

Alexander Berkman's Last Days

Emma Goldman

1936

St. Tropez July 12th, 1936

It is only two weeks since our beloved comrade Alexander Berkman passed away. Yet it seems an eternity to me. The blow his untimely death has struck me has left me completely shattered. I find it difficult to collect my thoughts. But I feel sure you will want to know all about Sasha's end. For have you not loved him all through the years?

Sasha left a note which we found after we returned from his last resting place. It reads: "I don't want to live a sick man. Dependent. Forgive me Emmie darling. And you too Emma. Love to All. Help Emmie." signed, Sasha.

I have two letters from comrade Berkman dated June 24th and 26th. He wrote while he did not feel strong enough to come to St. Tropez the 27th, my sixty-seventh birthday, his condition was not serious and not to worry. On the 27th in the afternoon Berkman called me up from Nice to give his well wishes for the day. He said he was feeling better. Comrade Michael Cohn, his family and a very devoted English friend were with me. And my thoughts were far away from any danger to my own old pal. At 2 A. M. Sunday, just two weeks ago I was awakened by a telephone call from Nice to come at once. I knew at once that our comrade was at the end. But not what kind of an end.

On arriving in Sasha's apartment we found Emmie, his companion for fourteen years, in a collapse hardly able to tell us what had happened. We finally learned that Sasha had suffered a violent relapse and while Emmie was trying desperately to get a doctor Sasha had shot himself in the chest. This Emmie learned only after Sasha had been rushed to a hospital and she had been dragged off by the police as having killed Sasha. So great was the fortitude of our brave comrade that he did not let Emmie know he had ended his life. Actually she found him in bed covered up with blankets so she should not notice his wound. Getting a doctor in a small town in France is another indication of the backwardness of the country. It took Emmie several hours before the miserable man arrived. He came too late. But when he found the revolver he notified the police and the hospital, and Sasha was taken away in an ambulance.

We rushed to the hospital. We found Sasha fully conscious but in terrific pain so that he could not speak. He did, however, fully recognize us. Michael Cohn and I remained with him until the early afternoon. When we returned at four o'clock Sasha was in a coma. He no longer knew us. And I hope fervently he no longer felt his pain. I stayed with him until 8.30 P. M. planning to

return at 11 and remain with him for the night. But we were notified that he died at 10 o'clock Sunday, June 28th.

Comrade Berkman had always maintained that if ever he should be stricken with suffering beyond endurance he will go out of life by his own hand. Perhaps he might not have done it on the fatal evening of the 28th had I or anyone else of our friends been near to help him. But Emmie was desperately trying to get a doctor. And there was no one near she could have left with Sasha. She most likely did not even realize the gravity of the moment.

It had always been our comrade's wish to be cremated. This was also my wish and Emmie's. But there is no crematorium in Nice. The next place was Marseilles. And the cost I was told 8000 francs. Sasha left the "munificent" sum of \$80 which the very government, that had hounded him from pillar to post, blocked as soon as Sasha's death became known. No one could get it. I myself have not been blessed with worldly goods, certainly not since I am living in exile. I could therefore, not carry out the cherished wish of my old pal and comrade. In point of fact he would have been opposed to such a thing as spending 8000 francs for cremation. He would have said "the living need this money more than the dead." But it is so characteristic of our damnable system to fleece the living as well as the dead. No one will ever know the humiliation and suffering our comrade went through in France. Four times expelled. Then granted a pittance of three months. Then six months. And irony of ironies just two weeks before the end he was given an extension of a year. Just when he might have enjoyed some peace Alexander Berkman was too harassed by pain and too spent from his operations to live.

Death had robbed me of the chance to be with my lifelong friend until he breathed his last. But it could not prevent me from a few precious moments with him alone in the Dead House, moments of serene peace, and silence in contemplation of our friendship that had never wavered, our struggle and work for the ideal for which Sasha had suffered so much and to which he had dedicated his whole life. These moments will remain for me until I myself will breathe the last. And these moments in the House of the Dead will spur me on to continue the work Sasha and I had begun August 15, 1889.

I know how you all feel about our wonderful Sasha. The many cables, wires and letters I have already received are proof of your devotion and your love. I know you will not deny our dead the respect for the method he employed to end his suffering.

Our sorrow is all-embracing, our loss beyond mere words. Let us gather strength to remain true to the flaming spirit of Alexander Berkman. Let us continue the struggle for a new and beautiful world. Let us work for the ultimate triumph of Anarchism — the ideal Sasha loved passionately and in which he believed with every fiber of his being. In this way alone can we honor the memory of one of the grandest and bravest comrades in our ranks — *Alexander Berkman*.

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