Rudolf Rocker
Max Baginski
(died 24 November 1943)
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so they had to bring him to the hospital where death finally closed his tired eyes.

Max Baginski was one of the last of the old school, a man who thought, battled, and suffered greatly while always remaining patient. If he were able to read this obituary from his old friend, he surely would have said: "Why make such a fuss over something so small? We come and go, but it's not worth the effort to prattle over it."

I.

On 24 November 1943, Max Baginski died at Bellevue Hospital in New York at the age of 79. With his passing, the world lost one of the most outstanding members of the old guard of libertarian socialism, a magnificent character of rare intellectual talent and matchless mental power.

Baginski was born in Bartenstein in 1864, a small East Prussian town near Königsberg. Max's father had a shoemaking business, but, as a free-spirited and rebellious man who had earned a reputation as a "black sheep" within his ultra-conservative community, he often struggled to make a living. In his youth, he had enthusiastically participated in the revolution of 1848, and, after the victory of the reaction, was sent to prison for a few months—an experience which, needless to say, did not teach him a "better attitude."

As a child in his father's house, Max eagerly read *Die freien Glocken* ("The Free Bells"), which was then edited by the freethinker Dr. August Specht in Germany. The little cobbler's workshop also received the *Berliner Freie Presse* ("Berlin Free Press"), which at that time was published by Johann Most in the capital; even then Most's folksy, humorous language made an impression on the young boy.

When Max finished school and was about to become his father's apprentice, he was supposed to receive a churchly blessing from the pastor of the little town, as was common practice in Germany. For this service the man of God demanded two and a half thalers, which the father denied him. When the pastor finally agreed to offer the blessing for free, the father told him: "No, that doesn't work! Without money, the whole thing won't bring any blessings, and my son will end up in hell!" Thus, Max had to begin his apprenticeship without the blessing of the church—a fact which bothered him not at all. When Max traveled to Berlin in 1882, he was already a convinced Socialist. It was a difficult time in Germany back then. Bismarck's exceptional law against the Socialists weighed on the

working class like an incubus, hampering any free movement. Socialist newspapers could only be smuggled in from abroad, and public demonstrations on behalf of Socialism were out of the question. Only small trade unions were suffered a beggar's existence every now and again, although even these eventually fell prey to the law. Together with his older brother Richard, Max threw himself heart and soul into the underground movement; he soon became one of the most active comrades of the "inner circle," which, heroically taking on every sacrifice, led the battle against the reaction. Because Socialists were not allowed to hold their own conventions in those days, they often appeared *en masse* at the conventions of the officially-sanctioned political parties, where they were obliged to talk sparingly lest every meeting be broken up by the police. Baginski, who had distinguished himself as one of the finest speakers of the movement, made frequent and masterful use of this right of hospitality to develop ideas that could not be expressed openly in Socialist meetings.

In this inner circle of the underground movement, a core group known as the *Opposition der Jungen* ("Youthful Opposition") formed which opposed the centralistic tendencies of the old social-democratic party leaders and tried to direct the movement towards more radical measures. Together with Karl Wildberger, Wilhelm Werner, Bruno Wille and others, Baginski emerged as one of the spiritual leaders of a young movement which even then was foretelling the fate of German social democracy—a fate which would so cruelly come to pass many years later with Hitler's rise to power. When the exceptional law against the Socialists was struck down in 1890 and the Youthful Opposition went public, Baginski participated in the momentous debates which took place in Berlin between the "old" and the "young" and confronted the party elders more forcefully than anyone.

Even before the two factions decisively split at the political convention in Erfurt (1891), the party leaders put Baginski in charge of the editorial office of the newspaper *Der Proletarier aus dem Eu-*

I release pressure from my soul, but then it has lost its meaning for me."

His fantastic prelude to the works of Robert Reitzel—which he composed in three big volumes in Detroit in 1913, as was commissioned by the Reitzel Society, and of which only five-hundred copies were printed—is a brilliant proof of his literary talent. When reading these texts, one feels in each line the strong connection of Baginski's soul with the unforgettable editor of *Der Arme Teufel* ("The Poor Devil"). Over almost four decades, Baginski's literary creations could be found all over the German language libertarian newspapers and magazines. I tried to collect his best pieces and publish a book, but the brown barbarism that swept over Germany destroyed this plan, as it did so many others.

Although Max Baginski lived in the U.S. for fifty years, he could never get used to the conditions in this country. This was one reason why he became so lonely later in his life, judging other peoples' gross stupidities only in silence. He was always driven by an inner longing towards something that he could never reach. When he returned to us in Germany after WWI for a few months, he felt like an alien there as well, as though he had no home anywhere and could only find repose in the inner world he created for himself. I received several interesting letters from him that clearly reflected the fate of this great man. Unfortunately, the Nazi cannibals destroyed these as well.

During his final years of life, my poor friend suffered from a chronic weakness of memory that only worsened with time. He lived with his loyal partner Emilie, the sister of our deceased friend George Schumm, in the friendly little town Towanda in Pennsylvania, and each time I visited him, it broke my heart to see how swiftly his inner decay progressed. It was a hard fate, twice as hard for his courageous female companion of so many years, who knew well that no amount of dutiful effort on her part could change a thing. In July 1943, the old folks moved in with their daughter, who lived in New York. There, Max became very ill after a couple of weeks,

the newspaper's advertisement section for bourgeois election propaganda. Baginski certainly could not countenance such a decision, and he withdrew from his editorial role. The *Arbeiter Zeitung* was once again led by the Social Democrats but ceased publication not long thereafter.

In 1896 Baginski tried to publish his own weekly paper, *Die Sturmglocke* ("The Alarm Bell"), of which only a few issues were published. After the passing of Johann Most in March 1906, Baginski was invited to edited *Freiheit* and he did so exemplarily. Within one year, however, the old, ever-fighting newspaper folded after a romantic and stormy existence. The German libertarian movement in the U.S., which used to be the strongest in the country, became defunct. The old generation gradually died off, and its young offspring ventured off in different directions—the inevitable fate of all migrations.

After this, Baginski was active for years in the circle of Emma Goldman and her friends, and he published many superb essays in *Mother Earth* until this period also ended with the deportation of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. He then wrote for our papers in Germany and for the New York *Volkszeitung* ("Peoples' Newspaper"), edited by Ludwig Lore, but when this paper started to become involved in Communist activities and harshly attacked Emma Goldman, Baginski quit there as well, as he was a loyal friend who never made any compromises in these matters.

Max Baginski was one of the most outstanding human beings I have met in my life, a man with extraordinary intellectual capacities and inner strength of character, always patient and mild in his judgment of others, and without any personal ambition. He had all the talents of a good writer: abundant creativity, a good sense of humor, and a crystal-clear writing style which made his work truly enjoyable. He himself, however, never considered his natural gifts to be special. At his house, you could never find a single line he had written. When I chided him about this once, a silent smile rushed over his elegant face, and he replied: "Whenever I write something,

lengebirge ("The Owl Mountain Proletariat"), which served as a propaganda outlet among the Silesian weaver population, then among the poorest of the German workers. That the steering committee placed the defiant Baginski in such a position can only be explained by their desire to get him out of Berlin so that he could no longer sway the Youthful Opposition.

In his new sphere of influence, Baginski was untiring. His brilliant talent as a speaker, and, above all, his humble, unaffected character earned him scores of followers among the starving weavers of the Owl Mountains. He soon knew every village, every far-flung corner in this region of ever-increasing hunger and misery. When the young Gerhard Hauptmann began to collect the impressions which he later portrayed in his famous drama "The Weavers," he found in Baginski an excellent guide. Together they visited the most deeply impoverished sites, which Hauptmann would later describe in such shocking detail in his books.

The police certainly did not approve of Baginski's role as agitator among the weavers. Several lawsuits were filed against his newspaper. In one of the offending articles, he had very vividly described and criticized the pedagogical methods used in elementary schools in his East Prussian *Heimat* (home region). When Baginski was compelled to defend himself on this score, the prosecutor explained: "The defendant is a living refutation of his own statements. He himself has only attended elementary school, yet his writing is of superb quality. His grim humor has been influenced by Heinrich Heine, his reckless criticism by Ludwig Börne." Max Baginski, the simple shoemaker, spoke a masterful German that was the envy of many intellectuals. He certainly he did not learn it at school; rather, it was an outgrowth of his personal character. The prosecutor came to these conclusions because he had visited Baginski frequently in prison and had hour-long conversations with him. He had also sent all the classic German literature from his private library to Max's cell. Such an episode is rare to behold in Germany!

Around this time Baginski was sentenced to two and a half years in prison for a number of press-related offenses. While he was imprisoned in Schweidnitz, the Erfurt congress expelled Werner and Wildberger, the leaders of the "Young Ones," from the party. At the same time, some of the old party leaders tried to keep Baginski in the party—on this account August Bebel and Ignaz Auer visited him in prison, and Auer even promised him a prominent position in the party after his release. But Baginski was not a man who violated his friends' trust. He stood in solidarity with Werner and Wildberger and turned his back on the very party for which he had labored so strenuously under the Anti-Socialist Law. Baginski was a pure, sincere man. For him, freedom of thought was more important than anything else. His whole being rebelled against every inflexible party dogma which his conscience could not condone. Later on he was one of the first from the Youthful Opposition movement to embrace Kropotkin's libertarian ideas.

During his imprisonment he was brought close to death by a cancer of the head and neck which had been improperly treated by the prison. When the Socialist press made his case public, he was granted interim release after two years of imprisonment. He went to Zurich, where he gradually recovered and participated actively in the circles of the Youthful Opposition movement, represented by such august and abiding representatives as Gustav Landauer, Franz Blei, Hans Müller, Alfred Sanftleben, Fritz Köster, and others. All of them have since died except for my faithful friend Alfred Sanftleben, who is still alive at almost 80 years-old in Los Angeles. He has been afflicted by a severe illness for years, but he is mentally unbroken and remains devoted to the ideal of freedom, as in the tender dreams of his youth.

II.

In 1893, Baginski decided to emigrate to the U.S., where his brother Richard had already moved. On his trip from Zurich, he came to Paris, where he stayed for four weeks. I met him there in person for the first time, and we remained friends for life. (Perhaps he should have stayed in Europe, as he was one of those rare wanderers in the garden of life who fares poorly away from home. But these are questions of fate that can scarcely be answered.) In New York, Baginski joined the circle of Johann Most and his friends, and he became a diligent employee of Most's newspaper *Freiheit* ("Freedom") for which he wrote several of his best essays. He remained closely connected with Most until he (Most) died. More than anyone else he understood the character of this outcast man, probably because Most, who was driven out of Germany by the Anti-Socialist Law, is only remembered in this country as a lost knight fighting in a forlorn position—a fact which became tragically apparent to him, especially later in his life.

In the fall of 1894, Baginski assumed the position of chief editor of the *Arbeiter Zeitung* ("Workers' Newspaper") in Chicago. The newspaper had gone through many changes in its history. It was founded in the first half of the 80s by August Spies, but after his tragic death on November 11, 1887, the newspaper was taken over by the Social Democrats. After that time the newspaper underwent various changes and strayed from its original meaning. It was only in 1894, when the editors followed the recommendation of Most to entrust Baginski with editorial responsibilities, that the newspaper experienced a resurgence. The Chicago *Arbeiter Zeitung* was a daily newspaper which also published two weeklies called the *Fackel* ("The Torch") and the *Vorboten* ("The Heralds"). Baginski's co-editors were Hippolyte Havel and Rudolf Grossmann; with them, he made the newspaper one of the best German language workers' papers in the U.S. Baginski stayed in his position for more than seven years, until the editors decided one day to sell space in