

With Jack Abrams: Imprisonment and Deportation

A Memoir

Mollie Steimer

March 1930

I first met Jack Abrams on a Saturday evening in January, 1917, when I joined the anarchist group, Freedom, in New York. I observed right away that only two people did practically all the work of the group. They were Bunin (“Jesus”) and Jack Abrams. Abrams was the more energetic personality with a greater will for action. He won my admiration immediately. It was the kind of admiration that a young girl had for the person who shared the same ideals which she holds dear and struggles for them to become a reality. Abrams and his wife, Mary, and I became good friends and comrades immediately. We were very active. Suddenly, I don’t remember why, the group broke up. There were ideological differences.

The events of the time had become very serious — war was being waged all over the world. We decided to look deeper into our souls, overlook minor differences, and, this time without Bunin (“Jesus”), decided to form a new group. The new group consisted of Jack Schwartz, Bernstein, Bernard Sernaker, Jack Abrams and a few others whose names I do not want to mention at this time.

We distributed leaflets and flyers everywhere and published a Jewish newspaper from time to time called *The Storm*. Though not oriented to any special “ism” it was anarchistic. All our members sincerely believed that the Revolution was around the corner.

Events were taking place very rapidly. In Russia a Revolution had broken out which filled us with great enthusiasm. It was then that our discussions began. Should we give up our stand against war and take the side of the allies, or side with the German militarists? Bernard Sernaker wrote an article for Our paper supporting Peter Kropotkin and the famous sixteen in favor of the allied side against the German Government, to safeguard the libertarian traditions of the French revolutionary movement. After exhaustive discussions we did not accept Sernaker’s article for our paper. We decided to continue our call to the world against war and to stop the bloodbath. But we were not able to continue our agitation much longer because of the Espionage and Sedition Act of October, 1917. We could no longer work openly and freely. All criticism of the government was prohibited. The printshops refused to print our leaflets and our paper. We were compelled to operate underground, illegally.

At first we tried to install a little printing press in a comrade's room, but it made too much noise and the neighbors would begin to complain and call the attention of the authorities to us. We then decided to establish a small print shop of our own where Jack Schwartz and Hyman Lachowsky were supposed to hold private jobs and at the same time print our leaflets and other propaganda. We opened our shop in Harlem and found an apartment nearby with a number of rooms in which to live. Schwartz and his wife, Florence, had one room, Abrams and his wife, Mary, had another room, and I occupied the third room. We did this to reduce our expenses both for living quarters and our printshop.

In July, 1918, we learned that President Wilson had sent ten thousand American troops to Vladivostock to intervene militarily against the Russian Revolution. At that time we were all very much in sympathy with the Russian Revolution. We sent out a call for a mass protest meeting against intervention and sent it to the American press. Samuel Lipman attended the mass meeting even though he considered himself a Marxian Socialist and we were glad to have him. We knew that he was an upright person to whom we could entrust the preparation of the English version of our anti-intervention proclamation. We entrusted the Jewish version to Jack Schwartz. To test the effectiveness of the proclamation we read it at the mass meeting.

Our group consisted of only ten comrades. Each one took the responsibility to distribute leaflets in a designated district. In a few days our leaflets were distributed all over New York, Philadelphia and other cities, especially in workers' districts, in such numbers that the bourgeois press reported that we spread them by air. A horde of detectives were sent out to trail us and spy on us, all without success. They finally succeeded in the following manner. One day Lachowsky brought with him another comrade, Rosansky, to help distribute leaflets. We relied entirely on Lachowsky's assurance that he could be trusted and we gave him a bunch of leaflets to distribute. In the morning Rosansky was arrested. He was beaten mercilessly and he could not hold out. He told the police that he was to meet us later in the afternoon on the corner of Madison Avenue and 104th Street. On August 23, 1918, when I left my workplace and came to the appointed meeting place, I found Rosansky waiting. I was in a happy mood and told him that the press had already printed the protest proclamation against intervention.

The people were discussing it everywhere in the streets. Then Lipman arrived, and immediately after, Lachowsky. Suddenly we were surrounded on all sides by the police who took us to police headquarters. While this was going on, another police detachment broke into our communal living apartment. There they found Jack Schwartz, Abrams and his wife, Mary, and Rosa Bernstein. After a thorough search the police wanted to arrest all of them. Abrams spoke up and declared that his wife, Mary, was sick and that Rosa, a nurse, was taking care of her, that they knew nothing at all about politics. He convinced the police to leave them alone, but they took the others off to police headquarters. We were already there when they arrived.

We sat there for many hours. The police questioned the men for many hours forcing them to endure fearful beatings. I heard their screams from the different rooms where they were being questioned and beaten. I saw the detectives with their sleeves rolled up mouthing insults and foul oaths as they emerged from the interrogation chambers. When after midnight they led me for questioning past the room where comrade Schwartz was being interrogated I saw that he had a bloody handkerchief over his mouth. The detectives questioned me for hours to find out where our printing press was located. When they realized that they would never get any information from me, they incarcerated us in the Tombs where we remained imprisoned until our trial.

Preparations for our trial lasted two weeks before the trial was held. The pre-trial period was taken up with whether the government had the legal right to intervene in the internal affairs of Russia, militarily or in any other way. The well-known liberal periodical, *The Nation*, printed an editorial challenging the legality of the proceedings and raising embarrassing questions for the government to answer. The policy of military intervention in the Russian Revolution was abandoned. We won, in spite of the fact that Abrams, Lachowsky and Sam Lipman were sentenced to twenty years imprisonment, and I to fifteen years.

A collection of ten thousand dollars was made to appeal the verdict. During the month we were free on bail, Abrams continued his organizing and propaganda work. He was a member of the Bookbinders Union and often explained the position of the defendants.

In October, 1919, I was illegally sentenced to six months imprisonment in Blackwell Island Prison where I was placed in solitary confinement, entirely separated from the outside world, without mail, without visitors. Even my mother was not allowed to visit with me. One day, in January, 1920, a slip of paper was smuggled into my cell informing me that Abrams, Lachowsky; and Lipman were caught while trying to flee to Mexico. That same day a newspaper clipping giving the history of our group was thrown into my cell.

Our appeal to the highest court in the land ended in failure. My three anarchist comrades on trial with me were already sent to federal prison in Atlanta » Georgia. When my six months imprisonment at Blackwell Island ended, I was brought to New York where I was kept under arrest for two days. The first day was the International Workers Holiday, May Day, 1920. I was then sent to the Federal Penitentiary in Jefferson City, Missouri, to serve my fifteen year prison sentence. How the Defense and Amnesty Committees arranged to exchange us for Russian prisoners of war I do not know. I had my differences with the Defense Committee and the Amnesty Committee about sending a petition to the government but I was told that I did not have enough information about all the aspects of the case.

We were informed that the exchange with Russian prisoners of war would take effect on the 23rd of November, 1921. We were all deported to Russia.

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