

Berkman's Tunnel to Freedom

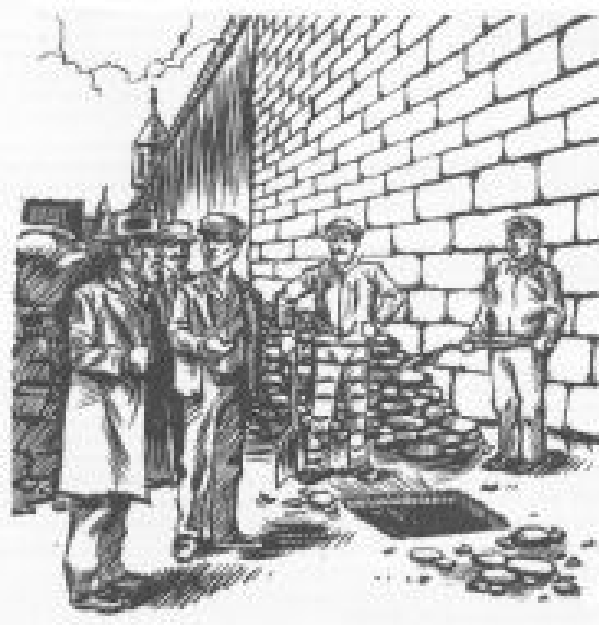
History, Not Mystery

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1992

Related story: "Tony" Revealed, *Fifth Estate* #377, March 2008

On July 26, 1900, officials of Western Penitentiary in Woods Run, Pennsylvania, discovered a tunnel which zigzagged some three hundred feet from the basement of the red brick house of 28 Sterling Street, which bordered the southern wall of the prison, to a point just inside the east wall. A superlative feat of engineering, the underground passage was equipped with an ingenious ventilation system as well as an electric warning device.



Western Pennsylvania Warden Wright looks on as workers uncover the tunnel intended for Alexander Berkman's escape (graphic by Rodrigo Quast)

The diggers had completed their work, yet they had mysteriously abandoned the tunnel without fulfilling their mission. In the house, police found an uneaten meal and a pot of coffee in the kitchen, a suit of clothes with money in one of the pockets, and a cipher note, which later proved untranslatable, all presumably intended for an escapee who never arrived.

The ensuing investigation revealed only that early in April, 1900, John C. Langfitt, owner of 28 Sterling Street and, ironically, an employee of the penitentiary, sold the house to a man named Thomas Brown, who said he was an inventor of electrical mining implements.

In May, Mr. and Mrs. Brown were joined by another couple. Nearby residents thought the Browns and their friends secretive and unneighborly and were alternately entertained and annoyed by Mrs. Brown's daily singing and piano playing, which began early every morning and lasted until late at night.

Sometime early in July the strange quartet departed, ostensibly on a vacation. Later that month, curious children stumbled upon the tunnel entrance as they explored the temptingly unoccupied house.

Neither Warden Edward S. Wright, the Board of Prison Inspectors, nor the police departments of the twin cities of Pittsburgh and Allegheny ever conclu-

sively determined the identities of the engineers of the tunnel or the inmate or inmates whom they had hoped to liberate.

The list of suspects included J.C. Boyd, an infamous forger; diamond thief James Riley; safe-cracker George “Snake” Wilson; “Paddy” McGraw, who had been involved in a previous escape attempt; and Alexander Berkman, the anarchist who had shot Henry Clay Frick in 1892 during the Homestead Strike. While suspects abounded, however, clues were few.

History, Not Mystery

If the tunnel continues to be an enigma today, however, it is not unascertainable truth, but neglected history, that makes it so. Though he denied it at the time, Alexander Berkman was the prisoner who planned and directed the escape attempt, and the labor and funding for the project were provided by his anarchist comrades.

Released from “Riverside,” as the prison is sometimes called, in 1905, after serving thirteen years, he divulged the story in 1912 in his powerful, cathartic *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*. In 1931, Emma Goldman, Berkman’s comrade, lover, and life-long friend, published her account of the tunnel in her autobiography, *Living My Life*.

Among anarchists, the tale of Berkman’s tunnel attained legendary proportions; it has been lost, however, to the popular consciousness, the history classroom, and the public record.

An Anarchist Buried Alive

By 1900, Berkman had served eight years of a twenty-two year-sentence. As a foreign-born anarchist of Jewish lineage who had attempted to assassinate one of the nation’s foremost industrialists, he received harsh treatment at the hands of the custodians of Western Penitentiary. In those first years, Berkman endured long-term solitary, the starvation “Pennsylvania diet,” confinement in the dreaded “basket,” and denial of such routine privileges as mail and visitors.

Not surprisingly, he had often thought of escape and had devised a plan as early as 1896, but Goldman and the other comrades hesitated to undertake such an expensive and dangerous project. Not until the Board of Pardons refused to hear his appeal at the end of his first seven years was Berkman able to convince his friends on the outside to put his plans into action.

The Tunnel Is Planned

He asked Emma Goldman to find reliable comrades to attempt the project and to secure money to finance it. Goldman selected Eric B. Morton, a Norwegian-born radical, to direct the operation.

Morton, code named “Ibsen,” was to work with a prison-mate of Berkman’s known only as “Tony,” whose release was imminent. Tony would smuggle Berkman’s plans, including detailed diagrams and measurements, out of the prison; and while Morton managed the excavation, Tony would communicate with the prisoner clandestinely, using a cipher that only he and Berkman could understand.

Goldman also began organizing a campaign to raise money and enlisted the support of Saul Yanofsky, editor of the *Freie Arbeiter Stimme*, a New York City Yiddish anarchist weekly, to manage the collection and disbursement of the secret fund. Purporting to solicit contributions for a new appeal, Alexander Berkman Fund subscriptions appeared in anarchist and labor newspapers internationally.

Having laid the groundwork for the daring project, Goldman embarked on a previously planned trip to Europe, hoping her absence would allay any suspicions the authorities might have that Berkman was contemplating an escape. She would meet Berkman and Morton in Paris in a few months.

The house that Morton secured at 28 Sterling Street was situated across the street from the southeastern corner of the penitentiary, almost directly facing the main wagon gate in the south wall. Berkman’s original plan envisioned a tunnel curving under the street towards the western portion of the south wall. Just inside the wall, the diggers would tap into a forgotten blind underground alley, accessible from the prison yard by a trap door.

This passage, known to Berkman through the confidence of an older inmate, had once connected the men's and women's cell blocks.

Digging the Tunnel

The digging was difficult. Rocky Pittsburgh soil, combined with cramped working conditions in the barely man-sized tunnel, continually frustrated the conspirators. Noxious fumes from the old gas well and the leaky sewer lines under Refuge Street, which bordered the east wall, forced the tunnelers to install ventilation machinery. An old water well further dampened their efforts.

Fearing that the noise of the digging might alert the guards, Morton and his musician friend, alias Mr. and Mrs. Brown, purchased a piano, and the latter played and sang while the work progressed. This entertainment amused the guards, and they failed to detect the vibrations of the men tunneling beneath them.

A buzzer system was installed to warn the diggers of approaching danger. If anything seemed suspicious, the piano player could press a button, setting off a buzzer in the shaft and warning the men to be quiet. She played certain staccato chords to signal that the coast was clear.

Break on Through to the Other Side

About two hundred feet down the east wall, the tunnelers finally cut through the huge foundation and continued just five feet into the prison yard. There they dug straight up to the sod, reinforcing the opening with flat rocks.

Berkman protested the exposed location of the tunnel's terminal and requested that Tony extend the passage another thirty feet into a seldom used shed. It would be a simple matter for Berkman to sneak into the building, tear up the wooden floor boards, and escape unnoticed.

Inexplicably, Tony resisted Berkman's entreaties and concealed his objections from Morton and the others. Just as inexplicably, Tony recklessly wired Berkman a coded telegram on July 2 containing the exact location of the tunnel opening—ten feet west of the seventh bar on the east wall—and the day and time set for the escape—July 4 at 3:00 p.m.

Disappointment

Since the Fourth of July was a holiday, prisoners did not have access to the yard. The following day, however, under the pretext of picking up gravel for his pet sparrows, whose tricks had charmed even the Warden, Berkman made his way along the east wall. To his great disappointment, he found the tunnel entrance covered with a large pile of bricks and stones dumped there during a construction project.

Having gone so close to the wall, Berkman violated the conditions of his daily ten-minute walk with his birds. The guards confined him to the cell block.

Undaunted, he urged Tony to continue digging to the shed while the tunnel remained undiscovered. By then, however, Morton and the other conspirators had departed, confident that Berkman would succeed in his escape.

Tony apparently left for New York City to secure additional funds to extend the tunnel, but while he was gone, it was discovered. Although no evidence was found to prove Berkman's complicity in the attempt, Warden Wright had him locked in solitary.

Berkman: An Extraordinary Man

Beyond its human drama and its importance in the history of Pittsburgh, the story of Berkman's tunnel is significant for at least two other reasons.

First, it tells us something about the man himself. Too often overshadowed by Emma Goldman, about whom much has been written, Berkman's life has been largely ignored by historians. What we do know of his life we have learned primarily from Goldman and from her many biographers. Although Goldman loved, respected, and looked up to Berkman throughout their many years together, both in America and in exile, he figures as a secondary character in the plethora of books and articles devoted primarily to her.

In the tunnel episode, we see Berkman as a resourceful, talented individual who not only managed to survive thirteen years of imprisonment and torture, but who also fought back. Despite the watchful eyes of his warders, Berkman found ways to obtain highly accurate measurements of the prison compound he was rarely able to enter and to communicate with comrades on the outside in an indecipherable code through a clandestine network of contacts.

We see a man who, despite his harsh punishment, was still intelligent and courageous enough to attempt what would have amounted to a spectacular escape from a high-security prison. Had such an escape occurred in Russia, it would have become the stuff of popular legend in the same way that Kropotkin's dramatic escape to the increasingly quick notes of a fiddle became. Berkman's attempted escape shows us an extraordinary man who is a significant historical figure in his own right.

Take Back Our History

Second, the tunnel tells us something about the anarchist movement in turn-of-the-century America. Anarchism has rarely been clearly understood in the United States. Like other enemies of the American government—the Russians, the Japanese, and more recently, the Iraqis—anarchists have been portrayed as both deadly serious threats and as sublimely stupid idiots.

On the one hand, they have been viewed as wild-eyed, crazed individuals who are as inept as they are fanatical. Newspaper reports from the period often ridicule anarchists as bumbling ne'er-do-wells who could never accomplish anything.

On the other hand, they have been accused of the most devious and intricate of plots. On the eve of the Haymarket executions in 1886, the city of Chicago was transformed into an armed camp because the city's industrialists believed that the anarchists would attempt a prison break or some violent reprisal.

At one point during the investigation of the tunnel, Warden Wright publicly announced his belief that anarchists dug it in order to place numerous bombs along the base of the prison wall and thus facilitate a wholesale escape. Behind every bomb blast and assassination attempt, the authorities seemed to find deep-rooted anarchist conspiracies.

This portrayal of anarchists is obviously contradictory, though it serves well enough for public relations purposes. Nothing panders to public emotions more effectively than the characterization of an enemy as dangerous yet ultimately inferior, ubiquitous yet inept. With such a view leaders mobilize the public with fright while creating a sense of in-group superiority that negates the enemy's humanity.

The story of Berkman's tunnel shows that the anarchists in this country were, in fact, both serious and competent. They were able to effectively generate human and financial resources to accomplish their objective.

The digging of the tunnel required the cooperation of radicals from many cities. It required, at the same time, that these well-organized activities remain hidden from the authorities, who used detectives liberally to infiltrate and report on the movement. It also required great technical ability. And finally, it required people who believed in their cause enough to risk bodily injury, arrest, and even death.

The tunnel episode shows us an anarchist movement that was much better organized, much more competent, and much more dedicated than it is usually given credit for.

This article is a summary of one of the papers that will be presented at the Alexander Berkman Remembrance, Thursday, July 23, 1992, at the Rosebud/Metropol entertainment complex in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. For information or tickets, or if you're interested in participating, please write to P.O. Box 22412, Pittsburgh, PA 15222, or call 412-734-8339.

Text of poster

THE MAN WHO SHOT FRICK: A REMEMBRANCE OF ALEXANDER BERKMAN

COME CELEBRATE THE EXTRAORDINARY LIFE OF ALEXANDER BERKMAN [1870-1936), ANARCHIST, AUTHOR, FIGHTER FOR PEACE & FREEDOM, ON THE CENTENARY OF HIS ATTEMPTED ASSASSINATION OF HENRY CLAY FRICK DURING THE HOMESTEAD STRIKE OF 1892. A SYMPOSIUM & CONCERT WILL BE HELD ON THURSDAY, JULY 23, 1992, AT ROSEBUD IN PITTSBURGH'S STRIP DISTRICT. FOR INFORMATION & TICKETS, PLEASE WRITE OR CALL: P.O. BOX 22412 PITTSBURGH, PA 15222

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