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# Letter to Oakley C. Johnson in NYC from Alfred Wagenknecht in Chicago, April 5, 1940

Typewritten letter in C.E. Ruthenberg Papers, Ohio Historical Society,  
Box 10, Folder 1, Microfilm reel 5.

Chicago, April 5, 1940.

Dear Johnson:—

In answer to your last two letters:

Address I.E. Ferguson at 77 West Washington Street, Chicago, Ill. This is his office address and so letter should be marked “personal.” What you will be able to get out of him, even if you promise secrecy, remains to be seen, because as you know, he went “respectable” years ago and probably does not even want to be reminded of his prison days.

Address Max Hayes care of *Cleveland Citizen*, Cleveland, Ohio. This will reach him. As for Charles Baker — as I stated, I do not know his present whereabouts. Last I heard he was in California.

As to an attorney you should see, who was partially in charge of the Ruthenberg-Wagenknecht case in 1917 and through 1918 and knows all about the rebellion against the workhouse tyranny — inquire in Cleveland for attorney Wolf. I met him in Cleveland about a year or more ago, do not know his address, but surely attorney Lands of Cleveland does, and she has been many times a candidate of the CP ticket, so can be readily located.

Maybe I left you under misapprehension when I stated Debs visited “us” in the Canton prison. He did visit us, but only Ruthenberg talked with him. The rules were that only one prisoner could see a visitor at a time. And visitors were not allowed into the cells or into the cell blocks. Debs sent us greetings, Baker and I, and expressed his disappointment at not being allowed to see us. Ruthenberg told us of his conversation with Debs. Debs appeared very provoked and mili-

tant. He always felt deeply the wrongs inflicted upon the proletariat. Ruthenberg approached him with his usual confident yet amicable, sociable, comradely smile and manner. They shook hands warmly (they met in the office of the superintendent and, as usual, a prison official stayed within elbow room of both) dressed in prison gray (we as federal prisoners wore gray in distinction of the others, who wore stripes) as bagged as a burlap sack. The conversation lasted only a few short minutes (it was not visiting day and the prison authorities were doing a favor in allowing this transgression) in which Ruthenberg expressed himself as happy to see Debs, and upon inquiry by Debs stated that we were all getting along as well as can be expected in a prison. They talked for a moment about the war and its cost in lives, of its unjust character. Ruthenberg said: "Our Comrades in Russia have understood how to win peace and confound the war-makers." To which Debs replied: "Our Comrades in Russia have my deepest admiration; this revolution has opened up a new era for the working class of the world."

The speech by Debs made in Canton after leaving the prison visit [June 16, 1918] should be studied. You can probably get this speech through the Rand School. Out of it will be gleaned his reaction to the situation of the day and to the visit to the prison.

I have no photographs of Ruthenberg. Fromholtz of Cleveland (who died recently) has many of them. And maybe you should also get into touch with Adolf Altenbernd of Cleveland. He is a great saver of documents and things, and when last I saw him he told me about going over his files and finding many interesting things. And I know nothing about Ruthenberg's meetings with [John] Reed or [Robert] Minor after their return from Soviet Russia, nor anything about his relations with [Santeri] Nuorteva. The division, CP and CLP, kept us apart pretty much altogether.

*Wag.*

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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