

EMMA GOLDMAN: CRUSADER FOR CHILDREN

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Emma Goldman was, unquestionably, one of the most dedicated and daring rebels of her time. An idealist who cherished liberty as the most precious of possessions, Emma is best-known as a spirited anarchist. Her interests, however, were many and varied and included the theatre, the status of women, the welfare of children, and education.

Writing for the *Washington Post*, Colman McCarthy devoted a column to Emma Goldman in its February 23, 1973 edition. The editorial began, "Among the many benefits of the current revival of women's consciousness are the flashbacks to Emma Goldman. Few scenes in today's worthy push for women's social equality cannot be cut back to an idea or event in Emma Goldman's committed life, from her birth in Russia in 1869 to her burial in Chicago in 1940."

Emma Goldman was seventy-one when she died in 1940. After her death, she was finally able to return to America, to be buried in Chicago's Waldheim Cemetery, near the graves of those men who had so greatly inspired her years before: the Haymarket Martyrs.

She had arrived in America in 1885, a poor Russian-Jewish immigrant. The bitterness of Emma's childhood was, to a large extent, the inspiration for her later courage and determination. She learned, for instance, from her father, that girls were second-class citizens. When she was fifteen, her father had planned a marriage for her. When she protested that she be allowed to continue her schooling, her father threw her French grammar into the fire and shouted: "Girls do not have to learn much! All a Jewish daughter needs to know is how to prepare gefullte fish, cut noodles fine, and give the man plenty of children."¹ Primarily to escape her father's plans, Emma left his household for America.

The promise of America, the promise it seemed to hold for the spirited and idealistic immigrant, was not kept. Emma Goldman, like countless

others, had little else to offer her new homeland except the ability to sew in the factories. Unlike the others who sat quietly by and accepted outrageous working conditions, Emma Goldman spoke up. The courage of this young woman as she shouts to the factory foreman that he is "a liar and a brute" is breathtaking.² It is particularly moving when one realizes that her outburst was prompted by her concern for a co-worker who had fainted and was accused of shamming.

Deeply touched by the unjust handling of the Haymarket Anarchists in 1887, Emma dedicated herself to anarchism.³ Believing the state to be an oppressor that sucked the breath from its citizens, she braved the wrath of its agents by speaking out against injustice. By 1891, Emma had come to the attention of the press which reported that "a mysterious young woman on a truck . . . had waved a red flag and urged revolution, her high-pitched voice putting the horse to flight."⁴

In 1892, the Carnegie Steel Strike at Homestead seemed to require more than words. It was time for an *Attentat*, a political act which would awaken the people to the real cause of the struggle.⁵ Emma Goldman and her friend, Alexander Berkman, planned to kill the villain of the hour, Henry Clay Frick. Lack of funds prevented Emma from accompanying Berkman in his unsuccessful attack on Frick's life; nonetheless, her role as a conspirator branded Emma Goldman as an enemy-of-the-state.

Emma was first imprisoned for a speech she made in August, 1893 when she declared to a large audience of unemployed workers: "If they do not give you work, demand bread. If they deny you both, take bread. It is your sacred right."⁶ For this assault on the system, Emma served a year at Blackwell's Island.

The years before World War I were years of political and economic upheaval. The IWW, Communists, and Anarchists, all seemed part and parcel of a savage attack on tradition, virtue,

capital, and authority. Emma Goldman was an easy target for the privileged to fear. She braved the dens of reaction, such as San Diego in 1912, where a veritable civil war was in progress. Her comrade there was branded, tarred and sage-brushed, and variously tortured.⁷ Despite the sinister threats of the vigilantes, Emma finally spoke in San Diego in 1915.⁸

The aftermath of World War I ended Emma Goldman's tenure as one of America's greatest orators as well as one of its most despised anarchist agitators. Deported by the agents of the state, especially the young and ambitious J. Edgar Hoover, she sailed, in the winter of 1919, with the other deported enemies of the state to Russia, via Finland.

She remained in the Soviet Union for two years, finally leaving in disgust over the destruction of the Revolution by the Communists. She eventually settled in St. Tropez, France, which was a base for her unflagging energies. Her seventieth birthday was spent in Toronto, raising money on behalf of the Spanish Liberation Movement.

Her courage as a woman, as an individual, and as an anarchist was exceptional. Her deeds and exploits are material for an exciting movie, but the more thoughtful side of Emma Goldman deserves to be recognized. The questions and issues that plagued her remain largely unanswered to this day. She attempted to deal, for example, with the questions posed by the family, children, and their education. She viewed the family and education not as isolates, but as reflections of the bold designs of the state. How to avoid the corruption of children in a society whose basic fabric is corrupt remains a question that teases and worries yet.

Because of her brave challenge to the system, Emma Goldman's name was frequently an oath. She aroused enough suspicion so that the foulest of deeds could be traced, no matter how ludicrously, to her instigation. During September, 1901, the newspapers had a field-day unjustly attacking Emma Goldman for supposedly inspiring Leon Czolgosz, the young assassin who had killed President McKinley. The *New York World* described her as "a wrinkled, ugly Russian woman," and the *New York Times* portrayed her as the chief of a tribe of "frousy-haired specimens."⁹ Through the newspapers' vitriolic and superficial attacks on her person, fear was aroused about her anarchist philosophy.

Former President Grover Cleveland declared: "We can hardly fail to see . . . behind the bloody

deed of the assassin, horrible figures and faces from which it will not do to turn away. If we are to escape further attack upon our peace and security we must boldly and resolutely grapple with the monster of anarchy."¹⁰ And one of those "horrible figures and faces" was especially unsettling since Emma Goldman's figure and face were decidedly those of a woman.

Mere mention of the name "Emma Goldman" was enough to intimidate a recalcitrant child. S.N. Behrman, the playwright, recalls that as a child his "parents cited her to us constantly, using her name . . . to frighten and admonish."¹¹

But Emma Goldman cared deeply for children. During a routine physical examination, the doctor advised her that an operation would be necessary if she were ever to bear a child herself.¹² She thought: "A child! I had loved children madly, ever since I could remember. . . ."¹³ For a few moments, Emma allowed herself to imagine blissful motherhood.¹⁴ But memories of her own cruel childhood and tormented adolescence broke the reverie. Emma's thoughts turned from her own miseries to the painful knowledge that her "tragic childhood had been no exception, that there were thousands of children born unwanted, marred and maimed by poverty and still more by ignorant misunderstanding. No child of mine . . . should ever be added to those unfortunate victims."¹⁵

Determined to serve these children through the cause of anarchism, Emma chose to accept her own chronic pain and incapacities; "to fulfill that mission I must remain unhampered and untied. . . . I would find an outlet for my mother-need in the love of all children."¹⁶ Thus, the operation never took place.

Emma Goldman's cause was anarchism. "The gist of the anarchist idea is this," wrote Max Baginski, a fellow editor and one of Emma's lovers, "that there are qualities present in man, which permit possibilities of social life, organization, and cooperative work without the application of force. Such qualities are solidarity, common action, and love of justice."¹⁷ This utopian description of a credo which, to many, stood for a complete and fearful social revolution appeared in the first issue of *Mother Earth* which Emma published from 1906 until the postal authorities put an end to the monthly shortly after the declaration of war in 1917.¹⁸

The scope and purpose of *Mother Earth* were explained in its first issue:

Mother Earth will endeavor to attract and appeal to all those who oppose encroachment on public

and individual life. It will appeal to those who strive for something higher, weary of the commonplace; to those who feel that stagnation is a deadweight on the firm and elastic step of progress; to those who breathe freely only in limitless space; to those who long for the tender shade of a new dawn for a humanity free from the dread of want, the dread of starvation in the face of mountains of riches. The Earth free for the free individual.

In *Mother Earth*, Volume 1, Number 2 (April 1906), Emma ponders the question of the child and its prospect of becoming a free individual. Titled, "The Child and Its Enemies," this essay takes to task "every institution of our day, the family, the State, our moral codes, (which) sees in every strong, beautiful uncompromising personality a deadly enemy."¹⁹ Every effort is being made to cramp human emotion and originality of thought in the individual into a straight [sic] jacket from its earliest infancy; or to shape every human being according to one pattern; not into well-rounded individuality, but into a patient work slave, professional automaton, tax-paying citizen, or righteous moralist."²⁰

The schools, serving the masters of the state, reflect the determination of the system to shape and direct each child and to make "the child a being foreign to itself."²¹ "The ideal of the average pedagogue is not a complete, well-rounded original being; rather does he seek that the result of his pedagogy shall be automatons of flesh and blood, to best fit into the treadmill of society, and the emptiness and dullness of our lives. Every home, school, college and university stands for dry, cold utilitarianism, overflowing the brain of the pupil with a tremendous amount of ideas, handed down from generations past."²² The purpose of this inculcation of facts and data is "to maintain every form of authority, to create awe for the importance of possessions."²³

Emma continues, "In whatever direction one turns, eagerly searching for human beings who do not measure ideas and emotions with the yardstick of expediency, one is confronted with the products, the herd-like drilling instead of the result of spontaneous and innate characteristics working themselves out in freedom."²⁴

In "The Child and Its Enemies," Emma raises the question, still essentially unanswered, of how one is to educate for freedom. How does one free the child from the system and yet not inculcate him with yet another authority? Emma writes of the family whose politics are radical, whose

values are radical, which seeks, nonetheless, to inculcate their child with these same values. The contradiction inherent in this sort of family was obvious to Emma: though emancipated from their belief in ownership and property, "they cling tenaciously to the notion that they own the child, and that they have the right to exercise their authority over it."²⁵ Whether it is the parent or the teacher who points with pride to the child who can recite revolutionary poetry, the result is little different from the Catholic child's being prepared for his first Communion: the child's dignity and individuality have been sacrificed to some greater authority.

And what then? "The child, being fed on one-sided, set and fixed ideas, soon grows weary of rehashing the beliefs of its parents, and it sets out in quest of new sensations, no matter how inferior and shallow the new experiences may be. . . . So it happens that the boy or girl over-fed on Thomas Paine will land in the arms of the Church, or they will vote for imperialism only to escape the drag of economic determinism and scientific socialism . . . or they cling to the right of accumulating property, only to find relief from the old-fashioned communism of their father."²⁶

Should one, then, regard these children with despair — these children molded to grow in certain pre-determined directions and who, nonetheless, yearn to embrace other ideas? On the contrary. Emma regards these willful children as "the greatest guarantee that the independent mind, at least, will always resist every external and foreign force exercised over the human heart and head."²⁷ Then, if education is to mean anything at all, "it must insist upon the free growth and development of the innate forces and tendencies of the child. In this way alone can we hope for the free individual and eventually also a free community, which shall make interference and coercion of human growth impossible."²⁸

At this point, one must recognize some basic conflicts. For one, does the child who refutes the dictates of his radical family do so simply as an independent spirit, as Emma suggests above? Or, is the child engulfed by the institutions and systems of the world-at-large which seek always to recapture their potential deviants, as Emma suggests in the earlier pages of this essay? Or, is the child, rather than acting from individual conviction, eager to adopt the ways of his neighbors and chums because of his discomfiture with the peculiarities of his mother and father?

Too, how can education for freedom *insist* on



Emma Goldman, at age twenty-three, in 1892. From *Living My Life*, Dover Publications.



Emma Goldman at San Tropez, 1929. In *From Nowhere at Home*, Schocken Books.

anything? The pages of *Mother Earth* were filled with admonitions to remember always the dignity and beauty of each individual child. The goals of the International League for the Rational Education of Children concluded with: "Above all, let us not forget that, in matters of education there is but one right superior to all others and before which all others should yield: the right of the child."²⁹

Mother Earth gave recognition to many famed educators of the day. Sebastian Faure and Francisco Ferrer were among the notables whose anarchist views and their educational implementation were recognized and applauded. But, history was catching up with *Mother Earth* and the anarchists.

Just as the war hysteria ended the publication of *Mother Earth*, the subsequent "Red Scare" terminated Emma's American citizenship.³⁰ Leaving New York aboard the "Soviet Ark," the S.S. Buford, Emma Goldman and her long-time friend and comrade, Alexander Berkman looked forward to their arrival in the Soviet Union, whose recent revolution held such promise to these returning natives.³¹

In *My Disillusionment In Russia*, Emma relates not only her bitter and painful recognition of the price of Soviet monolithicism, but her experiences with the state's educational programs.³² These Soviet experiments were thoroughly distasteful to Emma.³³

In 1920, Emma had the opportunity to meet with Lunacharsky, the Commissar of Education. During their first meeting, he inquired whether she intended to "remain a free bird" or would she join him in his work. Emma was taken aback by the implication that one had to relinquish freedom, "especially in educational work," where it seemed that initiative and freedom were essential.³⁴

Lunacharsky was filled with the spirit of reform and eagerly sought Emma's reports on educational progress in America. Together, he and Emma would visit schools and other institutions in his charge. Emma was delighted to accept this invitation so that she might thus render a service to the Russian people. But Emma was to discover that Lunacharsky's good intentions were submerged by the increasing efficiency of the state bureaucracy. "Evidently Lunacharsky was caught in the same machine that apparently held everything in its iron grip."³⁵

Several months later, Emma was sure that she could not accept any work which would place her "under the control of the Communist machine.

The Commissariat of Education was so thoroughly dominated by that machine that it was hopeless to expect anything but routine work. . . . I became convinced that Lunacharsky himself was a helpless cog in the machine, his best efforts constantly curtailed and checked."³⁶

By April 1, 1920, Emma's initial optimism with the new government education had begun to tarnish. She was particularly disturbed by the elitist class being developed within the schools.³⁷

Desiring work of a non-partisan character, work that would enable her to study conditions in Russia and provide an opportunity to meet ordinary citizens, Emma joined the "Museum of the Revolution" which was a project organized to collect materials from the Revolutionary period in the Ukraine and Caucasus.³⁸

The city of Poltava was one of the Expedition's first destinations. There, Emma heard the story of the Save-the-Children Society which was subject to discrimination and persecution by the new regime.³⁹ In Kiev, the Expedition saw the same sort of "show schools" they had seen in other cities.⁴⁰ No one besides Emma seemed disturbed by the discriminatory effect of these schools.⁴¹ In Archangel, Emma paid a surprise visit to a school and was delighted to find happy children who obviously adored their teacher. "They were the first happy children I had seen in Russia. It strengthened my conviction of the significance of personality and the importance of mutual confidence and love between teacher and pupil."⁴²

While willing to give some credit to the State for its efforts to increase educational opportunities, Emma was critical of the price of the experiments.⁴³ Whatever successes the system may enjoy, "they have no bearing whatever on the Revolution; they do not prove that the Bolshevik educational experiment is superior to similar efforts in other countries where they have been achieved without a revolution and the terrible price it involves."⁴⁴

She continues: "State monopoly of thought is everywhere interpreting education to suit its own purpose. . . . But while the monopoly of thought in other countries has not succeeded in entirely checking the spirit of free inquiry and critical analysis, the 'proletarian dictatorship' had completely paralysed every attempt at independent investigation."⁴⁵

The tragedy of the Russian Revolution was deeply troubling. In America, where free public education remained rooted in the prejudices and styles of the past, the capitalist state stood in the

way of substantial change. There had been such high hopes that Russia, throwing off the shackles of tradition and tyranny, would truly find a way to liberate each child through education. For the child-centered anarchist, there was only bitter disappointment.

In December, 1921, Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman left the Soviet Union for Berlin, with hearts "heavy with the tragedy of Russia."⁴⁶

Finally, the correspondence of her last decade reveals Emma's unflinching interest in education. By the Thirties, Emma's influence had waned, her hopes and aspirations had dimmed, her optimism had tarnished. But her letters reveal an enduring spirit and faith that is not simply of historical interest.

In a letter to Mary Leavitt, written from St. Tropez and dated November 2, 1932, Emma writes, ". . . so glad to hear about the little fellow. As to what he will be when he grows up no amount of training and concern can decide that in advance. I was always of the opinion that all one can do for a child is to implant certainty of love and understanding, the feeling that whatever happens in his or her life they can find the strongest support and deepest understanding from their parents. . . ."⁴⁷

All this from a woman whose name was used to frighten little children!

Footnotes

¹Emma Goldman. *Living My Life*, Vols. 1 & 2, Dover Publications, New York, 1970, p. 12.

²*Ibid.*, p. 16.

³*Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 122-123.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 500-501.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 558-559.

⁹Richard Drinnon. *Rebel in Paradise: A Biography of Emma Goldman*, Bantam Books, New York, 1973, p. 106.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹²Goldman, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁷Max Baginski. "Without Government," *Mother Earth*, Vol. 1, No. 1, March 1906, p. 20.

¹⁸Drinnon, *op. cit.*, pp. 244-245.

¹⁹Emma Goldman. "The Child and Its Enemies," *Mother Earth*, Vol. 1, No. 2, April 1906, p. 7.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 7.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 8.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 8.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

²⁹The International League for the Rational Education of Children states with unusual clarity the conception of a liberating education; see *Mother Earth*, Vol. 5, No. 5, July 1910, p. 156.

³⁰Emma Goldman. "Statement at Deportation Hearings," *Makers of America*, Wayne Moquin, editor, Vol. 8, Encyclopedia Britannica Educational Corporation, Chicago, 1971, pp. 27-30.

³¹Berkman was born in Lithuania in 1870; the territory was, at the time, Russian. Goldman was likewise born in Russian Lithuania, in the town of Kovne.

³²Emma Goldman. *My Disillusionment in Russia*, Thomas Y. Crowell, New York, 1970. This book has sometimes been erroneously published in two volumes entitled: *My Disillusionment in Russia* and *My Further Disillusionment in Russia*.

³³Clarence Karier, Jr. *American Educational History: A Perspective*, paper presented at the Southeastern Regional Meeting of the History of Education Society, November 1971.

³⁴Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 28.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 71.

³⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 42-43; 71-72.

³⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

³⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 122-126.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 222-223.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁴⁷Richard and Anna Maria Drinnon, eds. *Nowhere at Home: Letters from exile of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman*, Schocken Books, New York, 1975, p. 175.

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