



Chapter V

MEETING PEOPLE



AT a conference of the Moscow Anarchists in March I first learned of the part some Anarchists had played in the Russian Revolution. In the July uprising of 1917 the Kronstadt sailors were led by the Anarchist Yarchuck; the Constituent Assembly was dispersed by Zhelezniakov; the Anarchists had participated on every front and helped to drive back the Allied attacks. It was the consensus of opinion that the Anarchists were always among the first to face fire, as they were also the most active in the reconstructive work. One of the biggest factories near Moscow, which did not stop work during the entire period of the Revolution, was managed by an Anarchist. Anarchists were doing important work in the Foreign Office and in all other departments. I learned that the Anarchists had virtually helped the Bolsheviks into power. Five months later, in April, 1918, machine guns were used to destroy the Moscow Anarchist Club and to suppress their Press. That was before Mirbach arrived in Moscow. The field had to be "cleared of disturbing elements," and the Anarchists were the first to suffer. Since then the persecution of the Anarchists has never ceased.

The Moscow Anarchist Conference was critical not only toward the existing régime, but toward its own comrades as well. It spoke frankly of the negative sides of the movement, and of its lack of unity and coöperation during the revolutionary period. Later I was to learn more of the internal dissensions in the Anarchist movement. Before closing, the Conference decided to call on the Soviet Government to release the imprisoned Anarchists and to legalize Anarchist educational work. The Conference asked Alexander Berkman and myself to sign the resolution to that effect. It was a shock to me that Anarchists should ask any government to legalize their efforts, but I still believed the Soviet Government to be at least to some extent expressive of the Revolution. I signed the resolution, and as I was to see Lenin in a few days I promised to take the matter up with him.

The interview with Lenin was arranged by Balabanova. "You must see Ilitch, talk to him about the things that are disturbing you and the work you would like to do," she had said. But some time passed before the opportunity came. At last one day Balabanova called up to ask whether I could go at once. Lenin had sent his car and we were quickly driven over to the Kremlin, passed without question by the guards, and at last ushered into the workroom of the all-powerful president of the People's Commissars.

When we entered Lenin held a copy of the brochure *Trial and Speeches** in his hands. I had given my only copy to Balabanova, who had evidently sent the booklet on ahead of us to Lenin. One of his first questions was, "When could the Social Revolution be expected in America?" I had been asked the

question repeatedly before, but I was astounded to hear it from Lenin. It seemed incredible that a man of his information should know so little about conditions in America.

My Russian at this time was halting, but Lenin declared that though he had lived in Europe for many years he had not learned to speak foreign languages: the conversation would therefore have to be carried on in Russian. At once he launched into a eulogy of our speeches in court. "What a splendid opportunity for propaganda," he said; "it is worth going to prison, if the courts can so successfully be turned into a forum." I felt his steady cold gaze upon me, penetrating my very being, as if he were reflecting upon the use I might be put to. Presently he asked what I would want to do. I told him I would like to repay America what it had done for Russia. I spoke of the Society of the Friends of Russian Freedom, organized thirty years ago by George Kennan and later reorganized by Alice Stone Blackwell and other liberal Americans. I briefly sketched the splendid work they had done to arouse interest in the struggle for Russian freedom, and the great moral and financial aid the Society had given through all those years. To organize a Russian society for American freedom was my plan. Lenin appeared enthusiastic. "That is a great idea, and you shall have all the help you want. But, of course, it will be under the auspices of the Third International. Prepare your plan in writing and send it to me."

I broached the subject of the Anarchists in Russia. I showed him a letter I had received from Martens, the Soviet representative in America, shortly before my deportation. Martens asserted that the Anarchists in Russia enjoyed full freedom of speech and Press. Since my arrival I found scores of Anarchists in prison and their Press suppressed. I explained that I could not think of working with the Soviet Government so long as my comrades were in prison for opinion's sake. I also told him of the resolutions of the Moscow Anarchist Conference. He listened patiently and promised to bring the matter to the attention of his party. "But as to free speech," he remarked, "that is, of course, a bourgeois notion. There can be no free speech in a revolutionary period. We have the peasantry against us because we can give them nothing in return for their bread. We will have them on our side when we have something to exchange. Then you can have all the free speech you want--but not now. Recently we needed peasants to cart some wood into the city. They demanded salt. We thought we had no salt, but then we discovered seventy poods in Moscow in one of our warehouses. At once the peasants were willing to cart the wood. Your comrades must wait until we can meet the needs of the peasants. Meanwhile, they should work with us. Look at William Shatov, for instance, who has helped save Petrograd from Yudenitch. He works with us and we appreciate his services. Shatov was among the first to receive the order of the Red Banner."

Free speech, free Press, the spiritual achievements of centuries, what were they to this man? A Puritan, he was sure his scheme alone could redeem Russia. Those who served his plans were right, the others could not be tolerated.

A shrewd Asiatic, this Lenin. He knows how to play on the weak sides of men by flattery, rewards, medals. I left convinced that his approach to people was purely utilitarian, for the use he could get out of them for his scheme. And his scheme--was it the Revolution?

I prepared the plan for the Society of the Russian Friends of American Freedom and elaborated the details of the work I had in mind, but refused to place myself under the protecting wing of the Third International. I explained to Lenin that the American people had little faith in politics, and would certainly consider it an imposition to be directed and guided by a political machine from Moscow. I could not consistently align myself with the Third International.

Some time later I saw Tchicherin. I believe it was 4 A.M. when our interview took place. He also asked about the possibilities of a revolution in America, and seemed to doubt my judgment when I informed him that there was no hope of it in the near future. We spoke of the I.W.W., which had evidently been

misrepresented to him. I assured Tchicherin that while I am not an I.W.W. I must state that they represented the only conscious and effective revolutionary proletarian organization in the United States, and were sure to play an important rôle in the future labour history of the country.

Next to Balabanova, Tchicherin impressed me as the most simple and unassuming of the leading Communists in Moscow. But all were equally naïve in their estimate of the world outside of Russia. Was their judgment so faulty because they had been cut off from Europe and America so long? Or was their great need of European help father to their wish? At any rate, they all clung to the idea of approaching revolutions in the western countries, forgetful that revolutions are not made to order, and apparently unconscious that their own revolution had been twisted out of shape and semblance and was gradually being done to death.

The editor of the London *Daily Herald*, accompanied by one of his reporters, had preceded me to Moscow. They wanted to visit Kropotkin, and they had been given a special car. Together with Alexander Berkman and A. Shapiro, I was able to join Mr. Lansbury.

The Kropotkin cottage stood back in the garden away from the street. Only a faint ray from a kerosene lamp lit up the path to the house. Kropotkin received us with his characteristic graciousness, evidently glad at our visit. But I was shocked at his altered appearance. The last time I had seen him was in 1907, in Paris, which I visited after the Anarchist Congress in Amsterdam. Kropotkin, barred from France for many years, had just been given the right to return. He was then sixty-five years of age, but still so full of life and energy that he seemed much younger. Now he looked old and worn.

I was eager to get some light from Kropotkin on the problems that were troubling me, particularly on the relation of the Bolsheviki to the Revolution. What was his opinion? Why had he been silent so long?

I took no notes and therefore I can give only the gist of what Kropotkin said. He stated that the Revolution had carried the people to great spiritual heights and had paved the way for profound social changes. If the people had been permitted to apply their released energies, Russia would not be in her present condition of ruin. The Bolsheviki, who had been carried to the top by the revolutionary wave, first caught the popular ear by extreme revolutionary slogans, thereby gaining the confidence of the masses and the support of militant revolutionists.

He continued to narrate that early in the October period the Bolsheviki began to subordinate the interests of the Revolution to the establishment of their dictatorship, which coerced and paralysed every social activity. He stated that the coöperatives were the main medium that could have bridged the interests of the peasants and the workers. The coöperatives were among the first to be crushed. He spoke with much feeling of the oppression, the persecution, the hounding of every shade of opinion, and cited numerous instances of the misery and distress of the people. He emphasized that the Bolsheviki had discredited Socialism and Communism in the eyes of the Russian people.

"Why haven't you raised your voice against these evils, against this machine that is sapping the life blood of the Revolution?" I asked. He gave two reasons. As long as Russia was being attacked by the combined Imperialists, and Russian women and children were dying from the effects of the blockade, he could not join the shrieking chorus of the ex-revolutionists in the cry of "Crucify!" He preferred silence. Secondly, there was no medium of expression in Russia itself. To protest to the Government was useless. Its concern was to maintain itself in power. It could not stop at such "trifles" as human rights or human lives. Then he added: "We have always pointed out the effects of Marxism in action. Why be surprised now?"

I asked Kropotkin whether he was noting down his impressions and observations. Surely he must see the importance of such a record to his comrades and to the workers; in fact, to the whole world. "No," he said; "it is impossible to write when one is in the midst of great human suffering, when every hour brings new tragedies. Then there may be a raid at any moment. The Tcheka comes swooping inside out, and marches off with every scrap of paper. Under such constant stress it is impossible to keep records. But besides these considerations there is my book on Ethics. I can only work a few hours a day, and I must concentrate on that to the exclusion of everything else."

After a tender embrace which Peter never failed to give those he loved, we returned to our car. My heart was heavy, my spirit confused and troubled by what I had heard. I was also distressed by the poor state of health of our comrade: I feared he could not survive till spring. The thought that Peter Kropotkin might go to his grave and that the world might never know what he thought of the Russian Revolution was appalling.

ENDNOTE:

* *Trial and Speeches of Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman before the Federal Court of New York, June-July, 1917*, Mother Earth Publishing Co., New York.