from then on. He told C.E., "I sympathize with you, but I want to live." He told him, "You'll be arrested in 6 months. All the leaders will be sacrificed, and I'm not ready to do that." And it happened!

When he came out, I was chairman [of a celebration meeting]. I introduced C.E. with a quotation of Lenin about the Revolution of 1905 being a dress rehearsal for 1917. I said, “Experience gives us wisdom to teach us how to carry on. One of the aspects of the movement is that so many young people are in it. The combination of the wisdom of experience and the enthusiasm of youth — C.E. is someone who carried on and inspires all of us.”

C.E. retained the enthusiasm of youth through all experience.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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