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“The Whole World Is One Big Prison”

How Rudolf and Milly Rocker Escaped the Nazis

Tom Goyens

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2023

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don't worry; I'm always accompanied by a boat, so nothing can happen. The weather and the water are still warm, making it a pleasure to splash around. —Rudolf Rocker²⁵

Rudolf Rocker's lecture tour began on October 6, 1933, in New York and would take him to the West Coast and the principal cities in Canada. The Rockers soon found themselves in a distressing position again. As the situation in Germany and the rest of Europe grew grimmer by the day, any prospect of returning to a safe place in Europe faded. At the same time, maintaining legal status in the United States became a nerve-racking, nail-biting slog of requesting and waiting for visa extensions—a story for another time.

After all these peregrinations, the most priceless item the Rockers denied the Nazis was the manuscript of *Nationalism and Culture*, published in Los Angeles in 1937, which became a classic praised by Bertrand Russell, Albert Einstein, and Thomas Mann.

The manuscript and its bearer outwitted and survived the book burners, and if for no other reason, you should read it or listen to it.

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²⁵ Rocker to Nettlau, Towanda, September 27, 1933.

By June 1933, Milly and Rudolf prepared to depart for North America in September. There had been some job offerings, either at a syndicalist union or as editor, but Rudolf preferred to remain independent. He was offered the editorship of *Fraye Arbeter Shtime* (Free Voice of Labor) in New York, the foremost Yiddish anarchist paper in the world, but he declined. At one point, Nettlau suggested Rocker revive John Most's classic paper *Freiheit*, which ran from 1879 to 1910 in London and then in New York. But Rocker could not envision settling in depression-era America. "I'm too European to settle permanently in America," he wrote Nettlau, "even if immigration laws would allow it. No, that is really out of the question."²² An extended visit was all he could bear.

Gaining entry into the United States was surprisingly painless; at the end of July, they were granted a visitor visa valid for six months. On August 26, Milly and Rudolf boarded the steamship *Statendam* in Southampton, bound for New York.

Eight days later, they were greeted by their son Fermin, Milly's sister Fanny and her husband, Morris Pokrass. They spent ten days in a housing complex on Grand Street on the Lower East Side, a deary, characterless place, after which they traveled to Fanny and Morris's home in Towanda, a small town on the Susquehanna River in northern Pennsylvania.²³ The remote rural setting was most welcome, but as soon as they settled, Rudolf had to undergo eye surgery resulting from an untreated infection he contracted in London. After a quick recovery, the Rockers could enjoy some happiness in an otherwise gloomy world.²⁴

My wife and I go for walks in the mountains daily; there is also a wonderfully situated mountain lake, which I have already swum lengthwise and widthwise. But

²² Rocker to Nettlau, Paris, June 12, 1933.

²³ Interview with Fermin Rocker, in Paul Avrich, ed., *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America* (1995; AK Press, 2005), 37.

²⁴ Rocker to Nettlau, Towanda, September 27, 1933.

Emma Goldman, who believed they would be more useful in the United States rather than settle in London and rebuild the movement. But the insecurities of their nomadic life for the past six months were taking a toll. “If I’m honest,” he said to Goldman, “I urgently need to find solid ground under my feet again.”¹⁹

The rise of antisemitism was of particular concern to the Rockers. As they pitched their tent in London, the Nazis criminalized any marriage between a German and a Jewish or non-white person. Antisemitism and racism are not simply caused by economic inequalities or anxieties, and that, according to Milly and Rudolf, made them so dangerous. There is a psychology that shows that we are not born with this kind of hatred; we are taught it. This insight led Rocker to conclude that “the attitude of a people towards the Jews is [...] a measure of its democratic and liberal spirit and its capacity for further progress.”²⁰

Despite Goldman’s advice, Rudolf Rocker, still upset about losing his books, lost all appetite for a lecture tour in America. Letters from comrades painted a pessimistic picture: massive unemployment, the dollar in free fall, and no one having any money to contribute to the movement. A sense of hope hanging by a thread and powerlessness emanates from Milly and Rudolf’s letters to friends. “It’s a wicked world we’ve fallen into,” he wrote to Goldman, “and who knows what the future may hold in store.”²¹ Milly was also in a bad place, and they decided to travel briefly to France and Spain for a change of scenery. What added to their anguish was that no one in the rest of the world seemed to realize how dangerous things had gotten in Hitler’s Germany.

¹⁹ Rocker to Goldman, London, August 23, 1933, Emma Goldman Papers, IISH; Peter Wienand, *Der “geborene” Rebell: Rudolf Rocker. Leben und Werk* (Berlin: Karin Kramer Verlag, 1981), 385.

²⁰ Rocker, *Kritische Betrachtungen über die Judenfrage*, quoted in Portmann & Wolf, 287.

²¹ Rocker to Goldman, London, May 5, 1933, Emma Goldman Papers, IISH.

Part 1

*The time at the German border station seemed to take forever. The German officials, only did a quick look into the train compartments and didn’t even ask for our passports. Then came the Swiss passport control and after that customs inspection, which [...] took more time than we would have liked. The train finally started moving again. We breathed a sigh of relief. We arrived in Basel early in the afternoon.*¹

Rudolf and Milly Rocker later learned that the Nazis started searching all subsequent trains headed for Switzerland. A day later and this anarchist couple would almost certainly have been arrested and imprisoned as happened to many of their friends. While the crossing was a lucky break, it was just one episode in a harrowing year-long journey at a time when darkness descended over Europe. A sense of loss and despair with an occasional glimmer of hope is palpable in the letters and memoirs that Rudolf Rocker managed to put to paper while trudging across Europe.

The Rockers were no strangers to the peripatetic life. Rudolf, a gentile born in Mainz, and Milly Witkop, born of Jewish parents in what is today Ukraine, met in London’s East End where both were immersed in the Yiddish-speaking anarchist movement for many years. A son, Fermin, was born there. When the First World War broke out, Rudolf, who opposed the war, was locked up as an enemy alien. In 1918, he returned to his native Germany where the family reunited.

During the 1920s, Rocker became a leading proponent of anarcho-syndicalism, authored many of its manifestoes and pamphlets, and was a key representative at international conferences. He was a prolific and clear-headed writer who despised militarism,

¹ Rocker, *Aus den Memoiren eines deutschen Anarchisten* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 372. All translations by the author.

nationalism, and the Marxist idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat. He believed that fascism and Communism had toxic DNA in common, namely, the reverence for centralized power. Instead, he advocated anarchist decentralism, direct action, self-management, secular humanism, and international solidarity.

I am an Anarchist not because I believe Anarchism is the final goal, but because there is no such thing as a final goal. —Rudolf Rocker

When they were not traveling in Spain, the United States, or somewhere in Germany, the couple made a modest home for themselves in an apartment in the rather drab Neukölln district on the outskirts of Berlin. Fermin had remained in the United States. The Rockers were well-liked and well-connected within the non-Communist Left in Germany and perhaps in Europe. Two close friends lived nearby: the 74-year-old veteran anarchist activist Wilhelm Werner and the anarchist poet and editor Erich Mühsam.

Besides editor and orator, Rocker was also a writer and scholar. Since the mid-twenties he had been working on a historical study of the concepts of nation and state, but the project had grown into a bulky text on the phenomenon of nationalism—definitely a topic trending at the time. Materials for this study not only came from his impressive library but increasingly from the streets of Berlin. Fights between Nazi thugs and Communist militants were common. In January 1933, fifteen thousand stormtroopers held a rally outside the Communist Party headquarters on Bülowplatz chanting “We shit on the Jew republic!” It became all too obvious that the Berlin police either looked the other way or protected the brown-shirts.² Following some backroom dealings, Hitler was appointed Chancellor on January 30, 1933, prompting thousands to march through the streets holding their requisite torches. But the Nazis

² David Cay Large, *Berlin* (Basic Books, 2000), 256.

Terrible news greeted Milly and Rudolf shortly after arriving in London in May 1933. The police had broken into their Berlin apartment and confiscated their entire library—some five thousand volumes. Worse was that Ernst Simmerling, a friend and relative, had been in the apartment and was never heard from again. For a scholar like Rocker, losing all those resources was devastating. “I am in a state of mental depression like never before,” he wrote to Goldman. “I don’t need to tell you what losing my library means. Many future literary plans will have to be abandoned forever [...] I feel like someone without air to breathe.”¹⁶ The Nazis also sealed the room so that nothing could ever be retrieved.

Rudolf only learned later that not all was lost. In one of those unsung, heroic actions, Simmerling, Fritz Kater, Arthur Lehning, and Anton Bakels managed to haul away a large portion of Rocker’s library in the weeks before the Nazi raid. They then sent the boxes to Amsterdam, where they became part of the now-famous International Institute of Social History.

London was emotional for other reasons. It was the city where Milly and Rudolf met some thirty-six years ago and where both had worked tirelessly among the Jewish workers for over twenty years. Upon arrival, they received a welcome party where £30 was collected for Erich Mühsam and other comrades in Nazi jails.¹⁷ Also, Milly’s sister and parents still lived in the same East End neighborhood. “A strange feeling crept over us as we saw the old places where we had lived and worked for so many years,” remembered Rudolf.¹⁸

But those old places were just that; hardly any anarchist movement was left. Milly and Rudolf shared their disappointment with

¹⁶ Rocker to Goldman, London, May 5, 1933, Emma Goldman Papers, IISH.

¹⁷ Rocker to Nettlau, London, May 10, 1933.

¹⁸ Quoted in Werner Portmann and Siegbert Wolf, “Die Tore der Freiheit öffnen’: Milly Witkop-Rocker (1877-1955), Anarchistin und Feministin,” In: “Ja, ich kämpfte” *Von Revolutionsträumen, ‘Luftmenschen’ und Kindern des Schtetts. Biographien radikaler Jüdinnen und Juden* (Münster: Unrast, 2006), 286.

face) virulent antifascism with a wholly uncritical reverence for Stalin's Russia.

The terrible events in Germany have only allowed these brave Soviet followers to stress the need for a counter-dictatorship as the only remedy that can supposedly liberate the world. —Rudolf Rocker¹⁵

As storm clouds gathered over Europe, Milly and Rudolf accepted the invitation for a lecture tour during the upcoming fall in Canada and possibly the United States. This move could bring in some cash and, more importantly, reunite them with their younger son Fermin, who was a graphic designer in the United States. Immigrating to America was out of the question, so securing a permanent residency permit in a European state was the pressing issue.

A political reversal or stabilization in Germany seemed unthinkable. Rocker predicted with eery foresight that Hitler would rekindle German industries to tackle unemployment and re-arm and prepare for war. What about France? The Rockers traveled to Paris for answers but were told that legal residency was unlikely, let alone a work permit (he had been expelled in 1894). Smaller democracies like Switzerland and Belgium kept their doors closed out of fear of German intimidation, and Holland may offer residency but no work permit.

Britain and Spain beckoned as the most reasonable destinations. The Rockers had many friends in Spain, most connected with the anarcho-syndicalist movement, which was then the largest and most active in the world. But revolutionary foreigners were not always welcome even there, according to their friend Helmut Rüdiger. Eventually, Britain's Labour government granted them a two-month stay, which they were able to extend by a month.

¹⁵ Rocker to Goldman, Towanda, September 23, 1933, Emma Goldman Papers, IISH.

were not in total control, and Hitler, despite the viciousness of his followers, needed to maintain a modicum of legality during which he could consolidate power.

Rocker clearly understood the dynamics of an emerging dictatorship based on violence and worship, and this feature of his legacy can hardly be overstated. As an anarchist scholar, he loathed and feared populist demagoguery, worship of any kind, harmonizing of all thought, and the subordination of the individual to a leader, party, or state. His opinion of his compatriots grew bleaker with each passing week. During the early 1930s, his friend the Austrian anarchist historian Max Nettlau, chided him for his harsh pessimistic assessment of the German people. But Rocker was unwavering: "I feel more and more every day," he wrote in October 1932, "that soon a free person will no longer be able to breathe in this wretched country." He continued:

*We have always had the most miserable bourgeoisie in Germany, and the movement of these spiritual eunuchs toward Hitler is just the latest sign of a lack of character. And Social Democracy? May God have mercy. There never was a more miserable, more repugnant party in the world. No wonder that under such circumstances it should be easy for a rotten nobility to seize power which they lost after losing the war. At our throats today is not an ordinary Reaction, it is the specific Prussian Reaction that, in addition to brutal violence, also uses the smallest chicanery, and whose representatives have an almost sadistic desire to humiliate people as deeply as possible.*³

Unlike thousands of ordinary Germans, Rudolf and Milly Rocker understood the danger they were in and feared a European

³ Rocker to Nettlau, Berlin, January 20, 1933. Nettlau-Rocker-Briefwechsel, IISH.

calamity that was sure to follow. The day after Hitler's appointment, Milly wrote to her brother-in-law, the English anarchist Guy Aldred, that it was clear to her that the Berlin anarchist organizations would be the first to be stamped out.⁴ Rocker and his friends had already received threatening letters. On February 24, someone told him that the stormtroopers (SA) were convinced (incorrectly) that he had been an English spy during the Great War and that he is considered a "traitor to the fatherland."⁵

The prospect of having to leave the city, or even the country, seemed closer than ever. To their great relief, the Rockers still possessed a passport valid for two more years.

A nervous Rudolf decided to pay a visit to his friend Erich Mühsam, a Jewish anarchist poet with a knack for peppering reactionaries with scorn and biting sarcasm. For weeks Erich received threats in the mail and via telephone. Months earlier, none other than Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Propaganda Minister, publicly (but falsely) accused Mühsam of murdering hostages back in 1919 when he had been active in the revolutionary Bavarian Council Republic. Rudolf urged his friend to leave the country right away before it was too late. Mühsam at first balked at the idea, but after Werner made a second plea, Mühsam finally prepared to leave—but not after taking care of some loose ends.

"The Reichstag Set On Fire! Mass Arrests in Berlin and Other Parts of the Country!" screamed the morning headlines on February 28, 1933. Rudolf Rocker had gone to bed early the previous day and entirely missed this bizarre event.⁶ A huge fire in the late evening raged through the Reichstag building. Remarkably, the arsonist was arrested while still roaming through the smoke-filled building. Marinus van der Lubbe, a Dutch émigré and Communist

⁴ Peter Wienand, *Der "geborene" Rebell: Rudolf Rocker. Leben und Werk* (Berlin: Kramer Verlag, 1981), 364.

⁵ Rocker to Nettlau, Zürich, March 11, 1933. Nettlau-Rocker-Briefwechsel, IISH.

⁶ Rocker, *Aus den Memoiren*, 364.

this essay, Rocker repeats some of the most compelling arguments of twentieth-century anarchism that anyone interested in politics ought to know. He denounced the socialists and communists for their failure to resist fascism. He argued that any striving for political power—usually embodied in a state—from the left or the right would invariably open the door to despotism. It is all good and well that socialism fights against economic exploitation and the monopoly of property, but if it refrains from attacking domination itself, it will simply become the next authoritarian wasteland. Russia was a case in point.

Not the conquest of the principle of power, but eliminating it from society must remain the great goal of [socialism]. Anyone who believes that personal freedom can be replaced by equality of interests has never grasped the true essence of socialism. There is no substitute for freedom; there never can be [...] Socialism means working together in solidarity for a common goal and the same rights for everyone. Solidarity, however, is based on free decision and cannot be enforced unless it wants to be tyranny and thus abolish itself. —Rudolf Rocker¹⁴

Rocker made an explicit connection between fascism and Stalinism, between the rise of despotism under Lenin and fascism under Hitler and Mussolini. The will to state power, which often begins with the language of nationalism and patriotism, is palpable within both the extreme Right *and* Left. It was not surprising to Rocker that several local branches of the Communist Party had joined Hitler's stormtroopers. This viewpoint about the political Left and Right was rather unorthodox during the 1930s when most of the Left—except for the anarchists—combined (with a straight

¹⁴ Rocker, "Der Weg ins Dritte Reich: Die kommunistische Partei und die Idee der Diktatur," *Die Internationale*, Neue Folge, Vol. 1, Nr. 2 (Oct-Nov, 1934), pp.33–37.

are machines that can be automated and leveraged. Big states are infinitely more dangerous because one party can use democratic means to amass the means of power and become nearly omnipotent. Within a state, in other words, the transition from democracy to autocracy is much more fluid than people like to admit, especially people who don't question the presence of the state apparatus.

Rudolf tried to remain optimistic despite believing Germany was descending into madness. "It's getting darker and darker in the world," he once wrote, "but one mustn't lose courage, and especially today it's important to uphold the idea of freedom so that everything doesn't perish in this time of severe hardship."¹³ There were no silver linings for Milly; she saw disaster around every corner.

One day, an invitation arrived from Emma Goldman. Would Milly and Rudolf like to spend time at Bon Esprit, Goldman's cottage near St. Tropez on the French Côte d'Azur? It would be a quiet retreat with a view of the small harbor and the Mediterranean. The Rockers arrived in southern France sometime in mid-March when Hitler officially proclaimed the Third Reich. They enjoyed about six weeks of rest with good friends. On March 25, Rudolf Rocker celebrated his sixtieth birthday. Two days earlier, the German parliament passed a "Law to Remedy the Distress of the People and the Reich," better known as the Enabling Act, which allowed Hitler to enact laws without anyone else's approval.

But the real distress was the rapid erosion of freedom and the normalization of violence and brutality. How did we get here? Did it come as a surprise? Or had the pump been primed a long time ago?

Under the Mediterranean sun, Rudolf recounted his recent experiences, which grew into an essay called *The Road to the Third Reich* (*Der Weg ins Dritte Reich*). Let's do a brief reading because, in

¹³ Rocker to Nettlau, Zürich, March 11, 1933.

confessed and insisted that he had acted alone. Some people, including many anarchists, suspected that the Nazis themselves torched the building, but recent scholarship has dispelled this theory. That said, Hitler saw a political opportunity and grabbed it; privately, he called the fire a "God-given signal."⁷

The next day, the government and the friendly press declared that the conflagration was the start of a vast Communist conspiracy. The ruse worked. Hitler persuaded President Hindenburg to suspend all civil liberties guaranteed by the Constitution. Mass arrests followed. "That was precisely why the situation was so dangerous," Rocker later wrote, "for I was well aware that the Nazis could not stop halfway; they would use their undoubtedly well-prepared attack to unleash a panic in the country, which allows them to pose as the saviors of Germany and achieve the dictatorship they have wanted for so long."⁸

Milly had gone out for an errand and returned home in a state of distress. Mühsam had been arrested! Why did he stay in his apartment one last night? Why did he not heed the warnings? A train ticket to Prague was in his pocket when the secret police shoved him into a car. In the following weeks, only snippets of information about Mühsam's condition would reach the Rockers who did all they could to publicize the brutality of the regime in those early years.

There was little time to process the flow of events. Arrests were happening all over the city. It was time to go. They threw a few belongings in a bag but no suitcase, which would raise suspicion. Rudolf packed up his manuscript, *Nationalism and Culture*, which he completed a few days earlier, the loss of which would have been tragic. More on that later. When evening fell, they locked up their apartment and after several detours reached Werner's house where they plotted their next move. The mood was gloomy but practical.

⁷ Large, *Berlin*, 261.

⁸ Rocker, *Aus den Memoiren*, 365.

There was no longer any hope that the labor movement could rise against the fascists. “This brown shit will poison all of Germany and half the world,” barked Werner, “the Germans will never free themselves. What is coming is a new war.”⁹

Rudolf and Milly realized that they did not have enough clothes for what was potentially going to be a long voyage to who knows where. Milly decided to return to their apartment one last time and come back within an hour. Rudolf endured a dreadful wait, but his fifty-five-year-old wife reappeared in time. She arranged for two friends to hand them a suitcase near the train station around nine that night. All went well. Before long, they arrived in Magdeburg, one hundred miles west, and stayed for the night. The reason for this short trip was clever; an express train to the southern border would’ve been crawling with secret agents.

Early the next morning, March 1, they were on a train to Frankfurt where they arrived in the afternoon and checked into a hotel. They found the atmosphere markedly different than in Berlin; almost normal, which was surprising given the red scare unfolding in the capital in the wake of the great fire. But was this false comfort? Was everybody asleep at the wheel? Rocker observed the following:

*[in Frankfurt] you saw far fewer uniforms and people didn't look as anxious as in Berlin. Evidently, they have not fully realized the seriousness of the situation. Even in the small restaurant where we had dinner, there was a cozy atmosphere so typical of Frankfurt. The guests chatted loudly and casually, and at the table next to us, people cracked juicy Nazi jokes followed by laughter all around.*¹⁰

⁹ Rocker, *Aus den Memoiren*, 368.

¹⁰ Rocker, *Aus den Memoiren*, 372.

Even the Rockers let their guard down a bit and decided to stay a few days, maybe even visit some old friends. Perhaps they could still return to their flat in Berlin when things had calmed down. But as soon as the newspapers reported the arrest of seven thousand people they decided to continue their flight and board the next train to Switzerland, a two hundred-mile journey south. And another thing: the federal elections of March 5 failed to reverse the political situation, even though the Nazis came up short of winning an absolute majority.¹¹ After the nerve-racking customs inspection, the train pulled into Basel station.

Since the Basel train station was located in a German border enclave, Rudolf and Milly quickly traveled on to Zürich where they stayed at the Limmathaus, a sort of people’s house of the labor movement.¹² Safe from arrest, the couple could now focus on improving their economic situation as well as their physical and mental well-being. Milly was not in the best of health, and they had nearly exhausted their savings. Switzerland was expensive, and soon, they made plans to venture further afield. Rudolf also remembered that anarchists and syndicalists in the United States and Canada had invited him to undertake another speaking tour in the fall.

Part 2

Milly and Rudolf Rocker stayed in Zürich for at least ten days, offering time for reflection. Rudolf had been writing for years about the existential dangers of nationalism and the nation-state, and now his theories were being put into practice with terrifying accuracy. His premise is simple. States concentrate power and monopolize violence, whether they are democratic or autocratic. States

¹¹ Rocker, *Aus den Memoiren*, 369-372.

¹² Rocker to Nettlau, Zürich, March 11, 1933. Nettlau-Rocker-Briefwechsel, IISH.