

A MEMOIR

SOME ANARCHIST ACTIVITIES IN NEW YORK
IN THE 'THIRTIES AND 'FORTIES

by Clara Freedman Solomon

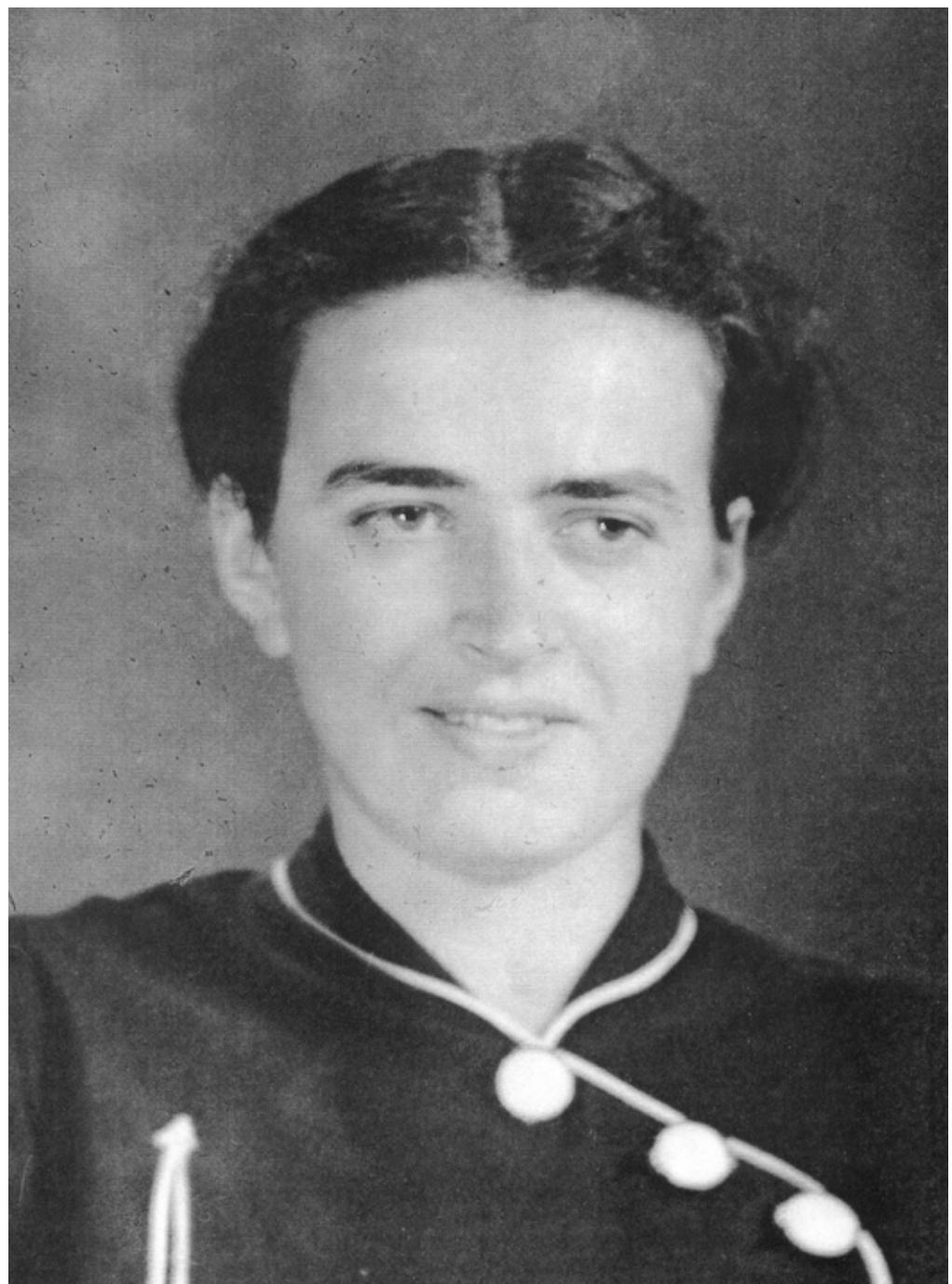
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Clara at one of her piano recitals.

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Clara in her early twenties.

WHILE GROWING UP in New York and then in an anarchist-oriented community in Stelton, New Jersey, I couldn't help overhearing talk of union activities, strikes, meetings, conventions, and of course, capitalism. Words like bigot, prejudice, hypocrite, exploitation, and prison were all too familiar.

My parents met in London at one of Rudolf Rocker's lectures—and were very active in the anarchist group that published *Der Arbeiter Freint* (*The Workers' Friend*), a Jewish anarchist paper edited by the prominent anarchist activist and writer Rudolf Rocker. (Rocker was not Jewish, but he learned the Yiddish language as an adult. He wrote *Nationalism and Culture* and books on anarchism.) The Rockers were friends, so I heard about them frequently.

My father was a raincoat maker in New York and was very active in the Waterproof Garment Makers Union, Local 20, of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (I.L.G.W.U.) In 1917 or 1918 the union was involved in a strike; and the whole executive board was sent to prison. I remember my mother taking me to see my father in prison at Christmas time. All the men were in one large room with relatives who were visiting them. My mother told me that this was a convention; she did not want to frighten me. It wasn't until quite a bit later that I found out that this was a consequence of a lockout by the employers. Shortly afterwards, however, Governor Alfred E. Smith pardoned my father and the other union members!

Growing Up Among Radicals

In 1921, when I was seven years old, we moved to the Ferrer Colony in Stelton*, NJ, with brother Sigmund, aged four, and brother David, six weeks old. (The Ferrer Colony was named after the martyred Spanish anarchist educator Francisco Ferrer.) Life was very hard for my parents. My father commuted to a New York clothing shop. The work there was seasonal. And there was no unemployment insurance in those days. My mother, therefore, took in other people's children to board with us. This was hard work, with the three of us, a house and no other help.

By the time I was thirteen I began reading Peter Kropotkin's *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*. A gem of a book. Every young person should read it.

The founders of the Ferrer Colony were mostly (but not exclusively) anarchists. An anarchist group met frequently at the Kropotkin Library in Stelton. There the *Road to Freedom* (an excellent anarchist journal) was edited by Walter Van Walkenburg, managed by a committee, and this was where the mailing of the paper took place. They had a library there of anarchist classics and I sometimes perused that collection.

At that time also, money was being raised for the defense of Sacco and Vanzetti. So I naturally heard a lot of talk about that, and I became a staunch believer in their innocence. It was then, with the influence of a few young visitors to Stelton, that I began thinking of myself as a revolutionist. Life in the Modern School was beautiful, but the outside world was full of problems.

After attending high school in Brooklyn and then at New Brunswick High School, I became aware that not everyone was an atheist or an anarchist! In fact, there were mighty few of us. I played and studied the piano and got into the Juilliard School of Music, and graduated in '32, before I was 19, to learn that there were no jobs to be found. Since this was the era of the Great Depression, I was advised by Edwine Behre, my private piano teacher, to apply for a job on the federal WPA Music Project. Meanwhile, I had moved to East 13th Street near 2nd Avenue, and on my first job taught piano in groups at the Christadora House, a settlement on the Lower East Side.

But while I was still going to the Juilliard my parents had moved to New York City, on East 12th Street. My father, ever mindful of his daughter's welfare, suggested that I go to a social where I might meet

* Stelton is near the town of New Brunswick, about 35 miles from Manhattan.

some really good young people, not bourgeois types. A dance with a live band took place at 219 2nd Avenue, a hall run by Jewish anarchists, where lectures and general meetings were held, and with a small vegetarian diner which was run by Ida Cohen, who cooked with love for the mostly single radical crowd and hangers-on. The center always buzzed with activity.

It was at this social that I met Sidney Solomon, still a student at City College of New York, who later became a painter (mostly impressionist), school teacher, graphic designer, and publisher—and he was the drummer of the band which played that night. Among those present that evening were Lou Slater, a college student and printer, and a few other young radicals.

Since my father was then the manager of the *Freie Arbeiter Stimme* (*Free Voice of Labor*), the highly respected Jewish anarchist weekly, these young people I met at the dance had no hesitation in inviting me to a new group that was being formed. Their first meeting was scheduled at the home of Daniluk, a Russian comrade who lived on lower 2nd Avenue in Manhattan. Daniluk gave us a warm welcome on his sixth floor walkup flat. It was all so fascinating.

This is really where *Vanguard* (an anarchist monthly) was started. Then when I got there I met Mark Schmidt, a radical theoretician and historian, who had been through the Russian Revolution and who was known by the Russian comrades Murashko, the Samusins and Daniluk. Besides Sidney, Lou Slater, Schmidt, and myself, there was Lou Genin (Whitey, he was called, because he was almost an albino); Eddie Wong, waiter and student at N.Y.U.; Zina and Ruth Dickstein, two young Polish anarchists; Glenn Carrington, a black activist in Brooklyn and a writer; and Violet, a comrade's daughter; and Thomas Dolgoff, Sam Dolgoff's youngest brother. It was then and there that we decided to issue our own publication. We called it *Vanguard*. What *chutzpa*. (This was Schmidt's influence, from his Marxist background. We were too inexperienced to fight this.) The time was the early '30s, long past the heyday of the Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, Johann Most era, or even Carlo Tresca. Rudolf Rocker was in Germany. Then, after spending years in a British prison in the early part of the century, Rocker was editor of *Der Arbeiter Freint*.

In the '30s, the communists were in the saddle and were riding high. Some Americans even emigrated to the Soviet Union. But most were busy working to destroy unions that then existed, if in fact they couldn't take them over. The Stalinists character-assassinated all other radicals. These were years of tremendous factionalism in the labor movement.

Though our first issue of *Vanguard* had to be mimeographed, we had very fine writers, even with the very first number. Issues that followed were done by multigraph then printed by Marc Epstein, and later by Phil Miller, and then by linotyper Jimmy Mangano, son of Italian anarchists.

The foreign language adult anarchist groups welcomed our young activists. Within a short time more young people were attracted to our ideas, and to our little group. Roman Weinrebe, talented in writing, whose father was a Jewish anarchist writer; Jack Schlesinger, who was a college athlete but was working in jewelry design at the time.

Our editorial board would discuss and decide on what articles would have to be written and who would write them. There was a real comradely atmosphere. Needless to say, there were constant meetings and we gradually developed other activities like having a lending library and lectures and debates that would be open to the public. There were frequent socials and picnics also. They were very well attended. Many long-time relationships were started. It was an exciting period.

Radicalism in the 1930s

In 1932, '33, and '34 there was the case of the Kentucky miners who were imprisoned for their activities in the coal miners union. John L. Lewis (head of the United Mine Workers Union) wouldn't defend them. As a result they became anti-Lewis and were befriended by the local Wobblies—members of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.). A communist defense organization dropped them, after which the New York I.W.W. committee, headed by Herbert Mahler, took up their cause. Herbert Mahler put all his energies and time into their cause and had the assistance of other Wobblies, *Vanguard* members Roman and others, and Yvette Weinrebe and the Corder family. After a long struggle the miners were finally freed by Governor Chandler.

Another situation that our members were involved in was the defense of Bruno Terzani. The Black Shirts, an Italian-American fascist organization had a meeting in Astoria, L.I., when one of their members was killed. Terzani, a member of the Italian anarchist group *Il Mertello* was accused of the murder and imprisoned; and after the trial was freed due to the work of the Terzani defense. A big celebration was held on the Lower East Side, where Sidney and I were present as well as Sam Dolgoff. It lasted at least ten hours, and Terzani himself cooked dinner.

In 1935 Carlo Tresca, a prominent Italian anarchist activist and publisher of the weekly anarchist Italian newspaper *Il Martello* (*The Hammer*), invited us to share the loft and offices (at 94 5th Avenue in Manhattan) with them. The majority accepted, but some members objected to our joining Carlo Tresca. Sidney Solomon edited an English page for *Il Martello* then. Carlo Tresca was later murdered by an assassin's bullet as he and his comrades walked across 5th Avenue after a meeting. Sidney missed the meeting because of my illness that day.

Besides the *Freie Arbeiter Stimme* (*Free Voice of Labor*), a weekly Jewish anarchist-oriented paper at 45 West 17th Street, N.Y.C., there was also the Italian *L'Adunata*, a monthly edited by Armando Borghi; *Cultura Proletaria*, a Spanish anarchist weekly; a Russian monthly *Diela Truda*; and the *Road to Freedom*, in English, but their number was going down. There was quite an anarchist presence!

We were the “young Turks”: And we were active on many fronts. The foreign-born comrades usually came to our functions and supported our activities. Some of our newer members were Abe Bluestein, son of anarchists, who had been active in the student protests at City College of New York; Franz Fliegler (who called himself Yager in the movement) who was a seaman, a First Mate who died this past summer; Albert Mullady, an Irish-American anarchist. Gradually, we seemed to have spawned a large group of very young people from the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. In all, the *Vanguard* group had about 60 members.

In the years of 1932 to '38, the Great Depression was still with us, abject poverty was widespread, and families would move from one apartment to another in order to gain a couple of months free rent, by overstaying in their current apartment and getting a month's free rent (which was called “concession”) in the apartment they were moving to. Those who were absolutely homeless built their pitiful shacks, Hoovervilles. There were many of them on the outskirts of New York.

When we shared a headquarters with a branch of the I.W.W. on West 17th Street in Manhattan, the *Vanguard* group held lectures that included, besides our own anarchists, some noted writers: Max Nomad, Edward Dahlberg, James Farrell, Dwight Macdonald, Dorothy Dudley and, of course, Sam Dolgoff. Sam was an excellent debater and would frequently debate one Trotskyite or another. (We did not debate Stalinists.)

We also traveled out of town quite a bit to help organize other groups. I remember Sidney went to Philadelphia, where a young group met, and also went to Youngstown, Ohio, to a steel-mill workers group, where he

spoke to about 500 members and had a most sympathetic response. They especially enjoyed singing the songs from the I.W.W. *Little Red Song Book*. I went to Boston and Framingham, Massachusetts, where I met with some young people, and stayed with Joe and Mollie Meltzer, wonderful, devoted comrades in Chelsea, MA.

And during this period I was active as a musician and piano teacher. At that time too, there were frequent lectures at the Rand School, on East 15th Street in Manhattan, at the Labor Temple on East 14th Street, and sometimes in union halls as well. But these young people did not have any staying power that we knew of. Call it what you may, guidance was needed and it was wanting. In spite of so much going on, we felt somewhat isolated. And the movement occupied every moment of our spare time. But we retained our hopes.

The Spanish Revolution, and After

But . . . when the Spanish Revolution broke out on July 19, 1936 (in response to Franco's fascist attack), we were not surprised by the crucial role that the C.N.T. (National Confederation of Labor) and the F.A.I. (Anarchist Federation of Iberia) were to play. The masses of Spanish anarchists were prepared. Usually, we had some information about what was going on in Spain printed in the *Vanguard*.

The inspiration of the revolution was tremendous. Here was anarchism in practice on a large scale, a true people's revolution. And anarchism *worked* in the factories and farms. So, we lost no time in deciding that a publication was needed which would give a true point of view of the monumental changes taking place in Spain. The paper was called *Spanish Revolution* and was supported by a number of libertarian groups and sympathizers. But it was edited by and written by members of the *Vanguard* group. We received cables and letters from our comrades in Spain, and got information from the Spanish and French libertarian press.

An Italian comrade living in Spain, Bruno L'Americano, came here to try to get arms because of the embargo against Loyalist Spain. It turned out to be a plan in futility. There simply was no way to do this in the early days of the Spanish Civil War. But the C.N.T. unions were able to transform many industries in Catalonia and other regions into munitions plants for the fighting front. Even education took on an anarchist mode; the Ferrer schools in Spain continued educating children. Large estates were

converted to urgently needed agricultural production and socialized. There were hundreds of libertarian communities practicing real socialism, and they were much more productive than before, and there were also many socialist collectives. But the communists, under the Stalinists' leadership and dictatorship, were bent on destroying these workers and the workers' accomplishments. A lot has been written about this matter. Communists made a war within a war—against a truly democratic revolution.

In 1938, after Emma Goldman had returned from Spain, very saddened about the then most recent happenings, Audrey Goodfriend and I decided to visit her in Toronto. We hitch-hiked from the Bronx, where Audrey lived then, and made it to Toronto, Canada, in one day. We stayed with Jack and Sylvia Fitzgerald. Jack Fitzgerald was a comrade from New Zealand who occasionally wrote for the *Vanguard*. Emma was most thoughtful and kind to us and arranged a lovely picnic day at the Georgian Bay Beach along with Arthur Bartoletti, who had the car, and Ferrero.

The crushing of the revolution in Spain and Franco's fascist victory was a terrible blow to all of us in the anarchist movement, and in a real sense to people all over the world. *I think that if the European countries and the United States had supported the Spanish Loyalists, the whole history of this century would have turned out differently.*

About that time conscription was here. Some of our members like Irving Sterling, Harry Stein, and others were drafted into the U.S. Armed Services and there was a lot of pairing, which made for families. Many of us had to get on with our private lives. As the *Vanguard* members got a bit older, a new (younger) youth group was added to our forces. But the younger group continued to function. Audrey Goodfriend was one of the most active. They published a magazine called *WHY*. There were other little publications as well. Audrey and Dave Koven went to San Francisco, California, where they became very active in a progressive school. Moishe Shuman and Jack Schlesinger became I.L.G.W.U. union organizers concentrating on the out-of-town sweatshops. And so it went.

But early in the '40s there was the Libertarian Book Club which had meetings and forums each month in Manhattan. Literature was sold and many young people came. One of the important influences at that time and to this day is Paul Avrich, who gave much of his time to lectures which were very informative. His scholarly books documented anarchist history in Russia and America. He also greatly influenced students at Columbia University and Queens College, where he taught.

Sam and Esther Dolgoff, as well as Sarah and Bill Taback, Valeria

Isca, Brandt, and others from the former *Vanguard* group were among the primary activists in the Libertarian Book Club, which, by the way, still exists today. Among the most constant and primary activists for many years were Steven Rabinowitz and Bob Erler. Interesting lectures were held then.

During the '50s, '60s, '70s, and '80s, Sam Dolgoff did a great deal of writing (a lot of which got published) and brought him recognition as a speaker as well. There were frequent invitations for him to speak at colleges and students' clubs. His apartment at 175 East Broadway became something of a center for visitors and young people to congregate. Sam and Esther helped keep the fires burning. When they died there were large memorial meetings for them. Many felt that an era had closed. However, Sidney and I did not feel that way, and were very happy when we met Bob Helms at a lecture by Martha Acklesberg at the Libertarian Book Club forum two and a half years ago, and we got invited to speak at the Mid-Atlantic Anarchist five-day conference in Philadelphia.

The new anarchist upsurge is our inspiration.



Clara with son Raymond.



Clara with brother Sigmund at her 80th birthday party.

MY SISTER CLARA

One day when I was a young boy, I asked my father (Sam Freedman) why he liked my sister Clara so well. He wrinkled his forehead and smiled, and then said it was because she was so pure . . . And furthermore, just look at her—she has such beautiful, thick black hair which always shines—her smile is perfect, her skin is light, smooth, and radiant. And her hands (my mother inserted) were at least as beautiful, dexterous, and coordinated as Rachmoninoff's. She plays the piano beautifully, she paints and dances like few in the community of the Ferrer Colony in Stelton, New Jersey. Besides, she reads and writes very well. She just finished a book by Thomas Mann. She has a remarkable memory; and best of all, she is very, very modest. She plays the piano at least as well as Paderowski. As we all grew older, it was clear to me that Clara had all these qualities and more. She had this broad knowledge in music and always stimulated me to sing and appreciate her art and music, and at every opportunity she and I would walk together and sing. When somewhat older, she joined the Dessoff Choir, and so I joined—again to be able to sing together. Clara was a model aesthetic person in addition to being very aware of most things, and was involved in a broad understanding of most of the realities of life, not to mention having great courage. She was a model for all of us.

—David Freedman

January 16, 2001

Dear Sidney,

How are you getting along? Clara's death has left all of us bereft. She was such a good friend to the piano teachers—and tireless. I am sad to imagine how much she is missed by you and the rest of your family. I think of her every day as I experience the events of musical routine—practicing, teaching, every aspect of musical life was touched by Clara's knowledge and help. Best wishes to you, Sidney. I am thinking of you.

—Florence Moed

Dear Sid:

We wanted to express our heartfelt sorrow at the news of Clara's death. She was such a warm and inspirational person to those of us "younger" folks in the anarchist movement, and will long be remembered for that and much more. This must be an extremely hard time for you. We hope friends and family in the New York City area are of some comfort, although nothing can replace Clara and the love you shared. Our thoughts and best wishes are with you from afar. Try to keep your spirits up; you, too, are an inspiration for so many of us!

—Fondly, Cindy Milstein & Ian Grimmer



Clara and Sidney at an exhibit of his paintings at Blackout Books.