

Boris Yelensky, We were five

It happened in the days of our youth, when belief in the lofty ideals of our cause was strong and the will to sacrifice for it was ever-present. We met during that meaningful and lovely period, all five of us comrades in the Movement, and for many years afterward maintained a close and intimate bond.

I came to Chicago from Philadelphia in the winter of 1913. The chief activity of our Movement, at the time, was the anarchist Red Cross.

Two affairs given by the Red Cross, the Prisoners Ball and Peasants Ball, usually brought out the whole radical colony of Chicago.

Bessie and I became involved in the work of the anarchist Red Cross. During the course of our activities, we made the acquaintance of three comrades who remained our dear friends for life.

All five of us, without prior agreement, usually found ourselves involved in the same kind of work or serving on the same committees. Before long, we became the inseparable 'quintet'.

Our close friendship endured until the Russian Revolution in 1917, when some of us went there. During this chaotic and turbulent period we lost contact with one another.

This is how I remember the four who are no longer with us:

SAM SHULMAN was a warmly responsive comrade; quiet, very intelligent, a friendly, lovable smile always brightening his face. He did not go to Russia with us. He withdrew from all activities during the Palmer Raids and dropped out of sight. My many attempts to find him ended in failure. Years later, he was said to have been seen in California.

SAM (SAMKE) FRIEDMAN. Short in stature, a clothing worker, he could not tolerate a wrong. When Sam discovered a wrong, the person committing it was fortunate if he escaped his ire. Aside from this and other little eccentricities he possessed, Sam was a good friend. There are few like him. We prized his friendship dearly.

His devotion to the Movement was boundless and he demanded of others that they give of themselves in the same measure.

Samke Friedman left for Russia with the first Chicago group. For a short time he was with Makhno's army. Once, after a big and bloody battle with the Whites, Makhno's headquarters was forced to move to another city. The evacuation completed, there remained only a small detachment of Makhno's army in the rear. Although the abandoned city was no longer safe, Samke returned to it, to make certain nothing of value had been left behind. His intuition proved right. In one of the desks, at former headquarters, he found two large envelopes. He stuffed the objects in his pockets and left. Later, when opened, the envelopes were found to contain part of the army's dwindling treasury.

Later, he lived in Odessa, where he married Dora, a comrade. In 1923 they succeeded in leaving Bolshevik Russia. I met them in Constantinople, Turkey, by accident. From there, they went to Paris and became active in the Jewish group.

We kept in touch, through correspondence. Eventually a daughter was born to them. But their family bliss was short-lived. The Second World War brought with it the German assassins who arrested Samke and Dora. The five-year-old child was hidden by French comrades.

As they were being led to their death, Samke scribbled a little note, addressed to us. He pleaded with the finder to forward the note and hurled it out of the sealed train that was taking them to the extermination camp.

Eventually the note reached us. It was very brief. 'We are being taken away,' it read. 'We do not know where. Take care of our child.'

This was the last we heard of Samke.

BARNEY MILLSON was a youth filled with the joy of life. Always in buoyant spirits, he at the same time approached the work in our Movement with earnest and sober mien. He was always eager and available to do work for our cause. Although perennially hoarse, Barney was a good speaker. He was the chairman of the ticket committee. The Peasants Ball did not entail too much work. This affair was so popular, some people were turned away at the door. But the Convicts Ball was another matter; this one required a lot of work. Two months before the affair, the committees began visiting organizations, urging them to buy tickets.

Barney visited landsmanshaftn, women's organizations and other groups to interest them in the Ball. Frequently the right to address those assembled was not granted; but Barney did not give up easily. As soon as he began to talk and depict the life of the political prisoners in Russia, there was scarcely a dry eye in the hall. Barney never left a meeting empty-handed. He was a master agitator.

Caught up by the news of the revolution, Barney left for Russia with one of the early groups. I maintained contact with most of the comrades who went to Russia. But nobody knew where Barney disappeared between 1917 and 1921. On my way from Moscow to Kharkov one day, I ran into Barney at the Kursk railroad station. Our stopover lasted an hour and this gave us the opportunity to talk. He told me a little about his experiences. For some time after his arrival in Russia, he was plagued by illness. Later, he studied medicine at the Kursk University. The girl he married, a comrade, also studied at the university. Toward the end of the twenties we received the tragic news that Barney Millson had died after a long illness.

MOISHE GUTTFRIND. The silent type, he was a member of the anarchist Red Cross. I became intimately acquainted with him in 'Alarm', an international group. Soon Guttfrind joined our small circle.

He was very eager to go to Soviet Russia but for a very important personal reason could not go and stayed behind in America.

I did not meet Moishe again until the thirties and under entirely different circumstances. The noble dream once so tenderly nurtured lay in ashes and our fervent hope for a new world in our time had been dealt a severe blow. We met virtually every year and during all that time of shattering disappointments and retreats, Moishe's faith did not waver. On the contrary, when I left him in 1917, he was influenced by pacifist notions, but in the thirties he sounded the fiery revolutionary. He belonged to that small group in the Movement that was always 'dissatisfied'; this was apparent in his talks, reports and letters to our press.

It puzzles me why Moishe did not rise higher in our Movement; he certainly possessed the necessary aptitudes and talents.

Moishe is entitled to credit to his account what in our Movement was considered an outstanding achievement; he reared his children in the spirit of his own convictions.

During the period when the youth organization, 'Vanguard', was active in New York, I attended one of their meetings. Afterward, a girl with a lovely smile approached me and introduced herself as Audrey Guttfrind, Moishe's daughter. Several years later, Audrey and David arrived in Chicago to organize a young anarchist group.

We were five. Sam Shulman disappeared, Barney Millson died, Samke Friedman and his wife fell victim to German barbarism. Next to depart was Moishe Guttfrind. One has remained who will hold aloft so long as he can the banner that brought the five together.

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