IDA PILAT ISCA
Born April 28, 1896    Died November 5, 1980
IDA PILAT ISCA

Translator - Writer - Activist - Friend
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This booklet contains four pieces. First is an article by Valerio Isca about his companion and friend, Ida. Following are three items written by Ida. Two are poems and the third is a short article which was first published in Fragments.

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WE MET by sheer accident at a meeting in support of Sacco and Vanzetti in the hall of the Cultural Center of the Spanish comrades; here in New York City. For a number of years Ida had been active in the agitation for the liberation of these two martyrs. She had been arrested twice by the police in Boston, together with other people who had gone there to protest in front of the house of Governor Fuller. It was that campaign that made her come close to the anarchist movement and the International Group of New York, which at that time was publishing a monthly paper, The Road to Freedom, edited by the old militant, Hyppolite Havel.

Conversing with her that evening, I sensed that the lady sitting next to me had a vivid intelligence and an exceptional culture, while I did not have clear ideas. However, although I found it difficult to converse in a language that was not mine, we became friends. Some time later, I learned who she was and where she came from. It was a world completely different and opposite from mine.

Ida Pilat was born on April 28, 1896 to a well-to-do Jewish family in Odessa, a city on the shores of the Black Sea. From childhood, she had an extraordinary education by private tutors. Every morning a German nursemaid came to her home to take care of her and two younger sisters. The lady spoke only German and taught them her language. In the afternoon, a French tutor came to teach them the French language and manners. When she had free time and played with the other children in the courtyard, she had to talk in Russian. She never remembered a time when she spoke less than three languages. I, by contrast, lost my father when I was ten years old and was very poor. I had to leave school to go to work in a wheat processing mill. It was a terribly hard and brutal job, where I was in constant danger of being crushed by the machinery.

In 1905, because of the pogrom provoked by the tzarist government after it lost the war with Japan, Ida’s father’s store was destroyed.
twice by a mob. He decided to emigrate to America with his family and established himself in Brooklyn, New York, where he opened a new store. Ida, a young girl at that time, enrolled in the public schools. She graduated from high school with the highest marks and Cum Laude. She then took a job as a secretary and translator in an export office.

Moved by a strong passion for learning, she took Latin and Greek for two years in evening classes at Hunter College. But being slender, weak and living far from the college, the traveling proved to be too much for her and she had to give it up. The doctor advised her to take long walks and to exercise. As a result, she became an untiring walker and developed a love for the outdoors and the spirit of adventure. In fact, in 1925 she took a leave of absence and, with another girl, hitchhiked to California—walking a good part of the way. To the newspapermen who interviewed them, the girls declared that they had taken a swim in the Atlantic and wanted to give the same treatment to the Pacific.

Ida found in me a companion also in love with the outdoors. When we had a free day, with a knapsack on our backs, away we went to the parks and woods for the whole day. For a number of years we had a tent in the country on the land of a friend, until a hurricane blew it away. When we had the necessary means, we bought a little house near the shores of Lake Mohagen and the Mohagen Colony where Milly and Rudolf Rocker and many other comrades lived, most now dead or away in search of a milder climate.

Two years after our first encounter, April 1929, we decided to live together in a free union, which lasted for more than fifty years—until she passed away. Ida's character was all love and simplicity, with an infinite tolerance for everybody. Because of her exquisite manners, she was loved and respected by everyone who came in contact with her. I can call myself lucky to have lived fifty-one years in a harmony that was all ours. Advised and guided by her, I went back to evening school to improve my English and then my skill as a machinist and tool-and-die maker. To say that our whole life together was an idyll of love would not be right nor human. When the discussion became too animated, because we had different opinions, it was she with her spirit of love and gentleness who prevailed. They were years of love, struggle and of hope.

A high school friend had introduced Ida to the Socialist Party and to the social struggle, and she was very active in the party for many years. Our comrade Rose Pesotta, also from a Russian-Jewish family, got her
acquainted with the Libertarian Movement during the Sacco and Vanzetti agitation.

Being very studious, Ida studied the Socialist Party doctrine in depth, and then she studied Libertarian ideas. But her preferred studies were always philology and the history of art. She loved to read the classics in their original languages; Goethe in German, Anatole France in French, Vergil in Latin, Cervantes in Spanish, and all of the Russian classics in Russian.

It was this knowledge of languages that distinguished her and she put that knowledge to use for the Libertarian Movement. She translated articles into Spanish for the Spanish comrades when they were publishing the weekly *Cultura Proletaria* here in New York. Later she did the same for the *Bulletin* in favor of the political prisoners in Spain. She translated from the French into English articles and letters for the *Freie Arbeiter Stimme* and the Libertarian Book Club. And she also translated many chapters for Sam Dolgoff's anthology *Bakunin on Anarchy*.

When Rudolf Rocker could not find a translator for the German essay he had written on his wife and companion, Milly, Ida came timidly forward saying, 'I will try.' For this work, she was praised by our old teacher in a letter he wrote to her saying, 'You, my dear Ida, are too modest. You know the German language better than many of my countrymen who call themselves literati.' This essay was published in English by Joseph Ishill in a private and limited edition of 180 copies that the author gave to his most intimate friends and comrades. It was also translated into Italian by Virgilio Gozzoli and was published in Italy in the magazine *Volonta*.

There are also many other writings Ida translated that I could mention, articles by Armando Borgi and poems by Bettica and Luigi Damiani. Her last work of translation was Max Nettlau's *A Short History of Anarchism*, which she did using the Spanish and Italian versions, since the original German work was lost during the Spanish Civil War in 1936.

Her contribution to the Libertarian Movement was not that of translator alone. Ida was also active in the Ferrer Modern School of Stetson and was for many years, the secretary of its auxiliary committee in New York. Ida was also a charter member of the League for Mutual Aid, an organization founded by Harry Kelly to help the victims of union struggles. She was part of the group that first started the Libertarian Book Club, and after the death of its treasurer, Joseph Aronstan, Ida took his place until her eyesight became too weak.
In all those years of living with Ida, I never heard her say a single word of self-praise for her intellectual qualities or an aspersion on anyone. Humble and gentle with everyone at our Book Club meetings, she would rarely ask for the floor and she spoke as though she were ashamed of her crudition.

Ida was of great help to me when, at the end of World War II, I did Red Cross work to help with packages of food and clothing for our friends and comrades in need in Italy. She also assisted me in the long and tedious correspondence with the publishing firm E.S.I. of Naples regarding the publication of the first volume of Rudolf Rocker’s *Nationalism and Culture* in Italian.

Systematic as she was in everything she did, every evening Ida wrote a brief entry in the diary which she was very careful to keep. With the help of these volumes, I could write the history of this half century of life together. However, it would be too painful for me to do so, beyond these few lines I am now writing.

After seeing the religious ceremony at her father’s funeral, Ida wrote and signed a statement saying, ‘At my death I do not want any ceremony, religious or any other kind.’ She died on November 5, 1980. Only Abe Bluestein, who had known her since his adolescence, said a few words of adieu at the simple funeral. Now she rests at Woodlawn Memorial Park on Long Island, where there are no monuments. There is only a small bronze plate with her name and the dates of her birth and death. Everything as she desired it.

Valerio Isca

November 5, 1981
LINES

Life ever changes, eludes my grasp.
'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity' cometh the ancient refrain.
I am seized with a fear lest all things pass and leave me
forlorn amidst the vain shadows.
O, for the skill of the sculptor, who fixes the fleeting grace
of supple-limbed youth,
Gives it eternal life in cool, gleaming marble.
The shadows of beauty that cross his spirit are not lost in
utter darkness forever.
They suffer a resurrection and enter new life in carven marble.
He is like unto God who gave his breath to the dust and
created man.
Fain would I, too, create and feel the joy of the maker
When in his mighty hand he holds the heart of the world.
Clamorous grows my thought, like a Titan enchained
It will not be hushed but would issue forth in rhythmical
accents
It would cry with a great voice and renew itself ever.
What matter then the change and the flux of existence?
I, too, shall be not only the changed but the changer,
Fashioning life to my will with my delicate tool
And the evanescent feeling forever congeal in song.
THE DOERS

We dwell in the lowlands of life and strive with the phantoms of darkness.
Yea, a light and a hope are they unto us, the Doers,
They who go forth in the dawn, with hands that are eager to labor,
With steadfast eyes that see the abyss and the land of promise beyond it.
Full well they know the bitter pain and the fear that ever beset us.
They are children of Earth and heirs of her burdens but godlike in will and in action.
They stretch forth their hands in the void and create, and life comes rushing to aid them.
No weavers of dreams are these; in their keen and life-breathing presence
Vanish all bodiless fancies; we stand erect,
In a place of light that urges us on to our utmost.
I have been re-reading the Bible, starting with Genesis, and I was fascinated by the story of Adam and Eve. It is a good story.

There they were, man and woman, placed in a beautiful garden, to cultivate it and enjoy its fruits. But the Garden of Eden, for all its beauty and sunny serenity, was hedged in with fear. It had a secret place (beware of gardens with secret places). Right in the center of the garden there grew a tree which bore fair-looking apples. All the creatures which inhabited the garden carefully avoided the spot. They did not have to be told; it was instinctive. But Adam was told plainly: 'Don’t touch,' and was warned by the Almighty of dire consequences if he did. Naturally, he did not touch the tree. He was a fine lad, though not too bright, and he found it easy to obey.

It was different with Eve. There was, in the first place, that little matter of her illegitimacy. She wasn’t really a created being; she was only a rib taken from Adam and made into a companion for him. It gave her lower status. While Adam held converse with his creator and received his mandates directly from on high, Eve got her orders through Adam. She was a second-class citizen in Eden.

Deprived of communion with divine spirits, Eve had ample time to range at will, explore her environment and study its flora and fauna. She visited the secret place in the center of the garden and inspected the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. She had been told (by Adam, of course) not to touch it, but taboos meant little to Eve. She had no fear, and she
viewed the world with clear eyes. She decided it would be worth her while to taste of the forbidden fruit and see what she could learn thereby. Her friend, the snake, gave her just the encouragement she needed (the desire for knowledge is always inspired by the devil).

So she helped herself to an apple. But Eve had that gaiety of spirit which we call generosity; she rejoiced in sharing. She could not help calling Adam and offering part of the apple to him; he, surprisingly, accepted it. They both ate their apple, and learned a good many things about themselves.

There was an instant change in the climate of Eden. The skies turned dark and threatening, and a cold wind blew. A thunderous voice called: ‘Adam, why hast thou disobeyed?’ The poor fellow could think of only one thing to do. Pointing to Eve, he stammered: ‘She made me do it.’ (No guts there, no character!) Then followed scoldings, gloomy predictions, and an order of deportation.

They had to leave in a hurry, since Eden was obviously no place for the pursuit of learning.

Eve was eminently well equipped for her life in exile. She had natural curiosity, she was on speaking terms with the creatures of the earth, she had courage, and she possessed a generous heart. These qualities served her well in the arduous days that lay ahead.

As time went on, Adam came to taste many other apples from the Tree of Knowledge but the record does not show that he ever offered to share them with Eve. She had to fight for the right to know, and still does.

The old fable is there for all to read and ponder. To countless generations it has spoken of woman’s sinful disobedience, fall, damnation and never-ending suffering. But I read it as the story of woman’s rebellion against a mindless paradise. And I want to pay tribute to an obscure heroine, our Mother Eve (always according to Genesis), who dared take the first step upward from animal contentment to human striving and discontent.

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