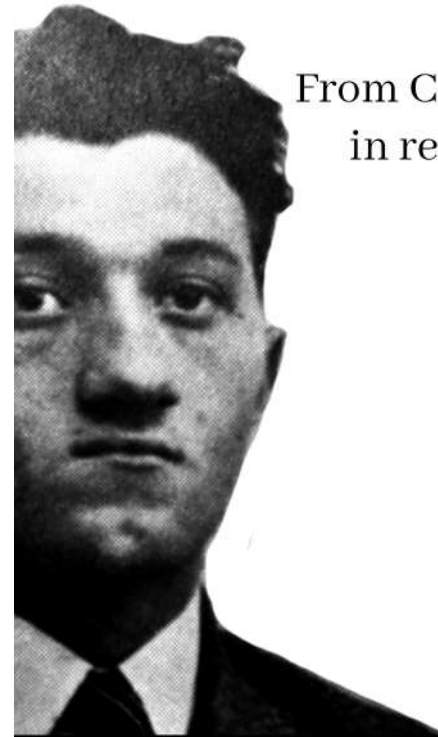


MECHEL STANGER

The memoirs of an anarchist from Romania

From Cernăuți to Berlin and
in revolutionary Spain
(1978)



The author has long been based in Sweden. He first wrote his memoirs in Yiddish for an anarchist newspaper published in New York, which had been in existence since 1890. The Swedish translation was later done by Stanger.

Mechel Stanger's memoirs feature, in vivid colour, several famous figures: Rudolf Rocker, a leading anarchist theorist; Erich Mühsam, a German poet and anarchist who was murdered in a Nazi concentration camp; Emma Goldman, who last appeared in the bestseller Ragtime; Voline, whose book on the "unknown revolution" in Russia is reprinted around the world; Nestor Makhno, the legendary anarchist, and many others.

(Frihetlig Socialistisk Tidskrift)



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- fel a börtönöket?
56. *Audre Lorde* – A düh használatáról: a rasszizmusra válaszoló nők
57. *Audre Lorde* – Életkor, rassz, osztály és nem: Nők újradefiniálják a különbséget
58. *bell hooks* – Feminista politika
59. *bell hooks* – Megérteni a patriarchátust
60. *Carmen Gheorghe* – Fejünkbe húzzuk a szoknyáinkat a roma feminizmusért
61. *Carolina Vozian* – Könyv, kégli, kéreg, kuckó, kvártély
62. *CrtimethInc.* – Az én mint Másik. Reflexiók az öngondoskodásról
63. *David Graeber* – Közös remény
64. *David Graeber* – Te anarchista vagy? A válasz meglephet!
65. *Georgiana Aldessa Lincan* – A fehér privilégium felhasználása a társadalmi igazságosságért folytatott harcban
66. *Giorgio Agamben* – Az ellenőrző államtól a destituáló hatalom praxisáig
67. Határokon átvélő feminista manifesztum
68. *Két Dűsznómia* – A személyes egyben politikai – javaslatok baloldali aktivista körökben alkalmazható jó gyakorlatokra
69. *Kimberlé Crenshaw* – Az interszekcionalitás sürgőssége
70. *Murray Bookchin* – Libertárius municipalizmus
71. *Oana Dorobanțiu* – Szövetségesség és performativitás: mit jelent szövetségessé lenni?
72. *Poór Péter* – Liberter pedagógia Spanyolországban (1868-1939)
73. *Robin Pajtás Szabadiskolája* – Paulo Freire és „Az elnyomott pedagógiája”
74. *Sam Dolgoff* – Autonómia és föderalizmus
75. *The Ongoing Collective* – Anarchafeminista Manifesztum 1.0
76. *Vincze Enikő* – Küzdelmek a társadalmi reprodukció terén világszerte idején: Lakhatási igazságosság Romániában

III. In English

77. *Adina Marincea* – This is NOT a love story! LoveKills, punk and the first 20 years of anarcho-feminism in Romania
78. *Cosmin Koszor-Codrea* – Science popularization and Romanian anarchism in the nineteenth century
79. *Cristian-Dan Grecu* – Csipike, the Communist Pipsqueak

80. *Martin Veith* – War against war
81. *Mechel Stanger* – The memoirs of an anarchist from Romania
82. *M.E.K.A.N.* – Ecstasy in the time of cholera
83. *Vlad Brătuleanu* – A Brief History of Anarchism in Romania
84. Essential Strike Manifesto for the 8th of March / A nélkülözhetetlen sztrájk március 8-i manifesztuma / Manifestul grevei esențiale de 8 martie

IV. Other languages

85. *A. Răvășel* – Petite histoire du mouvement libertaire roumain du XIX-ème siècle à présent
86. *M.E.K.A.N.* – Ekstase in Zeiten der Cholera
87. *Veda Popovici* – La Police assassine ! Pratiques et principes pour une solidarité féministe contre la répression.

BOOKS:

I. In Romanian

1. *Nicolas Trifon*: un parcurs libertar internaționalist – interviuri
2. *Luliu Neagu-Negulescu* – Arimania
3. *Mihail Bakunin* – Dumnezeu și Statul
4. *Mihail Bakunin* – Federalism, socialism și antiteologism & Catehism revoluționar
5. *Precum furtunile* – colecție de poezii queer
6. *Henry David Thoreau* – Walden sau viața-n pădure (o ediție ilustrată)
7. *Murray Bookchin* – Să ne amintim de Spania

Already published:

BROCHURES

I. In Romanian

1. A. Răvășel – Mircea Rosetti
2. Adina Marincea – Asta (nu) e o poveste de dragoste! LoveKills, punk și primii 20 de ani de anarha-feminism în România
3. Adrian Tătăran – Panait Mușoiu (ed. I)
4. Anarhie relațională, nu libertarianism! Mic ghid de re-imaginat relațiile noastre de zi cu zi
5. Anarhismul și vechea mișcare socialistă
6. Andie Nordgren – Anarhia relațională (introducere de hopancarusel)
7. Anuarul Anarhivei 2020, 2021, 2022
8. André Gorz – Ideologia socială a automobilului
9. bell hooks – Să înțelegem patriarhatul
10. C. Ganait – Anarhismul în Bucovina de Nord. O scurtă istorie (1925-1935)
11. C. Ganait – Nestor Mahno în România (1921-22)
12. C. Ganait – O părere. 100+ ani de publicistică liberară în România
13. C.A.M. Anti-Exploatare – Scurt ghid de bune practici. Cum să ne facem viața mai ușoară și să reducem exploatarea când muncim împreună
14. CCRI / EZLN – O declarație pentru viață și alte texte (2020-2021)
15. Chiara Bottici – Anarhafeminism: către o antologie a transindividualului
16. Colin Ward – Anarhismul ca teorie a organizării
17. CrimethInc – Ucraina. Perspective anarhiste locale. Împotriva invaziei ruse
18. CrimethInc – Vot vs. Acțiune Directă
19. Cristian-Dan Greco – Csipike, piticul comunist
20. Cum să organizezi un grup de Cruce Neagră Anarhistă. Un ghid practic
21. David Graeber – Ești un anarhist? Răspunsul te-ar putea surprinde!
22. David Graeber – Noii anarhiști
23. David Graeber – Speranța în comun
24. Dennis Fox – Anarhism și psihologie
25. Necunoscut – Slogane din mai 68
26. Emma Goldman – Căsătorie și iubire
27. Emma Goldman – Gelozia: cauze și posibile remedii
28. Emma Goldman – Nu există Comunism în URSS

29. Errico Malatesta – Anarhia
30. Giorgio Agamben – De la un stat al controlului către un praxis al puterii destituente
31. Institutul pentru Studii Anarhiste – Genul
32. Ionuț-Valentin Cucu – Kurzii, între naționalism identitar și federalism libertar
33. Lucy Parsons – Principiile anarhiei
34. Martin Veith – Neobosit! Luliu Neagu-Negulescu
35. Martin Veith – Răsboi răsboiului
36. Mary Nardini Gang – Către cea mai queer dintre insurecții
37. Mechel Stanger – Amintirile unui anarhist din România
38. M.E.K.A.N. – Demoni Dansatori: cugetări provizorii asupra mișcării free party siciliene
39. Mihail Bakunin – Catehism revoluționar
40. Murray Bookchin – Municipalismul libertar
41. Murray Bookchin – Revolta marinarilor din Kronstadt
42. Nick Heath – O scurtă istorie a mișcării anarhiste bulgare
43. Nimeni nu e ilegal – Împreună împotriva granițelor, statelor și războaielor!
44. Panait Mușoiu: o scurtă biografie și câteva anexe literare (ed. II)
45. Philip Richlin – 10 reguli pentru o societate non-violentă
46. Piotr Kropotkin – Ordinea
47. Robert Graham – Ideea generală a Revoluției la Proudhon
48. Sub același acoperiș: Antologia revendicărilor și analizelor pentru dreptate locativă — o perspectivă intersecțională în contextul pandemiei COVID-19
49. Suprerealism și anarhism
50. Ucraina, vești de pe frontul libertar
51. Veda Popovici – Poliția Ucide! Practici și principii pentru o solidaritate feministă anti-represiune
52. Vlad Brătuleanu – Anarhismul în România

II. In Hungarian

53. A Combahee River Collective Nyilatkozata
54. Adina Marincea – Ez (nem) egy szerelmi történet! LoveKills, punk és az anarhafeminizmus első húsz éve Romániában
55. Angela Davis – Reformáljuk meg vagy számoljuk

The author has long been based in Sweden. He first wrote his memoirs in Yiddish for an anarchist newspaper published in New York, which had been in existence since 1890. The Swedish translation was later done by Stanger. Mechel Stanger's memoirs feature, in vivid colour, several famous figures: Rudolf Rocker, a leading anarchist theorist; Erich Mühsam, a German poet and anarchist who was murdered in a Nazi concentration camp; Emma Goldman, who last appeared in the bestseller Ragtime¹; Voline, whose book on the "unknown revolution"² in Russia is reprinted around the world; Nestor Makhno, the legendary anarchist, and many others. (Frihetlig Socialistisk Tidskrift)

I was born on November 2, 1909, in Vishnitsa (Wijnitz), a small town in Bukovina, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was only in 1918 that this area became part of Romania.

I was born into a turbulent and troubled world. My family was poor, with many children: the children of the family and the children my father taught. My father was a teacher—strict, pious and very harsh. My earliest memories are of slaps and blows: the ones I received and the ones my father gave to his pupils.

When I was thirteen, in November 1922, I ran away from home. I went to Chernivtsi (Cernowitz), a town where I knew no one. After a few hours of wandering the streets, tired, cold and hungry, I went into a bakery to keep warm.

1. E.L. Doctorow, *Ragtime*, Random House, New York, 1975. The novel was adapted to film in 1981, and directed by Miloš Forman.

2. See: Voline, *La Révolution inconnue* (1917-1921), Les amis de Voline, Paris, 1947. The volume presents the anarchist perspective on the 1917 Revolution and its aftermath, Voline was part of Nestor Makhno's Revolutionary Army (or „Makhnovshchina”).

There, I was allowed to stay. That's how I became a baker and that remained my job.

I worked from 4 in the afternoon until 6 in the morning at the bakery. Then I would go out on deliveries to customers with two heavy baskets of bread. At 11 o'clock I could finally collapse on a pile of empty flour sacks full of vermin (that was my bed) and fall asleep immediately, until I was awoken again for work. My days of rest were Saturdays and holidays. The pay was food and my "shelter" was the bakery. We had plenty of food, but sleeping was worse. I stole every moment of sleep whenever the opportunity arose. My clothes were old rags. I always worked almost naked in the bakery, with only one bag up front and one in the back, tied around my waist.

I worked like that for seven years (seems unbelievable today), until I was called up for military service. In those seven years, I ran away from the bakery several times, but I always came back. Hunger or cold, sometimes both, kept pulling me back. My employer always welcomed me with a half-smile. He didn't take me back out of pity, but because he appreciated the work of this young "horse" who, despite struggling from time to time, always returned to the harness and the hard work.

After the Second World War, the Soviets conquered Chernivtsi and my hometown, Vishnitsa, as well as northern Bukovina. Throughout history, this area never belonged to Russia.

During my stay in Chernivtsi, I came into contact with Jewish anarchists for the first time. I almost immediately became interested in the anti-authoritarian "idea". Frequent confrontations with my father had prepared me psychologically for it, making me sensitive to the "anti-government" discourse. My experiences at the bakery, where I was worked and exploited to the point of exhaustion, made me sensitive to anarcho-syndicalism.

I particularly remember an unexpected meeting with my schoolmate Schmerl Ringel (who now lives in Paris). We were walking down the street, as usual, with our two bread baskets. He told me he had something good to read,

Minnen av en rumänsk anarkist

Mechel Stanger

Författaren är bosatt i Sverige sedan lång tid tillbaka. Men sina minnen skrev han först på jiddisch för en anarkistisk tidning som trycks på jiddisch och utkommer i New York och har funnits sen 1890. Översättningen till svenska har gjorts av Stanger själv. — Många kända personer uppträder livs levande i Mechel Stangers minnen: Rudolf Roeker, en ledande anarkistisk teoretiker, Erich Mühsam, en tysk diktare och anarkist som mördades i ett nazistiskt koncentrationsläger, Emma Goldman, som senast förekom i bestsellern "Ragtime", ryssen Voline, vars bok om "den okända revolutionen" i Ryssland trycks om över hela världen, Nestor Makhno, den legendariske bondeledaren och många andra.

Jag är född den 2 nov. 1909 i Wijnitz, en liten stad i Bukovina, som då tillhörde Österrike-ungerska imperiet. Först 1918 blev detta område en del av Rumänien. Jag föddes i en trång, orolig värld. Mitt hem var fattigt. Där fanns många barn, barnen som tillhörde familjen och de barn far undervisade. Min far var lärare, sträng, from och mycket argsint. Mina första minnen är örfilar och slag, de som jag själv fick och de pappa utdelade till sina elever.

När jag var tretton år (nov. 1922) rymde jag från detta hem. Jag begav mig till Cernowitz, en stad där jag inte kände en enda människa. Efter några timmars vandring på gatorna gick jag trött, frusen och hungrig in i ett bageri för att få värma mig. Där fick jag stanna. På det viset blev jag bagare och det har förblivit mitt yrke.

I bageriet arbetade jag från klockan fyra på eftermiddagen till klockan sex på morgonen. Därefter gick jag ut på stan och lastad med två tunga brödkorvar för att dela ut brödet till kunderna. Vid elvatiden kunde jag sjunka ihop på en hög tomma mjölsäckar fulla med

ohyra (det var min säng) och somnade med en gång, tills man på nytt väckte mig för arbete. Mina vilodagar var lördagar och helgdagar. Lönen var mat och "husrum" i bageriet. Mat fick jag tillräckligt. Värre var det med sömn. Jag stal mig till sömn, så fort tillfälle gavs. Mina kläder var gamla trasor. I bageriet arbetade jag alltid nästan naken, endast med en säck fram och en säck bak fastknutna kring midjan.

På det viset arbetade jag i hela sju år (det förefaller i dag otroligt) tills jag blev inkallad till militärtjänst. — Under de sju åren rymde jag flera gånger från bageriet. Men jag kom alltid tillbaka. Hunger eller köld, ibland båda delarna drev mig tillbaka. Min arbetsgivare tog alltid beredvilligt emot mig, med ett halvt hänleende. Han tog emot mig inte av medlidande utan därför att han uppskattade arbetet av denna unga "häst" som trots att den spjånade emot då och då ändå alltid kom tillbaka till selen och det tunga arbetet.

Efter andra världskriget har Sovjet lagt beslag på Cernowitz och min födelsestad Wijnitz, liksom hela norra Buko-



which made me curious. He gave me Errico Malatesta's booklet, "Between Peasants"³. These were my happy anarchist beginnings. The words of this Italian anarchist resonated powerfully and convincingly, and they managed to profoundly touch the heart of the young baker I was.

Next to Schmerl was another comrade, Benno Donnenfeld. He looked at my tattered clothes and at the baskets of bread that was weighing me down and said: "The time has come for you to become human too." After reading Malatesta's booklet, I became not only

"human", but a completely different person.

Benno came often to my bakery. He secretly brought me the latest issues of the *Freie Arbeiter Stimme* (*Voice of the Free Workers*)⁴. By the time they reached me, they had passed through several hands and were so tattered that they could hardly be read. But my intellectual appetite was very healthy, and the articles I read in the paper were feeding it. I couldn't imagine then that half a century later, as a former baker, I would be writing my memoirs in Sweden for this magazine⁵.

3. Errico Malatesta (1853-1932) was a militant Italian socialist, an important figure of classical anarchism, fervent advocate of "propaganda by the deed" and insurrection as a revolutionary tactic. The booklet "Between Peasants" was first translated into Romanian in 1891. A second translation appeared in 1910, in the collection of pamphlets edited by Panait Musoiu, editor of *Revista Ideei*. The version to which Mechel Stanger had access to was probably not the Romanian version, but one of the German translations of the text.

4. *Freie Arbeiter Stimme* was an anarchist Yiddish publication that appeared in New York between 1890 and 1977.

5. This text originally appeared in *Frihetlig Socialistisk Tidskrift*, a socialist publication in Sweden, in 1978.

In time, Benno introduced me to the then secret and illegal Jewish anarchist circles. At first, it was hard for me to follow the discussions. Eventually, however, they opened up a whole new world to me. The intellectual leader of these groups in Chernivtsi was a man named Schnab. Many years later I read that this Schnab gave a lecture in Tel Aviv or Haifa on the subject “Why was anarchism not achieved?”.

In 1930, at the age of 21, when I was drafted into the army, I was already a convinced anarchist. I felt terrible. Refusing military service would have meant prison. As an anarchist, I had no desire to be buried alive in a Romanian dungeon. In the end, I enlisted. But after a few months, I devised an escape plan that might have seemed foolish in its audacity.

Desertion from the Romanian army

I was given a few days leave to go to Chernivtsi. There, after talking to my comrades in the anarchist group, I decided not to return to barracks life. Military life itself was not so difficult for me. I was used to working like a horse and sleeping on rags and sacks. For the first time since I escaped my harsh father (and teacher), the Romanian army offered me three meals a day, a full set of clothes and a clean bed. I didn't suffer from anti-Semitism either, although at that time there were pogroms in Romania, instigated by Cuza⁶ and his followers, Cuza being the leader of the anti-Semitic movement. But in no way could I excuse the futility and brutality of military service. For example, we had to wash our boots three times a day, even though they shone like mirrors. For the slightest deviation from military discipline we were hit on the head with the rifle barrel. We were slapped and punched by soldiers; most of the time we didn't even know why. Our sub-officers claimed, with a sadistic “twinkle” in their eyes, that the beating was necessary for military discipline.

6. A.C. Cuza (1857-1947), far-right politician, promoter of anti-Semitism and xenophobia, forerunner of the Legionary movement. In 1935 he founded the National Christian Party together with poet Octavian Goga, a party whose symbol was the swastika.

and others who were part of my life during my years of wandering, and who remained my companions and friends during that troubled period. Lately, I have been remembering and reliving with great joy the Spanish Revolution of forty years ago, but also its defeat and disappointment. But now, with the revival of libertarian thought in Spain, I feel that the light of the Spanish Revolution has not yet been completely extinguished.

Mechel Stanger

The text originally appeared in *Fribetlig Socialistisk Tidskrift* on 28 March 1978:
<https://soversiva.wordpress.com/2014/04/20/minnen-av-en-rumansk-anarkist/>

Back to Stockholm

In Stockholm, I got a work permit as a baker. When World War II broke out, Selma and I solemnly burned our fake Dutch passports. It was a symbolic act, marking the end of my wandering years and the idea of making a permanent home in Sweden. In 1943, our daughter was born. She is now the mother of two children.

Over the years, things have sometimes been worse, sometimes better, but at least I have stopped wandering. Until 1962, I worked in a cooperative bakery and earned quite well. Then, after so many years as a baker, I got sick and I had to quit bakery work. During the last few years, I worked in various professions, and two and a half years ago, I retired. In Sweden, the situation is relatively good, you can live simply and comfortably.

Now, looking back, I think the contact with anarchism at a young age changed my whole life and gave it meaning. I ran away from the Romanian army because anarchism taught me that you shouldn't learn how to kill people. The first great literary influence came from David Edelstadt³⁸, whose songs and writings I devoured with passion ever since I was in Chernivtsi. Later, I came into contact with Rudolf Rocker's writings, which had a great influence on me, as did his magnetic personality. It is a great honor and joy for me that, when *Nationalism and Culture* appeared in Yiddish, Rocker sent me a copy from America with the following dedication: "To my dear friend and comrade Mechel Stanger, a gift from the heart and a remembrance of years gone by."

Of the comrades I have met during my travels, some have come to visit me in Stockholm, and thus I had the pleasure of seeing them again. Among them are Arthur Lehning, Albert de Jong, Augustin Souchy, Diego Abad de Santillán

38. David Edelstadt (1866-1892), anarchist and Yiddish poet. After the 1881 pogrom in Kiev, he emigrated with his parents to the USA. From 1890, he was editor of the magazine *Freie Arbeiter Stimme* (see above, note 4). In his poems he described the hard life of workers. These were widely echoed, especially in Jewish communities where there were groups active in the labour or anarchist movement. He died of tuberculosis, aged 26.



When I decided to get out of the military service I was, of course, aware that this meant I would have to leave the country. At that time, in the spring of 1931, the only country where I believed that I had a chance to stay, without risking being sent back to Romania as a deserter, was Germany. Besides, our anarchist group in Chernivtsi had links with German comrades in Berlin. In addition to *Freie Arbeiter Stimme*, we also received German anarchist magazines and propaganda literature.

We received the address of a German comrade, Fritz Kater, who lived at Warschauerstrasse 34. I still remember how my Romanian comrades made me repeat it, so that I would not forget it. Although the anarchist movement was not illegal in Germany at that time, I was not supposed to have any address on me. I dressed in military clothes, two pairs of shirts, trousers, jacket, socks and gloves. My plan was to travel by train from Bucharest to Berlin. But not as an ordinary passenger. I was going to lie down under the carriage. The double garment was supposed to protect me from the hard iron and help me get a better grip with my hands and feet. With my last lei⁷ I bought a ticket to Bucharest and said goodbye to my comrades, who wished me a safe journey.

On Thursday, April 7, I arrived at the train station in Bucharest. Although the sun was shining, I was cold. I was shivering inside, and one question was echoing in my mind: "Mechel, are you sure you haven't lost your mind?". But before I could think of an answer to that question, the train to Berlin reached the platform and began to fill up with passengers. It was nearing departure time. I broke a piece of bread from the two loaves I had taken with me on the journey.

7. "Lei" is the Romanian currency.

Eating the bread, I mingled with the passengers and, in a moment when I wasn't noticed, I slipped under one of the carriages. I lay down and tried to make myself as comfortable as possible. Now that I was lying there, I felt more at ease. It was as if a stone had been lifted from my heart. I don't know why, but I felt freer and safer. My fear from before was gone. No one could see where I was hiding. From my hiding place I saw hundreds of feet pass by, small, large, male, female, even officers' feet, but they inspired no fear in me.

Just when I was thinking that it's not so dangerous and that, at least, this could be a cheap way to travel too, I heard the departure signal and the train started moving.

For twenty-six hours I sat under the carriage! I kept my eyes closed most of the time. The best thing to do was to lie face down, but as the train moved at a huge speed, the draught threw up pebbles and dust. My two pairs of trousers soon tore, exposing my skin, while my knees were repeatedly scraped by the vibrations. My whole body was shaking to the point of nausea. With each gear change, the iron chains were lowered, hitting me at regular intervals. Only a Dante or a Jack London could have described my pain, the excitement, the deafening noise in my ears, the hunger I endured and the thirst that burned me. I was exhausted and dead tired and felt intense anxiety every time I had to pee or poo. Several times I thought to let go of my hands and feet, so that the train would run me over and stop the suffering. But then the fear of being found out overcame me. At some stations, railway workers were walking around with lights to check if everything was all right under the carriages. When I saw a light I would freeze with fear of being discovered before I reached Berlin. I would turn my back to the light of the lamp and pull my clothes tightly on. I managed to escape every time. Only once did the glow of the lamp linger on me longer than normal. I was sure then that I would soon feel a nudge from the iron bar that was hitting the axles and wheels. But the man continued on with what he was doing. I think he'd spotted me. He was still a kind-hearted man, who didn't want to expose a stowaway. Then, at the end of the trip, when I looked in the



Cenetistas from the Civil War in Spain

not only to the *Worker*, but also to *Brand* magazine. I wrote under the pseudonym Aksorajdanto, which is a translation of the Berlin police joke, Achsenreiter, or “axle rider”, thus alluding to my journey as a passenger under the train car.

In the enthusiastic reports I was now sending to Stockholm, I could not have foreseen the villainous treachery of the Spanish communists. They were slavishly obeying the dictates of hypocritical Moscow. At the same time, the Spanish anarchists were singing “Antes que esclavo, prefiero morir” (“I prefer to die rather than be a slave”). And they did die by the tens of thousands, fighting against Franco without real weapons, while being betrayed by those they considered their brothers: the Spanish communists.

Among the foreign correspondents in Barcelona, I met the Jewish journalist Sch. L. Schneiderman, now a contributor to the magazine *Vorwärts* (*Forward*), who worked for a Warsaw newspaper at the time. I also met a lot of foreign anarchists who were very concerned that the Spanish comrades were cooperating with the government. They did this with full confidence in their ideological opponents, but the latter were too partisan and cared more about their party, instead of concentrating on the fight against Franco.

I spent fourteen weeks in Spain, in the midst of the libertarian revolution and, unfortunately, in the midst of the civil war.

After a while I realized that the work on the telemetry machine at Montjuich could very well have been done by other German-speaking comrades. I decided to return to Stockholm. The trip involved some difficulties, which, however, an American Esperantist helped me overcome. On the way home, I stopped in Paris. Voline, Jani Dubinski and the Erlichmans were not surprised that I was leaving Spain, because they had already understood that the tragic end of the Spanish Revolution was near. From the very first moment, the Spanish Revolution of freedom was betrayed by the whole world, by seen and hidden enemies.

mirror and saw how black with oil and grease my face was, I thought maybe the inspector hadn't seen me with this “protective mask” stretched over my face.

On Friday morning, April 8, 1931, after a day that had lasted seemingly an eternity, I crawled out from under the wagon, exhausted. I felt half dead. With my eyes squinted I could read “Schlesischer Bahnhof”. I knew I had arrived in Berlin! Staggering, almost drunk, I crawled into a corner behind a large box and tried to fall asleep. But soon I felt the kick of a boot. When I got up, I saw a cleaning woman with a broom in her hand, looking at me in fright. She ran to call the police and quickly returned with an officer. Without a word, they took me to the train station building.

As tattered, dirty and bloody as my clothes were, it quickly became quite clear that I was wearing a Romanian uniform and that I was a soldier. I told the policemen that I had deserted from the Romanian army and that I had spent twenty-six hours under a train carriage. They shook their heads, but they washed my wounds and treated them with iodine. It burned like fire. They gave me a coffee and a sandwich and took me to the nearest police station. That was the end of my insane and daring escape from the Romanian army, under the carriage of a train from Bucharest to Berlin.

My arrival in Berlin makes an impression

At the police station I was questioned, and reports were made. More than anything, the people at the station dwelled on the journey and were amazed that I had endured such a trip for twenty-six hours. Then, I was taken to prison.

That same afternoon, after a few hours' sleep, I appeared before a judge. The official charge was that I had crossed the German border without a passport or visa. The penalty for this was a 5-14 days prison term or expulsion from the country. All this was of little concern to me. The most important thing was not to be sent back to Romania. There, I would have been brought before a military court and convicted of desertion. The judge in Berlin gave me the

shortest sentence: five days in prison. He justified the light sentence by saying that he took into account the fact that I had risked my life to come to Berlin. Interestingly, the prosecutor recommended that the judge acquit me completely, considering that this dangerous trip was in and of itself sufficient punishment.

The next morning, the jailer came and handed me half a dozen Berlin newspapers, with sensational headlines about my arrival in Berlin on the front page. I immediately became a hero in the eyes of my fellow prisoners and the guards. Some newspapers got the whole story backwards, and others greatly exaggerated it. Only one journalist came to talk to me in prison. His article was the most accurate, in every way, and was written sympathetically. Among the Berlin newspapers that reported the story was *Der Angriff* (*The Attack*), edited by Joseph Goebbels. Not unexpectedly, the headline of the article in this newspaper was “A new guest in Berlin”. What frightened me most was the comment, which appeared in several newspapers, that I would be sent back to Romania and handed over to the army. It turned out, however, that my fear that the whole trip would have been in vain was not justified.

The next day, some compatriots who were living in Berlin came to see me. They had read about my defection in the newspaper. Among them were Mechel Roll from Vishnitsa and someone called Rappaport. There was also a man called Abusch, whose wife was from Vishnitsa. They all brought me clothes, cigarettes and chocolate. Their visit meant a lot to me, but the most important thing was that I had a place to go after I had served my prison sentence.

The day I was allowed to leave the prison, Mechel Roll was waiting for me at the exit. He took me to his house. There, I met three of my father’s pupils from Vishnitsa: Bopze Pishtiner, Anshel Bartel and Schulim Schulwolf. They hugged me. They had all read about my terrible journey in the newspapers, and had come to rejoice with their “hero” and be proud of him.

After a few days of rest and socializing with my compatriots, I got into contact with Fritz Kater, an anarcho-syndicalist writer and editor of *Der Syndikalist* (*The Syndicalist*), the organ of the German anarcho-syndicalist union. The

the life of Francisco Ferrer³⁷, who had lived nobly and purely, and who had wanted to teach children how to live freely and peacefully together. I had no desire to work in the same fortress, even though the prisoners were now fascists. My Spanish comrade calmed me down. I didn’t have to be in the fortress. I was going to operate a machine on the ridge, where the prison was. A telemetric device had been placed there. With it, it was possible to observe approaching ships from a distance: they could be identified, their distance from the harbor could be measured, and their speed could be calculated. The device was made in Germany and the instructions were, therefore, in German. I learned quite quickly how to use the device, how to recognize enemy ships, and how to report this. After instructing two other comrades how to read the instrument, I began to share the work with them.

The free time I had, I spent, of course, in Barcelona. The city was then entirely anarchist. Everything was under the control of the CNT and the FAI. Black and red anarcho-syndicalist flags were flying everywhere. The very air exuded freedom and enthusiasm. It was “El Comunismo Libertario”, as the Spanish called anarchism then.

The CNT had 2,000,000 members throughout Spain. It seemed to me that they were all in Barcelona. I wondered if it could really be possible that all these people were followers of anarchist ideas. Comparing my first years of anarchist awakening in the small town of Chernivtsi, libertarian Barcelona left a deep impression on me. Filled with enthusiasm, I sent correspondence

37. Francisco Ferrer y Guardia (1856-1909), a Spanish libertarian pedagogue who advocated rational and critical education, oriented towards the free development of pupils’ faculties, an education in which punishment, blind obedience and religious indoctrination were no longer part of the curriculum. In addition, equally scandalous for Spain at the time, he proposed mixed classes: girls and boys studied together. In Barcelona, he founded the ‘modern school’. Families paid according to their income (or nothing at all). This allowed even the poorest families to send their children to school. His work, inspired by the idea of “integral education” advocated by another anarchist pedagogue, Paul Robin, had a wide echo at the time, and remains a landmark in pedagogy today. He was arrested in 1909, tried and executed on made up charges. His death triggered a huge wave of outrage and protests around the world.

The next day, a comrade from the CNT, an Esperantist with whom I had corresponded while in Stockholm, came to pick me up. In Stockholm, as soon as the CNT bulletin started appearing in Esperanto, we stopped publishing our own newspaper, distributing only the Spanish bulletin. This brought me into contact with this comrade.

He took me directly to the CNT headquarters, which was buzzing with activity. The headquarters was in the house of some former bosses, and the black and red flag was flying at the top. There, I met Augustin Souchy and Helmut Rüdiger again. They were both happy to see me. At the same time they told me that there were enough people who wanted to fight against Franco, but the weapons and ammunition were scarce.

But where could they be procured? The so-called free Western countries, led by America, remained hypocritically “neutral”, while in the East, under the iron heel of “everyone’s daddy”, the “socialist fatherland” was thinking more of its own treacherous policies than of saving the Spanish people from Franco, Mussolini and Hitler. In this way, the whole world helped the Nazis carry out their murderous rehearsal for World War II. The Spanish Esperantists also complained to me about the lack of weapons, but assured me that they would find a good job for me. The revolution could have been defended without a rifle in hand. And so it was in my case.

After finding out that I knew German, a comrade from the FAI suggested a job at the Montjuich fortress. When I heard that name, I got scared. I knew very well that it was there that the Spanish government had taken



trade union was affiliated to FAUD (Freie Arbeiter Union Deutschlands)⁸. Fritz Kater—who was the father-in-law of Diego Abad de Santillán⁹, the famous Spanish anarchist and Rudolf Rocker’s¹⁰ Spanish translator—referred me to Augustin Souchy¹¹.

Souchy received me very warmly. The next day, he introduced me to I.N. Steinberg¹². I had heard of this man since I was in Chernivtsi and had read his works. I always wondered how a religious Jew could be a revolutionary. Because I couldn’t imagine my father, the very strict and rigorous Orthodox teacher, as an anarchist.

I.N. Steinberg invited me to his house. This gave me the opportunity to express my surprise. He answered me as follows: “A Jewish anarchist is more than just an anarchist, because the Jewish spirit works in him even when he is an anarchist.”

In his house, I also met his brother Aaron. The main topic was my trip from Romania. During the conversation I was the only one who smoked. I invited

8. For more information on the anarcho-syndicalist movement in Germany, see Helge Döhring, “Trade unionism and anarcho-syndicalism in Germany: an introduction”: <https://files.libcom.org/files/syndicalism-Germany.pdf>

9. Diego Abad de Santillán (1897-1983), Spanish anarcho-syndicalist, economist and publicist. After several years in Argentina and South America, in 1934, he became secretary of the FAI (Federación Anarquista Ibérica) and editor of the magazines *Solidaridad Obrera* and *Tierra y Libertad*, two of the most important anarchist publications of the period. At the end of the Spanish Civil War he returned to Argentina.

10. Rudolf Rocker (1873-1958), one of the most important anarcho-syndicalist theorists. He wrote the FAUD programme and was editor of *Der Syndikalist*. With the rise of the Nazis to power, he had to leave Germany and settled in the United States. His best-known works include *Nationalism and Culture* (New York, 1937) and *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice* (London, 1938).

11. Augustin Souchy (1898-1984), a leading figure of the anarcho-syndicalist movement and a contributor to *Der Syndikalist*, moved to France in 1933, and then to Spain. During the Civil War he was a member of the CNT, the Spanish anarchist trade union. With Franco’s victory, he returned to France and later went to Latin America, where he became involved in anarchist movements in Mexico and Cuba.

12. Isaac Nachman Steinberg (1888-1957), revolutionary socialist, publicist and lawyer, was Commissioner for Justice in Lenin’s government until March 1918, when he resigned. Because of his criticism of the Bolshevik authorities, he had to leave Russia, moving to Germany in 1923. Shortly afterwards he was stripped of his Soviet citizenship. In 1933 he left Nazi Germany and settled in Australia. He was a member of the Jewish Territorialist Movement that advocated finding alternatives to Palestine for the establishment of Jewish settlements and communities.

them too, but they turned me down. It was only later in the evening that I saw the two brothers smoking. Then I realized it was Saturday and they had waited until the evening, when smoking was allowed. I apologized for my insolence, but I remember to this day how impressed I was with their tolerance. I thought of my father, who would have surely beaten me for such a grave “sin”.

A few days later I went to *Der Syndikalist*'s editorial office. There, I met German comrades Helmut Rüdiger¹³, Max Bittner¹⁴ and Reinhold Busch¹⁵. All three praised me for my boldness and success in defecting from the Romanian army.

The warmest welcome I received was from another comrade, Gerhard Reinecke¹⁶. He immediately invited me to stay with him, even though he himself was poor and unemployed, like many other comrades during the great economic crisis in Germany. His life partner was a seamstress and had a small income.

In the meantime, I had received permission from the police to stay in Berlin temporarily. However, I was not given permission to work. Twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays, I had to report to the police. They were always very kind and used to joke with me: “Ach, Herr Achsenreiter ist hier!” (“Mr. Axlerider is here!”).

13. He was born in 1903. He was a disciple of the philosopher Gustav Landauer. In 1922 he became a member of the FAUD, and in 1927 he moved to Berlin, where he was editor of *Der Syndikalist*. In 1932, he went to Spain, where he worked on propaganda for the German-speaking members of the CNT/FAI. In 1939, he moved to Sweden, where he worked for the trade union newspaper *Arbetaren*. He died in Madrid in 1966.

14. German activist, born 1889. He was a member of the FAUD until 1933. Hunted by the state authorities, he tried to return to his native Leipzig, where he was arrested in 1937 and sentenced to prison for ‘illegal activities’.

15. German activist, born in 1900, he was a member of the Syndikalistisch-Anarchistische Jugend Deutschlands (SAJD), writing for their newspaper, *Junge Anarchisten* (*Young Anarchists*). He was secretary of the FAUD until 1933, and, during the war, he was also in charge of the FAUD's publishing house, ASY Verlag. He was also editor of the newspaper *Arbeiter-Echo* until 1933, when he was arrested by the Nazi authorities. He died in 1987.

16. Born in 1907 in Berlin, he was president of the Weissensee section of the Anarchistische Vereinigung, a group founded by Erich Mühsam and Rudolf Rocker in the late '20s. Reinecke was also one of the distributors of Mühsam's publication, *Fanal*. In 1930, he was a delegate of the Berlin section of the Freie Arbeiter-Union Deutschlands (FAUD) to the organization's 18th congress.

and became my companion in life. I returned from London to Stockholm to start a new life with her.

Shortly afterwards, on July 19, 1936, the Spanish Revolution broke out. Souchy and Santillán came to Stockholm. They told me about the heroic struggle of the CNT and the FAI (Federación Anarquista Ibérica) and the revolution. It goes without saying that I felt part of this struggle from the very first moment. I couldn't sit still in Stockholm knowing that our comrades were fighting, bleeding and dying in Spain while trying to build a new and free world. There was a cry for help coming from there to rebels all over the world. I decided to follow it and go to Spain.

The Spanish Revolution

At the end of 1936, I left Stockholm and travelled through France to Barcelona as a correspondent of the *Arbetaren* newspaper, that appeared daily at that time. As soon as I crossed the border into Spain, I felt that I had entered an incredible new world. All the Spaniards, men, women, young and old, everyone I met on the way to Barcelona was an anarcho-syndicalist. In the train carriages and in the train stations, I always heard the proud exclamation: *Nosotros somos de la Confederación!* (“*We are from the Confederation!*”); which meant they were members of the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo, CNT. They welcomed us with open arms and greeted us with brotherly warmth, as *compañeros* (“comrades”). This image of anarchism as a mass movement was, for me, an overwhelming impression. Half-drunk by this atmosphere and very tired after a long journey, I arrived in Barcelona late at night. There were several volunteers who had come to fight against Franco and to build a new world. The first night, we stayed in a barracks in Barcelona. We had just fallen asleep when we were awoken by air raid alarms. German planes were streaking across the starry sky, dropping bombs that spread death and destruction across the city. Most of us stayed in our beds.

Rocker's speeches into French, work that was continued by Paul Reclus, son of Élie Reclus³³. Rocker also gave a speech at "Autodidakt". I still remember the introduction: "After 40 years of active work in our movement, I have reached the point where, in my old age, I must leave my homeland and start wandering..."

I, too, have been a wanderer between different countries, sometimes with false papers. During these wanderings, I met many interesting people and prominent figures in the anarchist movement, of different nationalities: Arthur Lehning³⁴, Hem Day³⁵, Ernestan³⁶ and many others.

In Paris, I heard Emma Goldman for the second time. This time, she gave a lecture on "30 years of the American trade union movement". Emma Goldman put me in touch with Michael in London, where I went after a short stay in Stockholm.

In Paris, I learned Esperanto, a language that opened up new horizons in my contacts with like-minded people around the world. Through Esperanto, I also met the beautiful Selma from Stockholm. She was a seamstress by profession

the International Anarchist Congress in Amsterdam in 1907 and the Revolutionary Syndicalist Congress in London in 1913.

33. Élie Reclus (1827-1904), French ethnologist and anthropologist, older brother of the anarchist geographer Élisée Reclus. He participated in the Paris Commune and was appointed director of the National Library. He later fled to Switzerland and was sentenced, in absentia, to deportation by a military court. Here he became close with the anarchist wing of the socialist movement. From 1894, he lectured in the history of religion at the Free University of Brussels.

34. Arthur Lehning (1899-2000), historian and archivist of the anarchist movement. During his studies in Berlin he was involved, together with Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman and Rudolf Rocker, in campaigns for the release of anarchists imprisoned in the Soviet Union. He was editor of the contemporary art magazine *i10*, which appeared in Paris from 1927 onwards. He is one of the founders of the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. Between 1961 and 1981, he was in charge of the complete publication of Mikhail Bakunin's writings, coordinating the most important collection of the Russian anarchist's complete works.

35. Hem Day (1902-1969), Belgian anarchist, pacifist and vegetarian. From 1933, he was involved in several campaigns in favor of "conscientious objectors", travelled to revolutionary Spain in 1937, wrote, published and edited several magazines. In the 1960s, he contributed to the journal *Anarchisme et non-violence* and continued to campaign against the war.

36. Ernest Tanrez or Ernestan (1898-1954), a Belgian anarchist, was a contributor to several periodicals from 1922: *Bulletin Libertaire*, *Le libertaire* and *Le combat syndicaliste*. He actively participated in the campaigns in favour of the Italian workers Sacco and Vanzetti. During the Second World War, he was denounced as a communist sympathizer, arrested by the Gestapo and interned in the Breendonck camp. He was released after a few months of detention. After the war, he continued his work as a journalist and popularizer of anarchist ideas.

Gerhard Reinecke often took me to the headquarters of the German Anarchist Federation, where the editorial office of *Der Freie Arbeiter* (*The Free Worker*) was also located. There, I met many wonderful comrades whose kindness I will never forget. The thought of their comradeship warms me to this day.

One day, Gerhard Reinecke asked me if I would like to go with him to a meeting with Rudolf Rocker. He was very fond of speaking Yiddish with Jewish comrades. Needless to say, I was happy to answer Reinecker's question in the affirmative.

The first meeting with Rudolf and Millie¹⁷ was a special event for me. I spoke Yiddish all the time, and when, at one point, I switched to German, Rocker immediately asked me to continue in Yiddish. I couldn't admire his beautiful Hebrew handwriting enough. He corresponded with comrades from all over the world. Through Reinecke I also became acquainted with Erich¹⁸ and Zenzl Mühsam¹⁹ and other German comrades and anarchists living in Berlin.

Soon, my first three months in Berlin came to an end. I no longer had a residence permit. As I had nowhere to go, the Berlin police gave me another

17. Milly Witkop-Rocker (1877-1955), anarcho-syndicalist and feminist. Born into a Jewish family in Ukraine, she moved to London as a young woman, where she worked as a weaver. There, she met Rudolf Rocker, who became her life companion. They became involved in editing the Yiddish anarchist newspaper *Arbayter Fraynd* (*Friend of the Worker*) and the magazine *Germinal*. In 1918, she moved to Berlin and became a member of the FAUD, where she tried to set up a women's organization. From 1933, she lived with Rudolf Rocker in the United States.

18. Erich Mühsam (1878-1934), German writer, playwright and anarchist. In 1908, together with Gustav Landauer, Martin Buber and Margarethe Faas-Hardegger, he founded the Sozialistischer Bund (Socialist League), a federation of anarchist groups organized on the principles of voluntary association, decentralization and autonomy. In 1911, he founded the anarcho-communist and anti-militarist publication *Kain*. He was one of the leaders of the Bavarian Soviet Republic, and was arrested and sentenced to prison after the Weimar Republic troops crushed the rebellion. In 1926, he founded the newspaper *Fanal* (*Flare*), in which he criticized the rise of the extreme right, nationalism and anti-Semitism in German society. In 1933, after the burning of the Reichstag, he was arrested and placed on the list of 'subversive Jews' wanted by the Nazis. He was murdered in Oranienburg camp in 1934.

19. Zenzl Mühsam (1884-1962), socialist activist, participated in the Bavarian Soviet Republic. She fled Germany in 1934. After Erich Mühsam's death, she moved to the Soviet Union, hoping to receive support from the Soviet authorities, only to be arrested and imprisoned for 13 years. After her release, she returned to Germany (GDR), where she became involved in the posthumous publication of her husband's work.

three months. Those six months have remained forever in my memory. I lived in great poverty, but that was not because I had no work permit. There simply were no jobs. Most of my German comrades were also unemployed. Only once did I secretly manage to get a night's work in a Jewish bakery on Grenadierstrasse. I got it because I was a specialist in challa²⁰ weaving. Of course, the baker took advantage of the situation by paying me less.

But spiritually and intellectually, I lived in an anarchist, interesting and stimulating atmosphere. I was often the guest of German comrades, who always showed me solidarity and friendship. I was particularly touched when Rudolf Rocker offered me 50 pesetas, which he had just received from Latin America. He had no other money with him at the time and was just preparing for a trip to Holland. There, he was going to give a speech at the unveiling of a monument to Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis²¹, a leading Dutch anarchist, who was also his personal friend.

The Netherlands did not take part in the First World War. So, in those times of general economic crisis, the situation in the country was somewhat better than in defeated Germany. Rocker then promised me that he would discuss



Rudolf Rocker and Millie Witkop

20. Jewish braided bread usually made on the Sabbath or religious holidays.

21. Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis (1846-1919), Dutch socialist activist, anarchist and pacifist. A Lutheran priest, Nieuwenhuis gave up priesthood to become involved in the socialist movement. He was elected as a member of parliament in 1888, the first socialist to reach the Dutch parliament. From the 1900s onwards, disillusioned with social democracy, he moved towards anarchism. He edited the magazine *De Vrije Socialist (The Free Socialist)* and became involved in the international pacifist and anti-militarist movement.

I obtained a “Carte d’identité”, which enabled me to live and work in France. In Paris, I also met Peter Arshinov²⁹, Shalom Schwartzbart³⁰ and Nestor Makhno³¹.

Meanwhile, in Germany, Hitler had come to power. Rudolf and Millie left the country at the last minute. On their way to America, they stopped in Paris. The French comrades held a banquet in their honor. There, I also met Christiaan Cornelissen³² and Robert Luzon. The latter had begun translating

country. After a period in Berlin, he moved to France and published several texts on anarchism and the Bolshevik repression of libertarians. His best-known work is *La révolution inconnue*, published in 1947, two years after his death (see note 2 above).

29. Peter Arshinov (1886-1937), anarchist militant and one of the historians of the Makhnovist movement in Ukraine. Imprisoned by the tsarist police for his involvement in direct action and bombings, and for anarchist propaganda, he was released in 1917. In 1919, he joined Nestor Makhno’s anarchist army, and in 1922, after the defeat of “Makhnovschina”, he fled to Germany, from where he moved to France and then to the USA. He returned to Soviet Russia in 1934 with the government’s permission, but was accused of subversive activities and shot in 1937. His best-known work is *History of the Makhnovist Movement (1918-1921)*, originally published in Germany in 1923, in Russian. See also Peter Arshinov, *History of the Makhnovist Movement (1918-1921)*, Detroit & Chicago, 1974.

30. Shalom Schwartzbart (1886-1938), born in Ismail, Bessarabia (now Ukraine), Yiddish poet and anarchist. During World War I, he served in the French army, returning to Russia in 1917. After a period in the Red Guards, he returned to France in 1919, where he became active in the labour and anarchist movements. In 1926, learning that the Ukrainian nationalist leader Simon Petliura, who was guilty of pogroms during the civil war, had arrived in Paris, he plotted and carried out his assassination. He was acquitted by the French judiciary and left France to settle in South Africa.

31. Nestor Makhno (1888-1934), born in Ukraine to a poor family, became active in the Huliaipole anarchist group that emerged during the 1905 revolution. In 1910, he was sentenced to death for the murder of a police commissioner, sentence that was commuted to life imprisonment. In prison, he met Peter Arshinov, with whom he studied socialist and anarchist theories. Released in 1917, Makhno returned to Huliaipolie, where he organized workers’ and peasants’ soviets. During the civil war that followed the Revolution, Nestor Makhno led the Insurgent Army, which fought against Ukrainian nationalists (led by Petliura), the White Guards, and the Red Army. “Makhnovschina” (as the insurrectionary army was known) flew the black flag and explicitly claimed to be libertarian communist. After his defeat by the Red Army in 1921, Nestor Makhno fled to Romania, from where he was expelled in 1922. In 1925 he finally arrived in Paris, where he took a job as a worker in the Renault factories, despite his increasingly poor health. Also in Paris, he was involved in editing the magazine *Dielo Truda (Cause of Labour)*, which was published by anarchists in exile in Russia. In the pages of the magazine he proposes an “organizational platform of libertarian communists”, a program discussed, embraced and criticized by the anarchists of the time. He died of tuberculosis in Paris, in 1934.

32. Christiaan Cornelissen (1864-1942), a Dutch activist and economist, was one of the founders of the “Dutch Trade Union Centre” (Nationaal-Arbeid-Secretariaat), strongly influenced in its organization by the ideas of French revolutionary syndicalism. In 1898 he moved to France and contributed to several anarchist publications. He was involved in the organization of

Through a Dutch friend I got a job at the big Citroën car factory. My job was to clean some parts that came from France. Nobody asked me for a passport or work permit. Although the work was dirty and monotonous, I was happy. For the first time since I had crawled out from under the train at Schlesischer Bahnhof, I was earning a living. Besides, the factory had started to agitate for a strike. There were four different unions, including the anarcho-syndicalist one. These unions had to reach an agreement before the strike could begin. I was elected to the strike committee and took part in the picketing. Then, I was arrested by the Dutch police and sent back across the border, to Germany.

So began my five-year wandering between different countries, either trying to cross borders myself or being smuggled across by the police. These countries were Germany, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Denmark, England and Sweden. In all these countries, I was in contact with our comrades.

In Paris, for example, I stayed with Jani and Rosa Doubinski, and later with Ester and Abraham Erlichman. At meetings of the Jewish anarchist group “Autodidakt”, I met Adele Seller, two comrades from Chernivtsi, Engel and Teichberg, and many others. Among those who gave lectures at the meetings were Alexander Schapiro²⁷ and Voline²⁸. Incidentally, it was through Voline that

Socialist) and also on the editorial staff of *De Syndikalist*. He was involved in anti-militarist and anti-war campaigns, and was editor of *De Wapens Neder*, a publication of the International Anti-Militarist Association. He has written several works dedicated to the life and writings of F. Domela Nieuwenhuis.

27. Alexander M. Schapiro (1882-1946), Russian-born anarcho-syndicalist activist. In 1900 he moved to London, where Pyotr Kropotkin lived. He was a member of the *Arbeter Fraynd* collective and the Jewish Anarchist Federation. He returned to Russia in 1917 and became a member of the *Golos Truda* editorial board. After Kropotkin’s death in 1921 and the suppression of the Kronstadt sailors’ revolt by Bolshevik troops, he openly expressed his opposition to the new regime. Arrested and later imprisoned by the authorities, he was expelled from Russia in 1922. Schapiro settled for a time in Berlin, where he helped found the IWMA (International Working Men’s Association), an anarcho-syndicalist organization of which he was, for a time, secretary. In 1939, he moved to the USA, where he published the magazine *New Trends*.

28. Voline (1882-1945), real name Vsevolod Mihailovich Eichenbaum, Russian-born anarchist. He participated in the 1905 Revolution. He was arrested by the Tsarist authorities and sentenced to exile in Siberia, from where he escaped in 1907. He took refuge in France, where he began to frequent revolutionary and anarchist circles. He returned to Petersburg in 1917 and became editor of the Russian anarchist organ *Golos Truda*. In 1919, he joined the Maoist movement in Ukraine, was arrested by the Bolsheviks and sentenced to death, and later expelled from the

with the Dutch comrades the possibility of me going there and getting a job in my trade as a baker.

Netherlands—France—Sweden—England—Sweden

In 1931, Emma Goldman came to Berlin to give lectures. Her first lecture was entitled: “Is the destructive spirit a creative force, as well?” (German: “Ist der zerstörende Geist auch ein schaffender Geist?”). This title impressed my daughter when I told her about it, and she mentioned it in an essay about the ‘30s.

Forty-six years have passed since I heard this lecture. Emma Goldman’s speech enchanted me. For me, it represented a genuine and profound experience. I mainly remember her strong criticism of the Bolsheviks, who destroyed all revolutionary forces for many years to come through their dictatorship. At that time, in Berlin, it was very daring to express such thoughts in public. I knew that the title of her lecture referred to Bakunin’s famous statement²². But Emma Goldman developed this position from her own point of view and came to conclusions that suited the troubled times and the difficult events that were about to take place.

As just mentioned, Rudolf Rocker travelled to Amsterdam to unveil the monument to Nieuwenhuis in Haarlemer Plein. This anarchist was so popular with Dutch workers that not even the Nazis, who later occupied the country, dared to tear down his statue.

When he returned from his trip, Rocker told me that the Dutch comrades were ready to help me, so I could settle there. Now there was the question of a passport. I didn’t have one. And, of course, I couldn’t appeal to the Romanian consul in Berlin either, because I was a deserter. Augustin Souchy got me a

22. The quotation Mechel Stanger refers to is found in “Reaction in Germany”, a text published by Mikhail Bakunin in 1842: “Let us, therefore, have confidence in the eternal spirit which neither destroys nor annihilates, except because it is the inscrutable and eternally creative source of all life. The passion of destruction is at the same time a creative passion!” (in the original German: “Die Lust der Zerstörung ist zugleich eine schaffende Lust!”).



Fleschin, Voline și Steimer

Polish passport from a citizen of Upper Silesia. But there was not the slightest resemblance between me and the person in the photo on the passport. Rocker suggested that a German comrade living on the Dutch border smuggle me into the Netherlands at the right time.

I remember the last day in Berlin very well. It was August 23, 1931, four years after the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti²³. The Anarcho-Syndicalist Youth League organised a commemoration ceremony for these two Italian comrades, who had to give their lives for their ideas of a “free” America. Several comrades from different countries spoke at this meeting. Each in their own language. Among them, I remember Ferdinand Orobón²⁴, who spoke in Spanish, and Senia Fleschin²⁵, who gave his speech in Russian. The play *Es blitzt* was also due

23. On August 23, 1927, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, two anarchist workers, were executed in the U.S. for a crime they did not commit, their trial being, in fact, a judicial set-up.

24. Valeriano Orobón Fernández (1901-1936), an anarcho-syndicalist, is the author of the lyrics of *A las barricadas!*, an anti-fascist song popular during the Spanish Civil War.

25. Senia Fleschin (1894-1981), an anarchist activist, was born in Kiev and emigrated with his family to New York as a child. In 1917, he returned to Russia and joined the editorial staff of *Golos Truda* (*Voice of Labour*), the anarchist publication in Petersburg. In 1923, he was expelled from the Soviet Union. He joined the group of exiled anarchists in Paris, which included Nestor

to be performed, but just before the curtain went up, the police of the Weimar Social Democratic Republic intervened and announced that the performance of the play was completely forbidden.

With a heavy heart, I said goodbye to my German comrades, many of whom had become close to me. I took the train to Holland and got off in a small town near the border. At the station, I was met by comrade Muhr, who explained that it would not be a problem to cross into Holland. I spent the night with this comrade and happened to sleep in the same bed that Rudolf Rocker had slept in during his visit there. The next morning, another German comrade came and walked with me, through the forest, to Holland. Muhr was already waiting there, with a ticket to Amsterdam.

Here, too, I received a very friendly welcome. I was put up in a boarding house and even got some pocket money to live on until I found a job.

The anarcho-syndicalist movement had once been quite big in the Netherlands. In 1919, there were over 100,000 active members. But the Dutch communists, backed by Moscow, destroyed the Dutch labour movement, as they did in other countries, on orders of the Kremlin and under the motto: “master or destroy!”

When I arrived in the Netherlands, the weekly magazine *De Syndicalist* was still published regularly. There were then several anarchist organizations in the country, each with their own magazines. Some examples are: *De Arbeidar* (*The Worker*), in Groningen and *Alarm*, in Amsterdam. A magazine with a very high intellectual level was also *Befreijding* (*Brotherhood*). There was even a religious anarchist group that published its own magazine, *De Freie Communist* (*The Free Communist*). Nieuwenhuis founded the newspaper *De Freie Socialist*, which was still published at the time, and *De Wapens Neder* was published under the editorship of Albert de Jong²⁶.

Makhno, Voline, Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, Peter Arshinov, etc. After the outbreak of the Second World War, he went to Mexico. He earned a living as a photographer.

26. Albert de Jong (1891-1970), a Dutch anarchist, discovered libertarian ideas through F. Domela Nieuwenhuis, working for a time on the editorial staff of *De Vrije Socialist* (*The Free*