Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist

Introduction to 2017 AK Press edition

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Alexander Berkman was released from the Allegheny workhouse in Aspinwall, Pennsylvania on May 18, 1906. He had been there for nine months, since July 1905, and prior to that had spent nearly thirteen years in the Western State Penitentiary near Pittsburgh. He had, during this fourteen year stint, attempted to kill himself twice, and considered his own mortality regularly, "I stand on the brink of eternity"[1] as he describes it. Never a model prisoner, he had survived years of solitary confinement, including one period of sixteen months and another for just under a year after the discovery of the tunnel dug to aid in his escape from prison. There had been numerous shorter stretches in solitary as well. Berkman was regularly subjected to other emotional and physical punishment: he had served time in the basket cell where hardly any light entered, and been starved on what was called the Pennsylvania diet–one slice of bread and one cup of black coffee a day, with thin vegetable soup once a week–a diet that would cause him to suffer digestive and stomach problems for the rest of his life. Berkman had also lost friends among the prisoners; some, like Wingie, who adopted him when he arrived, were driven mad by prison, others killed themselves or withdrew into a brooding silence, hunched like wounded animals. Apart from the prison chaplain, John Milligan, these men were the only people to show him kindness and offer him constant and shared emotional support. When Berkman walked out into the brightness of that May morning, he was emotionally damaged, fearful, terribly insecure, and prone to depression. No one could lightly shrug off what had happened to them in that institution, and much of Berkman's future life would be a struggle between who he was, or wanted to be, and what the Western State Penitentiary had done to him.

His prison experience had been a confusing one that he himself could, at times, only barely come to terms with. Commentators on Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist have tended to see it as a journey from revolutionary naivete and fanaticism to mature experience and commitment.[2] Berkman himself would look back on his younger days, as "the narrow fanatical epoch of the Russian youth."[3] Although it is worth considering this interpretation again, the journey may well have been far more complex than that. Certainly when Berkman, aged twenty-one, climbed

[1] Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist, see p. 219 of this volume.

[2] See for example, John William Ward's introduction to the New York Review of Books edition, 1999. Ward's introduction first appeared in the New York Review of Books in 1970.

[3] Diary, October 7, 1910, see p. 462 of this volume.

the stairs to Frick's office on the July 23, 1892 he was acting as he imagined the real life heroes and heroines of Naradonaya Volya had acted as they embarked on their war against the Russian state. Like his heroes, he saw himself carrying out actions in the name of the people who, at the very least, would understand and appreciate what he had done.

Berkman had been drawn to anarchism by the execution of the Haymarket anarchists, been a member of the Jewish anarchist group Pionere der Frayhayt (Pioneers of Liberty), worked with Johann Most on his paper Freiheit, and, finally gravitated to the autonomists around the Radical Workers League. He found his home in their anarchist communism and belief in the efficacy of non-hierarchical affinity groups that embraced militant tactics to achieve their ends–a society predicated on the maxim of "from each according to their ability and to each according to their need." However, by his own admission, at the time of the Pinkerton raid into Homestead on July 6, 1892 Berkman had essentially dropped out of anarchist activity. He and his comrade Modest Stein had explored, with the help of Johann Most, the possibility of returning to Russia and playing a role in the movement there. From winter 1891 to summer 1892 they had been living with Emma Goldman in Springfield and then Worcester, Massachusetts.

The events of Homestead drew him back into political life and, together with other anarchists of the Radical Workers League, he planned the assassination of Henry Clay Frick initially by bomb and then by gun or dagger. Here was a man who manifestly deserved to die because of his treatment of the Homestead workers. A man who had locked out his workers and hired armed detectives against them rather than negotiate with the union. And here, at last, were workers arming themselves against the authorities to achieve their goals. The time was right to act and the air seemed alive with possibility. Of course Berkman could not write, in Prison Memoirs, of others' involvement in the assassination attempt. Better to portray himself as a lone assassin, as he did when arrested, than implicate his comrades, some of whom, by 1912, had dropped away from the movement. Somehow, one feels, that this scenario rather suited Berkman; for much of his life he saw himself as a man apart–however much he was central to a group around a cause or a paper. Of course when Berkman did climb the stairs to kill Frick he wasn't quite alone. He had registered at a hotel on July 22 as "Mr Rakhmetov." A central character in N.G. Chernyshevsky's 1863 novel What Is To Be Done?, Rakhmetov walked beside Berkman that day. It was Rakhmetov, the ascetic and driven revolutionary who Berkman consciously admired and emulated. He turned to Russian literature and Russian history for his role models on that July morning. They provided him with a tradition he could understand and belong to.

This tradition also gave Berkman a revolutionary script he could follow–one that had been followed by many young radicals before him. If captured, the militant or militants would use their trial to announce to the people why they had carried out their act. If sentenced to death, they would die bravely and, if sentenced to prison, they would try to kill themselves and engage in as many escape attempts as they could. But Berkman's trial was a farce; he couldn't speak English and his interpreter wasn't up to the task. This coupled with his refusal to engage legal counsel and his lack of legal knowledge meant he couldn't explain himself at his trial and was handed down a sentence far longer than it should have been. The day after his attempt on Frick, he had attempted to kill himself by chewing a dynamite cartridge–the influence of Haymarket anarchist Louis Lingg there for all to see. After his sentence, he urged Emma Goldman to bring him "the gift of Lingg." When that didn't work, plans were made for the anarchist Dyer D. Lum to bring poison into the prison to help Berkman die. Lum had previously smuggled into Cook County Jail the dynamite cartridge that Lingg used to blow his face off, yet this particular revolutionary

symmetry was denied Berkman by the difficulty of getting the poison into the prison. Voltairine de Cleyre was supposed to have brought poison into the Western State Penitentiary after Lum committed suicide in 1893, but that plan too foundered. All that was left for him, then, was escape.

From the moment he entered Western State Penitentiary thoughts of escape had been swirling through Berkman's mind. Very few had managed, even if many dreamed about it, and it wasn't until 1899 that a real plan could be put into motion. With money pulled together from various sources by Emma Goldman, a house was rented in a street next to the prison and a tunnel was dug from the house towards the prison. Eric B. Morton led the operation with the help of Italian anarchist miners, Vella Kinsella, Harry Gordon ("Yankee") and, above all, "Tony"–a recently released gay anarchist prisoner who had helped draw up the technical specifications. Emma Goldman left for England on a speaking tour and then to attend the International Revolutionary Congress of the Working People in Paris in September 1900, and Berkman was to join her in Europe. The tunnel was discovered on July 26, 1900. It was Eric B. Morton, rather than Berkman, who fled for Europe. Prison authorities could not be certain of Berkman's involvement in the tunnel operation but he was one of their major suspects and was placed once again in solitary. After this devastating blow, in July 1901, Berkman would again attempt to take his own life. Matters were eased with a shortening of his sentence and that, coupled with Berkman's sheer strength of will, kept him going until that May morning in 1906 when he walked into the free air. Unlike his Russian comrades, who had an astonishingly high rate of attrition, Berkman had survived prison and planned to devote his life to anarchist thought and action. There wasn't really a script for being a survivor. He was on his own.

Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist was a central part of the battle, or a bridge even, between the lasting mental and emotional damage prison inflicted and the person he wanted to be. It is an important stage in freeing himself from "the hands of the enemy,"[4] but we should be careful not to see it as an autobiography. Indeed Berkman's diary for this period reveals that he rejected the word from his title suggesting that "autobiography" was too prescriptive, and he wanted something more comprehensive–hence the word "Memoirs." It is not, then, the actual truth, either about his deeds before his arrest, or his time in prison. With the former, he had to lie to protect others who had been involved in planning the attack on Frick, and those who helped plan his escape. With the latter, there was so much in his head, both in terms of people and emotions that he could only cope by deciding to "select, combine types & incidents into typical representation."[5] Berkman also forgot people or their names, remembered situations wrongly (years blurred into fragments and made unlikely chronologies that were not in fact related) or, when he had to write of his time in the Penitentiary, found the whole question of re-visiting some parts of his time there too traumatizing to consider. "Memoirs" gave him the freedom to write and invent. He could create moods and atmospheres and experiment with writing styles that helped him trace his journey.

He began writing the book on June 3, 1910 and by September of that year had finished Part One, "The Awakening and Its Toll." He could not write anything between mid-September and early November. It was Part Two of the book, "The Penitentiary" that caused this blockage. He deliberately immersed himself in the political and social world around him. Anything was better with dealing with and sorting the memories of those prison years. In early November, he began

[4] Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist, see p. 441 of this volume.

[5] Diary, November 4, 1910, see p. 479 of this volume.

writing again with a desire to develop a psychology of himself, other prisoners, guards, and the wider society that sanctions the penal system. He wanted this central part of his book to reflect "the unspeakable injustice, uselessness and evil of the whole system of punishment."[6] He constantly worried that he had too much material to select from and whether or not what he chose was the right selection. Nearly a year later he was still struggling with this section and finding little resolution. Like many writers, he began to worry about whether or not his work was commonplace, and he discovered that he could only think about the book when he was sitting in front of a piece of paper with a pencil in his hand. By September 1911, the manuscript was almost complete, and Emma Goldman sent out a circular announcing its imminent completion and looking for financial assistance to get the book published. At that time it had the working title "Autobiography Of An Anarchist," a title, as we have seen, Berkman rejected. He continued to drastically revise the manuscript, finding it impossible at times to match together words and experiences into any sort of satisfactory pattern but finally, in a letter to Rudolf Grossman on August 15, 1912, Goldman writes that Berkman is working on the book's last chapter.[7] It had taken him over two years of mental and emotional struggle to produce.

Jack London was asked by Emma Goldman to write the introduction to Prison Memoirs but produced one that was critical of anarchism in general and of Berkman's action against Frick in particular. He wrote of the "silliness of his act" stating, "If my brother does a silly thing, a thing repugnant to my concepts, is he any the less of a brother?" His introduction did go on, however, to describe the book as a "great human document."[8] Even so, Berkman and Goldman rejected it in February 1912. Instead, their friend, the author Hutchins Hapgood was asked to write the introduction, and Goldman and others touted the manuscript to mainstream publishers such as Mitchell Kennerley. None of them accepted it. The only practical alternative was to publish the book through the Mother Earth Publishing Association. Gilbert Roe, Goldman's friend who was a writer and a lawyer as well as a member of the Free Speech League, took the lead in raising funds for its publication. Helped by the journalist Lincoln Steffens and others, Roe arranged soirees where extracts of Berkman's work-in-progress were read and money collected for its publication. It was eventually published in late September 1912.

Throughout the writing process, Berkman was helped and supported by Goldman. Their arguments and discussions focused his mind and added clarity to his writing. They also led him to wonder about just how much they were growing apart. Theirs was always a relationship of ebbs and flows, and her constant support for, and promotion of, the book was balanced by his sense that they saw anarchism, and how anarchy would be achieved, in different and perhaps contradictory ways. His other major support was Voltairine de Cleyre. She had corresponded with Berkman during his time at Western Penitentiary and maintained regular contact with him after his release. While in prison, Berkman learned English and extended his abilities in French, German, and Yiddish, but he was unsure of his fluency in written English. His letters to de Cleyre are full of questions about meaning and syntax as well as soliciting her thoughts on sections of the manuscript.[9] She edited his work with regard to style and grammar, answering all of his questions–from the use of apostrophes (something Berkman never quite got the hang of!) to the correct use of prepositions–with care and thoroughness, and even offering some stringent

[6] Ibid.

[7] Emma Goldman to Pierre Ramus, August 15, 1912, Pierre Ramus Papers, IISH, Amsterdam.

[8] Jack London, "Preface to Prison Memoirs" (unpublished) (Amsterdam: Alexander Berkman Papers, IISH).

[9] See for example Voltairine de Cleyre to Alexander Berkman, March 8, 1912 (Alexander Berkman Papers, IISH).

critique at times. She felt, for instance, that people who read the first part of Prison Memoirs would believe Berkman was mad as he tried to explain why he tried to kill Frick.[10] She also worried about a scene between Berkman and "Luba," which she felt was too explicit, and Berkman eventually cut it from the manuscript.

As he was writing the book, Berkman's emotional life was in turmoil. His relationships with the women he was seeing, sometimes two or three others besides his long-time companion Becky Edelsohn, were coming together, falling apart, or simply confusing him. He would discover in 1911 that Becky Edelsohn was pregnant by another man and Ben Reitman was to perform an abortion. Reitman, Goldman, and their circle all believed Berkman was the father and he didn't appear to contradict them, but writhed inside at what Edelsohn had done. There can be no doubt his experience of prison had left him emotionally and sexually tangled. Goldman, writing in Living My Life, would explain that "for fourteen years he had been starved of what youth and love could give… Sasha was two years younger than I, thirty-six, but he had not lived for fourteen years, and in regard to women he had remained as young and naive as he had been at twenty-one."[11] While Goldman's reading might be overly simplistic, it wasn't until 1915 that he found his emotional stability with Margaret ("Fitzie") Fitzgerald. The writing of his book, is a product, among other things, of the tension between his inner and external personal life and his inability to accept or control either one.

One area of his life that was firmly out of his control, was how others, especially anarchists, saw him. After Berkman's attack on Frick, the anarchist and sex radical Ezra Heywood described his prison sentence as "relative vengeance such as slew Nat Turner and John Brown."[12] At the same time, Goldman and other anarchists regularly referred to Berkman as a "Brutus," because he had attempted to slay the Caesar-like figure of Frick. This acclamation continued as Goldman regularly and warmly listed Berkman alongside other anarchist attentaters. " The acts of Berkmann (sic), Caserio, Henry, Vaillant, Pallas and other heroes were but the heralds of the coming Social Revolution,"[13] she argued in an 1895 London talk. The elevation to the pantheon of anarchist heroes would be capped by a letter Berkman and Goldman received after the publication of Prison Memoirs. It was from William Holmes, a close friend and confidante of Albert Parsons and some of the other Haymarket men. He writes that, after reading Berkman's book, he was reminded of "that memorable day in November when Comrade Parsons tried my soul when he said to me, 'Comrade. I couldn't live a year in state prison under a life sentence. I should either commit suicide or go insane.'"[14] The implication was there for Berkman to read and try to come to terms with. He had done what perhaps even Parsons could not do. As far as many of his comrades were concerned, he had taken the ultimate action against oppression, suffered for it, and returned as committed to the anarchist ideal as ever. He was less a person, more a living legend. Whenever he spoke, or wrote, his words would carry more gravitas because of who he was and what he had done. He would be looked on for inspiration–whether he wanted to deliver it or not. We might well see the writing of this book as an attempt to make his comrades understand

[10] Diary, October 7, 1910, see p. 462 of this volume.

[11] Emma Goldman, Living My Life (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931), 412.

[12] Ezra Heywood, The Word, January 1893.

[13] Emma Goldman, Liberty (London), October 1896.

[14] Letter from William T. Holmes to Emma and Alex, "My dear comrades," November 8, 1912 (Emma Goldman Papers, IISH).

that he was merely human, with all the strengths and weaknesses that word entails, and not a mythical hero. There is some poignancy in us knowing he wouldn't succeed.

From the middle of October 1912, Goldman began to give lectures on the book and on October 28 there was a banquet, held at New York's Cafe Boulevard with a variety of speakers, to celebrate its publication. On its release, the book proved successful not only in the world of anarchism and radical politics but also in the wider, literary world. The New York Evening Post stressed how Berkman had succeeded in making the reader "live in his prison experiences," while the New York Tribune compared Berkman's work to "Dostoevsky and Andreyev." The New York Times spoke of the book as "an arraignment of a system in which we have much to be bettered," and went on to describe the work as "vivid, candid, honest."[15] Prison Memoirs would be reprinted many times, translated into numerous languages, and would be recognized as a classic of both prison literature and political memoir.

When we read Prison Memoirs we would do well to realize that the book is a snapshot, a moment in time. It is a snapshot that could have changed every day as Berkman constantly revised his memories of prison, and consequently the text. It is likely his memories would have changed and coalesced for the rest of his life, leaving some kind of dissatisfaction with the written evidence created between 1910 and 1912. Be that as it may, one must acknowledge Berkman's skill as a writer. Throughout the book he adopts various writing styles and techniques. Sometimes he can be clumsy, but more often he writes with a balance and poise that is quite remarkable when one considers the subject matter.

His ear for dialogue and dialect is acute. As someone wanting to portray the realism of life behind prison walls, he tries, with some success, to copy the accents and cadence of the prisoners that were part of his life for all those years. Boston Red educates Berkman about man-boy love and the meaning of criminal slang; George discusses gay prison life with Berkman; and Wingie, who advises Berkman in his early days in the Penitentiary, introduces him to prison slang. Less successful to the modern reader–though perhaps of its time–is his representation of black prisoners. These and other vignettes throughout the book coalesce into an aural experience that provides a sense of reality, drawing us into a world we know little of. Often scenes with characters are near monologues, with Berkman playing the role of the young innocent, and obviously these scenes are conveying a message to us as well as to him. His use of dialogue ensures that ideas and information are conveyed to us without didacticism. Some of these characters did exist, and it's quite likely that others–George and Boston Red for instance–didn't. Of course people who were like them, did. It is unlikely, however, that they had these conversations with Berkman at one time as presented in the book, or even at all. It might be better to see them as characters providing us with information and attitudes that Berkman picked up and came to terms with over his fourteen-year sentence. These characters are just as likely vehicles for the thoughts he must have had in those long, lonely years of isolation and basket cell punishment–a mapping out of conversations with himself that helped him understand the culture of criminals and prison before he could write about them for us. Berkman may have exaggerated his naivete at times but it was still real and palpable. Locked up as he was, inside the world of his political beliefs, the book reflects how he had to re-consider what he knew and come to terms with what

[15] Paul Avrich and Karen Avrich, Sasha and Emma: The Anarchist Odyssey of Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 212.

he didn't. At times, his unease and the unsettled retreat into himself as that process takes place is also evident.

Sometimes Berkman becomes the sociological reporter in order to illustrate the casual dehumanization of prison life. The parade of the sick who are unsympathetically treated by medical staff and the casual contempt and cruelty of the prison guards to prisoners is carefully documented. Prisoners die because of this casualness and it is just as deadly as the "clubbing squad." His walks along the cell block range as the coffee boy allows him to present us with pen portraits of the prisoners. All of them are portrayed as individuals. All of them, as far as he is concerned, are victims. Waiting to pounce is the sheer horror of madness. His friend Wingie will go mad, eventually unable to recognize Berkman. He shows us the young black man reduced to madness and living in filth–not allowed to go home after serving his sentence. We see others who just give up or live in a fantasy world. Berkman documents it all remorselessly and the effect is all the more powerful for its frank realism. His description of the poignancy of New Year's Eve in prison stays with us for a long time after we have put the book down. Who deserves to live like this? What is anyone gaining from this experience?

Ironically, though, Berkman did gain something, and it may have been writing this book that made him understand what that was. Before prison, Berkman could see himself as "one who has emancipated himself from being merely human."[16] He was instead the revolutionary, acting in the name of the people but not like them. He was the living embodiment of Rakhmetov and the ideal revolutionist echoed in Nechayev's Catechism of a Revolutionary. He was like the heroes and heroines of the Russian revolutionary movement, dedicated to the emancipation of the people. It was all inside his head. He entered Western State Penitentiary as someone who, for all his bravery and political certainty, suffered from a lack of engagement with the world. He was as emotionally distant from it as it was possible to be. Certainly, that fact helped at times. The picture of himself he carried kept him alive when others might have gone under–"As a pioneer of the cause, I must live and struggle"[17]–but it would also cause confusion and intellectual chaos as his certainties were re-arranged and re-constructed. In his circumstances, learning was never straightforward and linear. He read whatever books the prison library had, from romance novels to obscure philosophical texts. He listened to the prisoners, spoke with them and learned from them. There was no such thing as a "political prisoner" in America. He was in the mainstream prison population and it was a revelation. "I marvel at the inadequacy of my previous notions of 'the criminal,'"[18] he mused.

The process of writing his book also clarified something else in Berkman's mind: a change of direction with regard to where anarchist propaganda should be aimed. In a letter to Goldman, written on March 13, 1905, he had argued that it is "of more real and lasting influence in the long run, to win for our ideas Americans of the intelligent middle-class, rather than the masses."[19] We can see his point. After all, there may well have been no Prison Memoirs if the intelligent middle-class had not donated money for its publication and, more importantly, his beloved Russian revolutionists had been drawn primarily from that class. They would be the ones who would go to the people and help bring about revolutionary change. As he struggled to create his book,

[16] Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist, see p. 28 of this volume.
[17] Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist, see p. 219 of this volume.
[18] Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist, see p. 222 of this volume.
[19] Alexander Berkman to Emma Goldman, March 13, 1905 (Alexander Berkman Archive, IISH).

however, a new direction in his public writing becomes more and more discernible–a direction that would lead to more tension between himself and Goldman.[20]

When Berkman left the Penitentiary in 1905 to finish his sentence at the Allegheny workhouse, over two hundred prisoners asked that he be allowed to go through the cell block ranges and say goodbye to them. The request was refused. Two things strike us about that request. Berkman wasn't acting for the people anymore–he was one of them in their eyes, and in his eyes, they were as much victims of capitalism as he was. Secondly Berkman's anarchism had become much richer and more complex as a result of his prison time and his interaction with these prisoners. More and more, after the publication of the book, Berkman attempted to master a simple writing style–one that could express difficult ideas in a clear and straightforward way.[21] It was writing that would be aimed at these two hundred friends and the millions like them as much as towards anyone else. How could he forget them? What good was anarchism if there was no room for them in it? His memories of his fellow prisoners, however tormented at times, would ensure that his anarchism would be a rich and inclusive one, and if his writings would offer pathways into appreciating anarchism's possibilities so too would his actions. He would make his own script.

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[20] Certainly you can see this within the pages of Berkman's diary during this period that records both conversations with himself as he works out how and for whom anarchist propaganda should be directed, and the subsequent arguments and tensions between himself and Goldman on the matter.

[21] See for example Alexander Berkman, Now and After: The ABC of Communist Anarchism (New York: Vanguard Press, 1929).

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