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The Poetics of Anarchy

David Edelshtat's Revolutionary Poetry by Ori
Kritz [Review]

John Patten

June 2008

David Edelshtat (or Edelstadt) was born in Kaluga, Russia in 1866. He emigrated to America in 1882, already a radical. Like others, he was further radicalised by the Haymarket affair of 1886–7: he joined the Pionire der Frayhayt (Pioneers of Liberty) and later edited the *Fraye Arbayter Shtime* (*Free Voice of Labor*). First writing in Russian, he switched to Yiddish to reach the mass of working immigrant Jews. In three and a half years he became a prolific and powerful anarchist poet, an agitator-in-verse. In 1892 he died of TB caught in a sweatshop, aged twenty-six.

First written as a thesis, *The Poetics of Anarchy* is especially valuable for the amount of biographical research it contains, especially translations from the Yiddish anarchist press and Yiddish books, both anarchist and literary. Kritz does a good job, even if when she mentions “Karl Marx, with whose writing Edelshtat was no doubt familiar” (p129), it makes me want to know for sure: and to know what else he read. If you write something interesting, people will want to know more!

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Edelshtat's anarchism was militant, uncompromising and self-sacrificing. The imagery of storms and blood-stained banners is probably alien to most contemporary anarchists. More alien will be the expectation of a final battle: "that success is near, and more importantly, absolute" (p116). Although Edelshtat was capable of falling in love, he refused to be distracted from the cause (p44). This is the attitude Emma Goldman reacted against in her celebrated "I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody's right to beautiful radiant things" outburst (*Living my life* p56). Edelshtat has a lot in common with Alexander Berkman. Both were Russian-speaking Jews who brought to anarchism the moral fire of Russian populism. Of course there are differences: Berkman's father was a successful businessman, Edelshtat's a cantonist (a 25-year conscript in the tsar's army). By the end of 1892 Berkman was beginning fourteen years of imprisonment; and Edelshtat was dead.

Kritz provides Yiddish and English versions of the Edelshtat's poems on the Haymarket affair ("August Spies", "Louis Lingg", "Der 11-ter november" ["The eleventh of November"] and "Albert Parsons") and analyses them in depth as "revolutionary myth" (p102), claiming he constructs a "civil religion of communist anarchism" (p132). In this she is helped by the number of times Edelshtat appropriated religious terms: holy, prophet, martyr. As for Louis Lingg, "On his 'vundersheynem gezikht' (beautiful face, line 3) rests the 'frayhayt helige shkhine' (freedom's holy Divine Presence, line 4). This metaphor links the fictional Lingg with the Divine Presence, the Shekhinah, the most important rabbinic designation for God's presence in the world." (p113)

It's a commonplace of anarchist writing that dead comrades are not really dead while we remember them and they inspire us, without expecting them to reappear, even in ghostly form. When Edelshtat says:

“But Lingg is not dead... above the battle-
barricades
Still hovers his spirit! And you hear
How he shouts to us ‘Forward, comrades!
Forward with armor and sword!’” (p111, lines 45-
48 of “Louis Lingg”)

it’s metaphorical and not metaphysical. Likewise, when Kritz sees the anarchist calendar (November 11th, first of May, July 14th etc.) as “drawing on Christianity, which has specific dates of commemoration of various saints that died as martyrs” (p143) is it not a broader human urge to remember and commemorate that’s at work?

Kritz briefly mentions some of Edelshtat’s poems that were put to music (p51). I would have liked to know more about this, since I suspect they are what have kept his name alive among anarchists and socialist Jews alike. “In kamf” (“In struggle”) and “Vakht oyf!” (“Wake up!”) were both used on the soundtrack of *The Free Voice of Labor: The Jewish Anarchists* (Steven Fischler and Joel Sucher, 1980, reissued by AK Press on the *Anarchism in America* DVD, 2006). From there (I assume) they made their way to the 1980s Spectacular Times compilation *Songs of Anarchism and Revolution*.

All of which suggests that David Edelshtat, anarchist and sweatshop poet, has written himself into history. *The Poetics of Anarchy* is recommended for all who want to know more about him or his work.

Towards a Yiddish anarchist anthology?

It would have been good to have more of his poems translated in the book along with some of his prose. For example, “Der ershter shtral” (“The first ray [of light]”), his account of *Di Varhayt*, forerunner of the *Fraye Arbayter Shtime* is quoted from, but not reproduced.

There must be hundreds (if not thousands) of similar, virtually unknown, pieces of history, in Yiddish books, pamphlets and articles; covering the history of the Yiddish-language anarchist movement, but also anarchists in the labour movement; the Russian revolution and Bolshevik repression of anarchists; or anarchism in Poland, Argentina, Palestine, Canada...

The edition of Chaim Weinberg's *Forty years in the struggle: the memoirs of a Jewish anarchist* (produced by and available at www.deadanarchists.org) shows what can be done. I look forward to seeing more in the same vein.