

Compañera: Esther Dolgoff

A Radical Woman and her Traditional Role

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n.d. about 1992

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Memoir

Esther and Sam Dolgoff entered my life and that of my sisters in the early 'seventies when I was 11 and Esther was 66. My father and mother had known them in New York 10 years before but the acquaintance was renewed through Sylvie Kashdan and Robby Barnes, a young anarchist couple who came out to our home in the country on weekends and holidays to work in the garden and live in our barn. They were working on some political-historical projects with Esther and Sam in New York and soon the older anarchist couple were also coming out on warm weekends to sit in the rusty chairs under the apple tree and talk and talk and argue about politics and personalities.

How I enjoyed those conversations, though I couldn't fully understand them or identify the names that flew back and forth in the sweet smelling air; Emma Goldman, Carlo Tresca, Bakunin, Kropotkin ... I could wish that the FBI had bugged that apple tree as long as I could access the tapes. What I remember most about those conversations is Sam getting impassioned. His face would get red, his gestures more dramatic, he would rise to his feet and his great uninterruptable voice would get louder and louder, while Robby bounced from humor to irritation and Sylvie valiantly held to her point in the storm.

Esther would shake her head. "Oh ... Sam!..." she would turn to the side and quietly start talking to my sisters and asking interested, interesting questions about the books we were reading or the work we were doing in school.

For a while Esther and Sam were like adoptive grandparents to us girls, our real ones were too far away for frequent visits. Esther certainly had the traditional grandmother look with her gentle peasant face, round shape, and the round bun of gray white hair on the top of her head.

She also dressed like a traditional grandmother, in the images I conjure up of her she wears bib aprons and flowered house dresses. I have no memory of her in slacks, though the warmth and convenience of polyester trousers had made them the daily outfit of most women of her age. Perhaps she wore them in the winter, perhaps she never wore them, it is an interesting point for a woman in slacks had been a potent symbol in her time.

Sam was a shade less of a traditional looking grandparent, something about his impish expression and the way his hair would stand up on end.

I remember his wonderful aggressively protuberant stomach, hard as biceps. He would get us to punch it and we would hurt our hands while Sam simply smiled at us. My main memory of Sam is of him standing on our lawn gesturing grandly around at the trees and the garden, proclaiming in his new Yorker accent and his soapbox style and volume, "THIS is the FOREst primEVAL!" And again as we drove them home through the tenements of the lower eastside, bellowing it out the open window so the whole block could hear "THIS is the FOREst primEVAL!"

I remember in detail few of my conversations with Esther but there is a telling one. I was probably around 15, since that was the year I attended my first consciousness raising, but it could have been earlier. I was expounding to her about woman's rights, the pressing need for equality with men. Esther's response was less enthusiastic, she said she had always thought that women and men should join together in the struggle for the working class first, that was the most important thing, once that was won the rest would follow. At that time I was impatient with her answer, I felt she had been duped or had duped herself, willingly. I was conscious enough to notice the way she let Sam overshadow her. Today I would not be as dismissive of her position,

I've been out in the working world for almost 20 years now and issues of class seem more and more important.

Time Line

1905 — Born in Russia

1906 — Family immigrates to U.S. First they Live on a farm in N.J. then they move to Cleveland.

1920–1928 — As a teenager Esther works in an orphanage, loses her job when she protests the treatment of the children. Esther wants to become a doctor but obtains some kind of degree in nursing, Later she gets a masters in English lit. from Ohio's North Western University. Esther's Mom dies and Esther's sister, a school teacher, expects Esther to stay home and raise there younger brothers. Esther becomes involved with radical politics, perhaps with the IWW.

1928? — Esther is on the organizing committee to select speakers for the Cleveland open forum; she first meets Sam , who has come to speak on anarchism, on the steps of the Cleveland public library. Around this time she and Sam join their lives together; she's 23, he's 29. They move to New York.

1929–1939 — Works with Sam on the magazine vanguard; contributes a lot of work with out taking credit, contributes most or all of the literary reviews. Esther, Sam and -the Magazine vanguard become very involved in supporting and reporting on the Anarchist and anti-fascist forces in Spain. They are involved with fund raising and organizing. Their life long mistrust of communism is deepened by stories of communists shooting anarchists in the back. Vanguard loses momentum and disbands after Franco's victory but Esther and Sam don't allow themselves to be disheartened, they keep on going.

1933 — During the year their first son is born Esther and Sam Move to Stelton a rural colony or commune near New Brunswick N.J. This is a cooperative of anarchists and communists, and is the home of the Modern School. They return to N.Y.C. where their second son is born in 1937, then they move back to Stelton and live there from 1938–1942. Looking back, Sam was dismissive of the whole colony movement, saying that it was escapism and kept people from doing the real work that needed to be done in the world. He was particularly critical of the modern school. Esther was not as critical as Sam she saw much that was positive and found many of the ideas of the modern school interesting. she was interested in all types of education, traditional and alternative. In later years Ester attended Stelton reunions, some as late as the 1980's. Sometime in the 30's Esther and her sons also lived at Mohegan, another colony in Michigan.

1943 — Esther is one of the four founders of the publication "Why" the title is later changed to Resistance. There is some disagreement about the stand Esther and Sam took regarding involvement in the second world war, the magazine Resistance took an anti-war stance. but by that time they were not involved in editing it. Sam says there was a split and that both he and Esther felt the defeat of fascism was necessary to the survival of civilization. Others say that they took an anti war stance based on the ideal that workers should not kill each other.

1954–1965 — Esther and Sam are among the founders of the Libertarian League. She writes for its newsletter *Views and Comments*. Also in the early 'fifties she is one of the founders of the Libertarian Book Club, which publishes some anarchist works and makes previously published ones more available, this group is still around today.

1960s-1970s — Esther and Sam become somewhat involved with the new left and try to build bridges between them and the old left. They are both disillusioned with the new left's embracing of totalitarian dictatorships like Castro's Cuba.

1977–1979 — Esther participates in Free Space Alternative University. She lectures and writes for their newsletter. The later 'seventies are an active time for Esther; renewed interest in anarchism and feminist interest in her views and experiences as a woman, make her a popular speaker. Among other venues she speaks at the College of integrated studies in Ontario about the role of woman in the anarchist movement. At the Women's socialist symposium at Vassar College she gives a speech called "What is Anarchism." She also speaks at the conference of libertarian feminists.

1977 — Esther and Sam fulfill a lifelong dream and finally go to Spain! They are greeted there and wined, dined and celebrated by anarchist comrades young and old. They see Sam's book on the Spanish anarchist collectives, which Esther helped write, in the windows of bookstores. Around this time they also go to visit comrades and contacts in Israel and England.

1980 — Esther completes her translation from Yiddish of Joseph Cohen's *The Jewish Anarchist Movement in the States*. This was scheduled to be published by Anares Press but apparently this doesn't happen because of controversy over a chapter on Zionism. An Excerpt is published in *Wooden Shoe*.

1989 — Esther dies at the age of 84; a year later Sam dies.

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