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Our Little Secrets

LISA FITTKO: SHE ESCORTED WALTER BENJAMIN ACROSS THE PYRENEES

By LAWRENCE REICHARD

Hitler's rampage across Europe produced millions of heroes, but few like Lisa Fittko, who at the age of 96 died March 12, 2005, in her adopted home of Chicago. I had the great honor of knowing Lisa, who happened to live next door to my father in the final decades of her life.

Through my parents I have had the privilege of knowing several extraordinary people who fled Europe one step ahead of Hitler's stormtroopers and SS: a mathematician, winner of the Abel Prize, who fled Budapest; a woman who, on foot, chased for several miles the vehicle full of Nazis that had come for her husband. Somehow my friend talked the Nazis into releasing her husband, and the couple soon thereafter fled their Viennese home for a life of teaching in the U.S.

But none of these people compares with Lisa Fittko who, in the fight against fascism, put her life on the line time and time again, most notably by smuggling Jews and intellectuals across the Pyrenees from Nazi-occupied Vichy France to safety in, of all places, Franco's Spain.

Lisa was truly larger than life. Go to <http://www.lrz-muenchen.de/~catherine.stodolsky/lisa/lisa.html> and check out her swaggering 1930s photo, resplendent with debonaire scarf and cigarette. You couldn't write a better life's script, not even if you wrote Casablanca, which in some ways bears a striking resemblance to the script of (OLS continued on page 2)

Questions Labor's Leaders Daren't Ask Where and Why Did We Go Wrong?

By JOANN WYPIJEWSKI

It's striking how much difference a few years can make. Five or so years ago, I was giving talks on the future of labor, and if we were gathered on a college campus, the hall was full of students. On February 28 2005, I was speaking at UCLA with Nelson Lichtenstein. The subject was "The Decline of Labor", and among the faculty and older white labor guys, who made up most of the audience, only two students were apparent.

Maybe students don't like talk of decline and, with youth's optimism, are as inspirited as their older brothers and sisters were about the great contest between labor and capital and the prospects for collective action through unions. I doubt it, though.

The next day, the AFL-CIO Executive Council would begin its three-day winter meeting in Las Vegas and, as I previewed it for the California audience, the most animating subject would be a tax cut. Afterward someone, probably SEIU's Andy Stern, would call it progress.

I was right, but I can't begin to match these guys in cynicism. The "great debate" as it's sometimes billed – taste of what's to come at the federation's fiftieth anniversary convention in July? – turned out to be a fight over how much money the affiliate unions might be able to extract from the federation. The Teamsters, suddenly in the front ranks of reformers, proposed a 50 per cent rebate on the per capita dues that national unions pay to be affiliated with the federation; the money to be reinvested in those unions' own organizing programs

(in theory) and available only to those unions (by Hoffa's formula, large unions) that have a proven commitment to organizing.

John Sweeney proposed 17 per cent. The reformers snorted, but the big news of the day was that these same reformers were joined by two new unions, the United Food & Commercial Workers and the United Auto Workers. The next morning on his blog, Stern said he'd seen the rosy-fingered "dawn of a new day" for change.

There's no concealing it anymore: this is a wall-to-wall farce, and anyone who wants to call it progressive or new or bold, possibly radical, is deluded. For two years the talk has been all about restructuring, density, democracy (or its irrelevance), but always as if these were serious proposals, serious grapplings with labor's fundamental crisis. They are nothing of the kind, and the disingenuous money-wrangle and quick make-up job on the UFCW and UAW with the pancake of reform, seal it.

It's not that those two unions are so much worse than all other unions, but having both just recently settled major contracts benefiting older workers at the gross expense of the young – guaranteeing that a new generation will despise unions and regard their invocations to solidarity as so much sounding brass – they symbolize everything that the spirit of progress should abhor.

What is the crisis? It's what is not being talked about. Loss of density, loss of members, and even assaults on democracy are merely symptoms. To follow (Labor continued on page 5)

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Lisa's life.

According to an excellent biography by Catherine Stodolsky of the Ludwig Maximilians Universität in Munich, Lisa "was born in 1909 as Elizabeth Ekstein in Uzhgorod, a small town on the eastern border of the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy that became part of the Soviet Union after World War II and is today part of the Ukraine." When Lisa was still quite young her family, which Stodolsky describes as "German-speaking middle class intellectuals from Bohemia," moved to Vienna.

I spoke with Lisa several times about her younger days in Vienna, and she remembered them fondly. It was perhaps here, at a very young age, that Lisa's profound political commitment began to take form. In Vienna, during and after World War I, Lisa's father published an anti-war literary magazine.

In 1922, the family moved to Berlin, and in the late 1920s and 1930s, as Hitler rose to power, Lisa was active in leftist youth groups and took to demonstrations and street fighting, not an unusual avocation for anti-fascist youth in those days.

When Hitler completed his rise to power, Lisa's parents fled the country, but Lisa held on. Around 1933 the heat became too great for Lisa as well, and she moved across the border into Czechoslovakia. Here she met her future husband

Hans Fittko, who had been organizing resistance on the German border. And here Lisa also hung out and apparently partied heartily with such exiled luminaries as the great Dada anti-fascist photographer and graphic designer, John Heartfield.

The heat became too great in Prague as well, and the couple moved on to Basel, Switzerland, on the French and German borders, and from there they smuggled literature into Germany.

But the supposedly neutral Swiss government decided to honor a German warrant for Hans' arrest, and the couple was forced to flee, this time to Holland. Not missing a step, Lisa and Hans continued their cross border agitation from their new home among the canals and tulips. Not surprisingly, trouble followed them here as well. When cohorts were arrested on the German side of the border, Lisa and Hans went to Paris. There, Lisa took to writing scripts for cross border, anti-fascist radio broadcasts.

When the war broke out in earnest, all German and Austrian refugees in France were ordered interned in camps. This order had the result of thrusting Lisa Fittko into the greatest role of her life, that of smuggler of people over the Pyrenees from France into Spain, where Franco, like Mussolini, was thwarting Nazi policies on the slaughter of Jews.

By sheer chance, Lisa was interned in Gurs (Hans was sent to Vernuche), in the French foothills of the Pyrenees. Lisa timed her visit to Gurs well. The camp was originally built to accommodate Republican refugees from Franco's murderous subversion of Spanish democracy, and it later became yet another of Hitler's death camps. For harrowing photos of Hitler's Gurs, go to <http://gurs.free.fr/>.

From Gurs, Lisa escaped the clutches of her internment camp, and then began her career as refugee smuggler.

Like any mountainous border region, the Pyrenees had its centuries-old smugglers' paths. According to Stodolsky, the trail used by Lisa had been used by Republican General Lister in his retreat from Franco's advancing troops, and was laid out for her by the socialist mayor of the border hamlet of Banyuls sur Mer.

Lisa's first charge was none other than the great Austrian philosopher and literary critic, Walter Benjamin. One small step ahead of the Gestapo, Benjamin knocked on Lisa Fittko's door. Stodolsky quotes Lisa's recollection of the experi-

ence. "Gracious madam," Benjamin said. "Please forgive the intrusion - I hope this is not an inopportune time. Your honored spouse explained to me how I could find you. He said 'she will take you over the border to Spain.'"

Fittko: "The world is falling to pieces, I thought, but Benjamin's courtesy is unshakable."

Lisa later recounted how Benjamin, "the old man" at 48, had to stop for one minute every ten minutes to make it over the mountains. The key, the sage said, was to not reach the point of exhaustion. All the way over the mountains Benjamin clung to a black leather briefcase, refusing to part company with it, despite what was for him a difficult and treacherous climb. "It looked heavy and I offered to help him carry it", Fittko recalled in the memoir she wrote in 1980 in English, finally published in Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol 5, 1982. "'This is my new manuscript,' he explained... You must understand, this briefcase is the most important thing to me. I cannot risk losing it. It is the manuscript that must be saved. It is more important than I am."

Lisa got Benjamin successfully over the mountains and into Port-Bou. But a week later she heard that Benjamin had taken his life (with an overdose of morphine) the day after he arrived. At the Port Bou border Spanish guards told Lisa's band of refugees that regulations had changed, and fearing he would be sent back to Hitler's clutches, Benjamin committed suicide. The experience of refugees who came later indicates that a few dollars, a few cigarettes or just a little pleading might have got Benjamin across the border and saved his life.

The precious manuscript? In 1980 Fittko got a call from Gershom Scholem, a trustee of Benjamin's literary estate and his closest friend. He'd just heard via Chimen Abramsky, of Fittko's recollection. "He asked," Fittko remembered, "for every detail concerning the manuscript. 'There is no manuscript', he said. 'Until now, nobody knew such a manuscript existed.'"

According to Stodolsky, Lisa Fittko was recruited to smuggle refugees in a Marseilles cafe by Albert Hirschmann, a member of the Emergency Rescue Committee and a confederate of the better-known Varian Fry. On meeting Lisa Fittko and proposing the smuggling idea to her,

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