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Clara Solomon: A Eulogy

Robert P. Helms

February 17, 2001

Good Afternoon.

I am grateful for this chance to state my remembrance of my friend and comrade Clara Solomon.

Because I knew her chiefly as an anarchist, and because she was one from the cradle to the grave, the occasion of Clara's death makes me stop and consider what it means to be alive at this moment in time, and active in the movement. Born into an anarchist family, Clara grew up as activities were winding down in the United States. She felt the hopes and tragedy of the Spanish War, and in the late hour when I knew her, she was part of this rebirth and steady growth we're seeing now. From the beginning of her long life to the end, she was a beautiful part of the scene. It's a pleasant coincidence that the last major news event to happen during her life was the stolen election, and the collapse of our government's facade of Democracy.

The first time I spent a while getting to know Clara was at the 1993 Anarchist Gathering in Philadelphia. Clara and Sid were guest speakers who I had invited when I briefly met them in Manhattan a few months earlier. My most clear recollection of Clara on that summer weekend is that she had a birthday (her 81st, I think), and we had one of the comrades make her a

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Retrieved on 16th May 2024 from www.deadanarchists.org
This eulogy was delivered at the memorial gathering for Clara Solomon on February 17th, 2001 at the Brecht Forum in New York City. It appeared in *Social Anarchism* no. 30 (2001).

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cake that he cut into the shape of a little round bomb, and we put a sparkler in it (for a fuse), and a circled "A" in the icing, when we all sang "Happy Birthday." She was a little put off by the appearance of some of the people who came to the gathering. It had been a long time since she'd mingled with young anarchists. The room was filled to the brim when she and Sid spoke, and they were, of course, a major hit.

The second lecture given in Philly by the Solomons was held at the A Space about the Vanguard Group of the 1930s, and it was another success. It was there that Clara did what I will always remember with fondness: she gently, but firmly, disagreed with something Sidney had said. "No, no. You have it all wrong," she said, and everyone in the room laughed, not at Sid of course, but touched that two people, both with strong opinions, could be together for something like sixty years and get along so well.

As time passed, I came to know Clara's dining room table as about the best place to brainstorm for the future of anarchism. I also came to know the Solomons as dear friends. I gathered there with the New York comrades many times. Sometimes we worked at taking the next step forward with the cause, and other times we just sat and talked about life, family, and the nature of the human world. Either way, I always left with the feeling that I had learned something, looking forward to returning again, but not being able to come as often as I'd like.

Clara was a special example of the anarchist lady. She was a strong mind and personality in a frail body. She persisted bravely in the face of health problems that would have crushed the spirit of a weaker person, and she inspired others to carry on in the struggle by the strength of her intelligence, her dedication, and her grace.

I am one of those inspired by her in this way. She and Sid would say that I had a part in bringing them back into the movement, but the way I remember it is turned around the other way. There were times over the past ten years when I've felt very,

very burnt, but then the phone rings and Clara is inviting me to an Anarchist Circle meeting, and asking how things are going, and by the time I hang up I'm energized, rather than drained, by my involvement. When I was burned out, it was usually because of quarrels that were going on between myself and other comrades, which bring out qualities in me that are best when they're used against the authorities. When I would discuss this sort of thing with Clara, I would somehow become aware of the smallness of the matter; aware of my tone and the effect it had on others. Her seniority, her humor, and her integrity all combined to have this effect, as no one else did.

What it means for me to be an anarchist now is to strive, like Clara did, to defend human freedoms as long as I live, but never neglect to enjoy family, friends, and culture. The beauty of our individual lives is what sustains us emotionally as we hang together for the good fight. When things start to wear us down, when it all gets too dry and grouchy, let's think of Clara and remember that there's a smile in the spirit of anarchism, and it's this spirit that really puts the idea into practice.

Goodbye, Clara. Your face and the sound of your voice will not soon fade from my thoughts. Just as you remembered Goldman, Tresca, and Rocker to me, I will remember you with love to the bushy-tailed anarchists I meet many years from now. I'll tell them that I'm grateful to have known you. Thank you, Clara, for enriching my life and our cause.