

POET OF THE POOR

Alexander Bergman went on fighting for socialism as long as he could breathe. The death of a gifted proletarian writer. His faith in the people.

THEY said in the NEW MASSES office: You know Alec Bergman's poetry, don't you?

He's in the last stages of T.B. up at Montefiore Hospital. Won't you go up and see him?

It was about two weeks later that I finally got around to it. I had meant to go sooner, but when you're healthy you feel you have plenty of time; only the dying haven't. So there I was, walking down corridors filled with the indescribable and terrible hospital smell, sick flesh and antiseptics. When I entered Bergman's room there were two boys lying in parallel beds, the nearer boy visibly dying.

"Alexander Bergman?" I asked. The boy in the further bed, who looked a little better than the other, raised his head. I went over and sat down next to him, introducing myself. He was glad to see me and wanted news, all sorts of news: what meetings were being held, what we were doing against war. With his thin face and enormous, unbelievable green eyes he looked almost like a child, but then I noticed how much gray there was in his hair. I found out later he was twenty-eight.

That was the first of many visits. I used to slip in from the porch, outside of visiting hours, and stay till the nurse came with supper. There was no question of overtaking Alec's strength, for nothing could make any difference to his strength any more. They had expected him to die in six months, when he first entered Montefiore, and he had now been there almost five years. His roommates died or were transferred or sometimes even cured, but Alec, except for a disastrous six weeks in another hospital, lay in that bed and looked out at a small corner of the sky year after year.

Who shut the door? [he wrote.]

Not me, not me

not this bird

beating from wall to wall. . . .

That was how he felt about being closed in there. But he never talked about it to me; he talked about almost everything else. He remembered the active days of his youth a good deal. I got to know various things about him; little things, like family gossip and the trouble he had keeping his contraband portable radio hidden from the hospital authorities, and how he used to lie awake at night looking at the distant lights of houses where healthy people were living. And big things, too, like the fight he put up to help the hospital staff form a union; how he wrote and edited a shop paper, had it smuggled out to be mimeographed, had it smuggled back in to be distributed; how the previous hospital administration (the present one was quite different) had threatened three times to discharge him from the

hospital, and would have, only he was too weak to be moved. I heard about the girl who left him when he got sick, and went back to Georgia, about the company doctor who gave him pills for his cough and sent him back to work. I told him things, too, about affairs like the NEW MASSES anniversary meeting.

"I wish I could get out to some of those things," he said.

The biggest thing I learned, though, was what kind of person he was and what kind of poet he was. He went on fighting for socialism as long as he could breathe; he went on breathing longer than his lungs warranted because he still had something to say. There isn't much great poetry being written today, and one's almost afraid to use the word. The "big" names in poetry are those of cheap entertainers, the Millays and MacLeishes, invited to the rich man's house to perform side by side with the torch singer. But Alec was a poet of exceptional qualities.

The quality of his work cannot be revealed by a formal analysis. He wrote an extraordinarily direct and flexible kind of free verse; he approached social problems with a passion of bitterness and a passion of tenderness. He illuminated the tragedies of the T.B. ward in a few seemingly casual lines. He spoke through the mouth of an old baker whose lungs were caked with flour dust, and capitalist society stood revealed for the murderous thing it is. All this is true, but it is not enough to say about his poetry. The important thing is that he loved people.

That love came out in everything he did or everything he wrote. Whether he was painfully collecting a few dollars for NEW MASSES, or writing an elegy for a boyhood friend, Eugene Loveman, dead in Spain, love was in it. With this love of people, too, there went a fiery and unshaken confidence in the strength of people. Men sitting in comfortable chairs might give way to cynicism, but Alec, breathing desperately with the rags that were left of his lungs, saw the new life of socialism shining outside his bedroom window. He knew the people would see it, too. "They'll win," he said.

His own contribution to the struggle was incredible for a man on the edge of death. He never stopped writing; reviews, poems, the manuscript of a novel. . . . When he could no longer type he got a fountain pen and went on. The last time I saw him, three days before he died, I was able to tell him

that his poetry was to be published in book form; several friends of his, unknown to him, had contributed some of the money needed for publication. He was dying then, and drugged with an enormous dose of morphine, but he rallied enough to make plans for the book. On Friday night he propped himself up and wrote in a notebook for hours: messages for his friends, instructions for distributing his clothes, books, manuscripts, and the few dollars he had. The hospital, understaffed like all our hospitals, left him alone all night; when the orderly came in at seven in the morning, he was dead.

It is impossible to say whether his death was inevitable from the moment he entered Montefiore. Certainly he managed to hold out for five years under adverse circumstances and in an unsuitable climate. Perhaps he might have been saved five years ago. What is sure is that he could have been saved before that by decent doctors, proper working conditions, and above all by a social system in which tuberculosis is not an occupational disease of the working class. He was a worker and he died because he was a worker, as surely as if he had been clubbed by company police or smothered in a mine. He never forgot that himself, and no one who knew him will forget it.

Another thing about Alec Bergman was that he didn't ask anything for himself, except to be remembered, except to have his name thought of sometimes among the names of other fighters. He probably never realized how deeply he impressed people, so that one girl who had only known him for six weeks traveled miles to bring money toward his book, and one man who only saw him for ten minutes just before he died felt the death as the loss of an old friend, and one worker in the hospital kept him alive, those last months, by buying and cooking special food for him.

"I have started a new poem," he wrote in his last letter to me. "I hope I can finish it—it starts":

Will some voice say—He was not there;
When men talk of remembered things
And you are silent. . . .

Ask yourself now,
will the future be silent and ashamed
will your eyes bear scars inside
where memory stores its outworn films. . . ."

It was only the sketch of a poem, but he went on to describe what he wanted to say. The poem was to be against the summer soldiers, those who expect to share in the new world but will do nothing to help bring it about. "You finish it for me," he said when I saw him on Wednesday. We will finish it.

JOY DAVIDMAN.



Rodney

Some Poems by Alexander Bergman

Jericho

We cannot be kept within the walls,
The false barriers will break at the shout
of our anger freed from its long silence.

The builders of high bridges and sweet spires,
the quiet people decent in their homes
and all who sing for liberty
will meet the embrace of our shrunken arms.

Out of our beds and our uniform cells
out of the smelling, serried, crowded wards
into the clean streets of little towns,
the green fields that never saw our faces—
we shall go—past the homes of the straight
firm walkers into the cities that banished us.
There are those who will fear our poison
our twisted, sometimes bitter faces,
our eyes of lizards strangers to the sun.

There are some who will tremble
when we walk with the hungry hordes,
the marchers with tired feet,
the fighters for peace, for freedom,
the sowers of wheat.

We Shall Love

To Jayne Percy

Can we sing these days
purely of love and nothing else?
No hard word dropped in the simple song
like a stone in a quiet pool?

When the names of oppressors are gone
when their ways are forgotten,
and there is no shadow
that goes with a man through life,

we shall sing, using the same old words
with a sure joy in the sound,
there will be love with the singing,
the shadows be made by the sun
or the natural night.

We shall sleep unafraid in the world
and gladly arise in the morning.

This, my own girl, wife of the digger,
girl of the sailor home from the sea,
will be life in a world made over
by such as we.

Harvest

To Everett Cameron

This is my house, my barn;
these few good acres
are my native soil.
Mine was the strength and blood
that ran rich courses
through the vacant mud.

My father's eager bones
have limed this soil;
they sweeten the harsh crops
that I harvest here,
the strong, proud, unrewarded toil,
the sleeping, yellow, empty days of fall.

Out of these furrowed loins each year
I reap good sights of corn,
sharp smell of apples sparkling in the air;
but find the autumn's golden horn
did not brim over to the page
where interest multiplies like weeds.

Defiance

I have lived long enough to see
betrayal and the traitors shot.
I have seen murder and the killers hanged
I have seen rulers scurrying away
like vermin from the coming light
And nations gripped in lockjaw terror, speak.
I have seen freedom too well prisoned
in the hearts of nameless men
I have seen—
Despite the dungeon of my crippled shell,
Despite the walls that hem me in,
Despite deliberate darkness
spread upon the land—awakening!
Therefore I have hope
Sure of fulfillment
I have no need of death,
Nor longing nor desire for it.
I seek no refuge there
Nor should you whose days
Lie endlessly and joyfully ahead.
Though death is offered cloaked in honor
Though death comes bugled, brilliant, blest,
Reject it
Defeat it
Tear off its uniforms and saintly garments
Let it stand naked, ugly, shivering
Before all humanity,
Without honor anywhere.

Time for One More Song

There is just time for one more song
before the lights go out,
so what shall it be, boys?

Good Night, Ladies?
Say, we hate to leave you now,
but we must

and there is time
for one more song, only one.
A song to the ladies is nice
but where will it leave us
after the lights go out?

Listen:
each year in honor of spring
the returning robins sing,
and their song is a golden wire
twisted through the days of your life,
weaving the early springs together
for death to shatter.

Boys, does anyone know such a song,
a song that will conquer the rhythm
of murderous drums in the sky,
of nails and leather on stone?
Can anyone sing it?
Quick;
there is only just time.

IT'S A NATURAL

The amazing success story of Local 65, Wholesale and Warehouse Union. Little pins on a map and simple organizing principles. The good neighbor policy in practice.

ARTHUR OSMAN is the father of an eight-year-old son named David, and the president of a phenomenon called Local 65, Wholesale and Warehouse Union, CIO, of precisely the same age. The twinship of these two youngsters was not entirely accidental, but was calculated as craftily as Arthur Osman's boss used to calculate on maintaining a ninety-hour work week and seven-dollar pay envelopes.

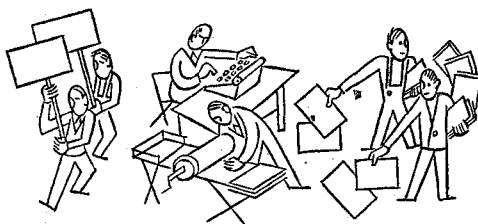
This twin birth occurred in the summer of 1933. The workers in a dirty little warehouse in Orchard Street, New York, wanted a place to meet out of earshot of stoolpigeons. It wasn't too easy in those days. An inspired warehouse worker said, "Let's go to Arthur Osman's house. We can celebrate the arrival of the new baby." Local 65 cut its eye teeth a month later when a committee of the same youths who welcomed David Osman served notice on their boss that they wanted a union contract, wage increases to boost their pay five dollars a week, and a sixty-hour week. Did they win it? You bet they did, and the biggest part of the victory was that sixty-hour week: thirty hours lopped off the former schedule; a ten-hour day in place of a fifteen-hour day six days a week!

In the hinterland there may be some remote hamlet where news of this now fabulous local union has not penetrated. We doubt it. Fun and fight are the two words closest to the hearts of Local 65 members. A list of its activities reads like the offering of a fashionable summer camp. Yet last July when the New York City police forbade mass picketing by 200 Local 65 members at Golding Brothers' warehouse, the union showed up next day with 4,000 pickets. The police hereabouts have not seemed inclined to start an argument about mass picketing ever since.

However, the aim here is not so much to tell what Local 65 has done—that story is too well known already—but to tell how it did it. Clear-sighted leadership stemming directly from a militant rank and file is the explanation in its simplest terms.

A slogan can be a dynamo or it can be window dressing. In Local 65 the slogans are dynamic. They plot the course of achievement. Up on the third floor of Bible House, the somber headquarters of this anything-but-somber organization, there is a bustling and business-like office. Across the farthest wall is a banner. It reads: "*Be a Good Neighbor—Organize the Shop Next Door.*"

Simple, isn't it? But that's just how they do it. They organize the shop next door. The application of this slogan brought 10,000 members into Local 65 up through May of this year; its leaders are just as confident of bringing 7,000 more in the next seven months as they launch a new membership drive to



take up where the last one left off. Seven thousand members in seven months; that's the meaning of that sea of green and white banners in New York's May Day parade which bore the cryptic legend, "7 in 7, It's a Natural."

"Organize the Shop Next Door" was the principle which gave Local 65 its start in life. The youthful veterans of the first meeting at Arthur Osman's house recognized that they would never be able to preserve any gains made in a contract with their Orchard Street boss unless they brought more workers in neighboring warehouses into the union. However, in those early days this principle—sound and simple as it seems now—ran into opposition which slowed down the union's growth.

The union, first independent, joined the AFL as a federal local. In the chaotic warehouse and wholesale industry, made up mainly of small establishments dealing in widely varied businesses, the AFL leaders insisted upon union divisions based on craft. Drygoods warehouses constituted one group, grocery warehouses another; notions still another, and so on. Under this system four organizing drives floundered. The drive launched in 1933-34 netted 110 new members; the 1934-35 drive brought only 350 into the union, and the 1935-36 drive added a scant 300. The following year the gain was 450, but in 1938 things began to change rapidly. The union was in the CIO now. The first twelve months saw the net gain in membership spurt from 450 to 2,532. During the next two years 3,949 warehouse workers signed up and in the fourth year the local launched its phenomenal "Security Drive," which has already brought the union more than 4,750 new members. This goal will be the starting point for the "7 in 7" campaign.

IN THE organizer's room at Local 65 headquarters you see the "Good Neighbor" slogan at work. The general appearance of the room suggests the GHQ of an army at the front. Across its length and breadth maps and charts cover the walls. Each of the maps covers a division or a subdivision of the union's activity in the area of the Port of New York, the metropolitan area and the New Jersey Hudson River shore.

These maps vary in size according to the concentration of warehouses and the intensity of Local 65 activity. One covers an area of

only six square blocks. Two more cover the entire borough of the Bronx. All the maps are studded with brightly colored pins. In the smallest section, for instance, the six-block area between Thirty-sixth and Thirty-eighth Streets and between Broadway and Seventh Avenue, there are more than 100 bright green pins of different sizes, about twenty red pins and three or four yellow ones. Solly Molofsky, youthful assistant recreation director of Local 65, explained that the green pins indicated fully-organized warehouses operating under closed shop contracts with the union; that red ones indicate "shops we are working on" and that yellow pins represent shops which have been reported by neighboring organized shops and where organizing soon will begin. "What we do," said Mr. Molofsky, "is to turn the red buttons green and the yellow buttons red."

THUS the changing composition of the colored pins on the score or more of maps in the organizers' room is the practical measure of the success of the Good Neighbor plan. But there is another slogan which carries the idea just a step farther in actually working out the process. The companion slogan is, "Every Member an Organizer; Every Steward a Business Agent." It is this auxiliary slogan that carries the main slogan fully into effect in the field of the union's operations.

The principle involved in this slogan is also simple. In practical effect it means this: If the Jones & Co. warehouse is organized and Smith & Co. across the street is not, then all the workers in the Jones shop, led by their shop steward constitute a "crew" to organize Smith's workers. Plans for the miniature organizing drive are made directly by the Jones & Co. crew to fit the peculiar conditions of that particular neighborhood. Lunch-hour contacts broaden into friendship between the workers of Jones and Smith. Back in the organizer's room at union headquarters the yellow pin that once spotted the location of the non-union Smith shop is now a red one. By now Smith workers are visiting the union in groups, finding places in one or more of the sixteen varied recreational activities from photography to hiking, from baseball to drama. Excited huddles in the Smith shop spread news of the fun to be had in Local 65. The union's growth begins to take on the form of a stampede. This tempo sweeps on through the contract negotiation stage. If a strike is necessary, Local 65 is ready. The annual budget has already set aside a sizeable working strike fund with surplus to give ample emergency leeway. In nine cases out of ten—either with or without a strike—the red pin on the map goes down and a green one goes up. The Smith shop is now ready to assume the next job. It becomes a "good neighbor," organizes