

The Berkman Conference

E.B. Maple (Peter Werbe)

1992

A few days before the commencement in Pittsburgh of the July 23rd conference, "A Remembrance of Alexander Berkman, The Man Who Shot Frick," Sunfrog and I headed for a little town on the Pennsylvania/West Virginia border called Confluence where several rivers come together. We figured if rafting was good enough for Earth First! founder, Dave Foreman, maybe we should give it a try as well.

So we shot the lower Yougheigheny River, and shot the breeze with our friend Pat, who has helped us with the FE in Detroit and is an instructor at a local kayak camp. After a few days of fun in the Laurel Highlands, we headed back up to the big city for the Berkman proceedings.

Gary Doebler (author of two FE articles on Berkman's anarchism and his assassination attempt on the life of H.C. Frick, a reactionary industrialist) single-handedly conceived of the commemoration and worked diligently for months with friends to make it happen. Gary's fascination with Berkman is deep: his two children are named Emma and Alexander. He and his wife Charlene were gracious hosts during our stay in Pittsburgh.

The program turned out to be less formal than Doebler originally conceived as all of the invited academics such as Paul Avrich and Richard Drinnon were unable to attend. So, instead of the presentation of papers, we were treated to a night of song and theatre which celebrated Berkman's life and his commitment to anarchism.

Dramatic readings from the works of Emma Goldman and Berkman, accompanied by slides and the powerful folk songs of John Benedict, were truly moving, particularly the scene from each of the principals' autobiography which recounted their reunion after the 14 years Berkman spent in the hellhole of Western Pennsylvania Prison.

Spirited folksongs from Anne Feeney, Mike Stout, the Feral Family and an anarchist folk rapper, Chris Chandler, entertained us with their contemporary themes. Leonard Lehrman and Helene Williams presented scenes from Lehrman's celebrated play, E.G., a musical portrait of Emma Goldman, which ended with a tuneful rendition of the famous Goldman quote, "If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be In Your Revolution". The song allowed this writer to give a cameo performance on stage to twirl Emma around after Berkman refused her invitation to dance. The only disappointment was the small turn-out which was surprising given the intense prior publicity and international endorsements. Pittsburgh appears to have a very small anarchist community and provided little in the way of a base for an audience. Still, those in attendance greatly appreciated the evening, and the Pittsburgh people are to be congratulated for presenting such a high quality event.

FE Note: See Doebler's articles on Berkman: "The Man Who Shot Frick," FE #338, Winter, 1992 and "Berkman's Tunnel to Freedom," FE #339, Spring, 1992.

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